

Following the Alaska Dream

by Candace Ward



Hikers in pursuit of the Alaska Dream looking over Doroshin Bay and the Skilak Glacier outwash plain in Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (credit: KENWR).

When I was 6 years old, my family traveled the Alcan Highway from California to the Arctic Circle in Alaska. We visited relatives who lived on a subsistence farm in the Peace River country of northern British Columbia and stayed with friends in a log cabin north of Fairbanks.

The adventures from that trip kindled a life-long love of northern latitudes that led to my time as a high school exchange student in Norway and eventually to seasonal jobs in Alaska from Lake Clark to Denali. Ultimately, the lure of following the Alaska Dream led my husband Walter and me back to the Kenai Peninsula over 30 years ago.

While I have always loved getting out and experiencing Alaska adventure first hand from the canoe system of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge to the brown bear country of Katmai, I also find great inspiration in the reading the stories of other people who were

motivated to follow their “Alaska Dream.” Some great “reads” that I’d like to recommend on this theme include:

***Winds of Skilak* by Bonnie Rose Ward**—Follow Bonnie and Sam Ward’s adventurous move from the suburbs of Ohio in 1980 to live “off the grid” on a private inholding on Caribou Island located in Skilak Lake (on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge). As Sam and Bonnie adapted to a remote life without modern day conveniences, they discovered the benefits of new friends, more time for each other, and the beautiful scenery of the Kenai Mountains and Skilak Lake. This book won a 2014 Next Generation Indie Book Awards/Memoir and also was an award-winning finalist in the 2014 USA Best Book Awards Autobiography/Memoir category.

***Two against the North* by Ida White Sharples**—Ida White Sharples and her husband left Juneau in the

late 1930's to build a remote homestead on the Kenai Peninsula. To reach their new home site, they traveled by boat from Kenai Lake down the upper Kenai River braving the rapids of the Kenai Canyon and then crossed over to the south side of Skilak Lake where they built their homestead. Ida had a love of wildflowers and worked to set up an Alaska wildflower seed business. She also was the author of the first book on Alaskan wildflowers—*Alaska Wildflowers* (Stanford University Press, c. 1938). Look for this Kenai Peninsula homesteading story in local libraries as the book is now out of print.

First Wilderness by Sam Keith—Sam Keith is best known for writing the 1973 best seller *One Man's Wilderness* about the remote life of Dick Proenneke in the Twin Lakes country of Lake Clark National Park. Sam Keith and Dick Proenneke were lifelong friends that both passed away in 2003. Ten years later, an unpublished manuscript written in 1974 by Sam Keith was discovered by son-in-law, author/illustrator Brian Lies. This work is now a new book, *First Wilderness*. The book tells the story of Sam Keith's own Alaska adventure experiences—some with his friend, Dick Proenneke, and others even on our Refuge on Tustumena Lake. This book will give Dick Proenneke fans something new while adding to adventure stories

about the Kenai Peninsula.

Arctic Son—Fulfilling the Dream (DVD and new 2014 edition book)—Authors and filmmakers **Jean Aspen** and **Tom Irons** (now living in Homer) share their story of moving to Alaska's remote Brooks Range in the spring of 1992 with their 6-year-old son, Luke, and friend Laurie Schacht. Living alone for more than a year, they had the energy and insight to keep journals and to film building a cabin and their day to day life in this remote wilderness. They were inspired to create both a book and a DVD. The DVD shows on PBS stations throughout the country (including Alaska's PBS Station—360 North).

Jean has also written **Arctic Daughter: A Wilderness Journey** which recounts her youth in the wilds of the Brooks Range. Long out of print, a new edition is scheduled for release in April 2015.

To find these books, check out our local libraries and community book stores. Wishing you inspiration as you follow your Alaska dreams!

Candace Ward is a park ranger, who has worked in the Refuge's Visitor Services Program for over 30 years. Find more information about the Refuge at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.