

The Harry Johnson cabin restoration project

by Bryan Taylor

Waking to the sight of hundreds of mosquito proboscises jutting hungrily through the mesh netting of your tent is enough to make anyone greatly appreciate a good shelter. The many cabins and cabin remains spread throughout the wilderness of the Kenai Peninsula have been places of refuge for old timers and visitors alike, providing protection from the elements and solace for the soul.

The 2004 Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Cabin Crew (Gary Titus, Iven Sjodin, Joshua Hightower, Bryan Taylor and Temperance Taylor) is working to maintain the life of many of the historic cabins that have been places of refuge for the early Peninsula pioneers. The history of these pioneers is dear to people throughout the Peninsula, and some of the best testimonies of the pioneers' lives are the actual material remains of the places where they worked and lived.

Nestled in the boreal forest among spruce and towering cottonwoods is one such cabin built by trapper, prospector, and wildlife photographer Harry Johnson. Mr. Johnson was a well-spoken gentleman and, despite his solitary lifestyle in the hills, he managed to maintain quite the social life with friends and acquaintances from Seward, Moose Pass, Hope, Cooper Landing, and Anchorage.

Harry Johnson had two cabins in the hills west of what is now the northern section of the Resurrection Trail. His main cabin is located on Afanasa Creek, but he also had trap-lines running in the area. The Cabin Crew has restored one of these trap-line cabins northwest of Afanasa Creek built by Johnson in 1926. It is a picturesque cabin of dovetail construction with split-chinking both inside and out. The cabin itself is a great testimony to Johnson's lifestyle. Many people knew Johnson as a very neat and tidy person. Everywhere about the cabin there are various hooks, shelves, cabinets, hitches, and cleats all made from limbs and saplings. For Harry Johnson, everything had its proper place.

When the Cabin Crew first arrived at the cabin, it

was very much in need of repair. The cabin had sunk from the rotting which had permeated the lower logs, three rounds high in places. The floor, which was just boards resting on the ground, was completely rotted out. And, the roof was decayed in most places, and completely gone in others. The slowly disintegrating cabin certainly needed some life built back into it.

A few sling-loads of supplies and several days later, the Cabin Crew restored Harry's cabin to its original state as a shelter from Alaska's harsh seasons, hazardous mammals, and voracious insect population. All in all, the crew replaced 10 two-sided rounds and the flooring, saved the roof by placing sheet metal on it, put in a new stove, and set the whole structure on pier blocks to prevent future rotting of the sill logs.

Part of our job is to preserve the history of the cabin in addition to restoring it to its original state. We recovered many interesting artifacts from the site, which give clues to Harry's daily life or perhaps how something, which is now destroyed, was originally intended. One of the more interesting finds at Harry's cabin was a 1926 newspaper under his old bedding.

Through the efforts of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, the historic cabin of a well-liked historic figure has been documented and restored so that future residents of the Peninsula can get a glimpse into how some of the early western settlers made a life for themselves in a sometimes unforgiving frontier. For now, Mr. Johnson's cabin remains a historic site not open for general public use. Perhaps someday this cabin will once again provide a much-needed shelter to those rugged enough to brave the hills that Harry Johnson called home.

Bryan Taylor has seasonally worked at the Kenai Refuge since 2001, first as a fee collection ranger and most recently as a member of the Cabin Crew led by Refuge Historian Gary Titus. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.