

The battle for Trapper Joe's Cabin

by Iven R. Sjodin

J. Lignurgaris was always considered a trapper of good reputation. During the summer of 1950, he constructed a cabin within the boundaries of the Kenai National Moose Range near the Chickaloon River on the shores of Trapper Joe Lake.

When contacted, Mr. Lignurgaris's explanation for this new construction was to replace his old cabin located less than 3/4 of a mile away. Trapper Joe's Cabin was built with an ax and a crosscut saw from spruce trees cut near the construction site. This new cabin was not very large, only 12 x 14 feet. However, there was enough room to sleep and eat comfortably.

There is an ample application of moss chinking between the double-notched, two-sided logs, which holds in the heat generated from the small wood stove. There are two bunks and a small table that is situated under the window overlooking the lake. By the doorway across the room, there is a double-burner Coleman cook stove sitting on a small table. It is an adequate shelter for any trapper.

Refuge Historian Gary Titus had been working on plans for this as well as many other historical cabins on the Refuge. He called me in the spring after going over my application and invited me to join his crew and be a part of the restoration process. He has a wealth of knowledge pertaining to the history of all the known cabins located within the boundaries of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He applies this knowledge with great pride when restoring these treasures. I enthusiastically accepted.

Things were not looking good for me the morning we were to fly supplies to Trapper Joe Lake. The first battle was to find a nomex flight suit to fit my ample frame. No such luck! I am six foot, three inches tall and weigh in at about three hundred pounds. The only suitable apparel available were yellow and green firefighting clothes that were two sizes too small. The reflection in the mirror reminded me of an over-stuffed sausage. Nevertheless I was ready to fly. (If the buttons on my shirt didn't fly off first.) The helicopter was no more comfortable than my clothes.

From the window of the helicopter I observed the harshness of the terrain. I could only imagine the battle it must have been just to hike to this remote location. I crouched below the blades of the helicopter and

headed up the hill toward the cabin. When I arrived I noticed that there were no trees of any size to do the necessary repairs. Knowing this earlier, we had found trees that had lost their battle with the spruce bark beetle miles to the south at Lower Ohmer Lake Campground. At that time the logs had been cut and peeled. These two-sided logs were then hauled by trailer to the end of the road, strapped to a long line and flown in to give Trapper Joe Cabin new life.

During the restoration it became apparent that gravel had been excavated from the nearby lakeshore to serve as a foundation. After years of settling the logs had sunk into the earth and begun to rot away. Here the next battle began: an army of ferocious carpenter ants had hollowed out a log on the fifth round and taken up residence. To eradicate these invaders we sprayed and stomped but they kept on coming. Wave after wave they attacked, even calling out their miniature air force. Finally they retreated, perhaps to return another day.

Also on the agenda was the replacement of the old outhouse. Although it was quaint, it was tilting into the hole on the back corner, leaving a large gap in front of the door. If you were brave enough, you could leap in onto the few rotten boards that made up what was left of the floor. Risky business for someone of my stature. We were all relieved to see the new one built and ready for use.

The summer of 2003 has proven to be one of the most productive seasons in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for cabin and trail work. The restoration of Trapper Joe Cabin was just one of the memorable adventures experienced by the "Cabin Crew," consisting of Gary Titus, Temperance Taylor, Josh Hightower, and Iven Sjodin.

If anyone has any further historical information regarding Trapper Joe or any other old cabins on the refuge, please contact Gary Titus at the Headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna (907) 262-7021.

Last summer Iven Sjodin worked on the Cabin Crew at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.