

MEMORIES OF OLIVER CAMERON

by
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I cannot really think of Oliver stories—just bits and pieces here and there.

Oliver took his job as provider very seriously. He was a great provider of caribou and fish for his parents, his family and other families. He was never wasteful of any parts of the animal. He carefully skinned the animals, as the fur was used for clothing. We even used bear fur for a ruff. He created his own pattern for moccasins, mukluks, mittens and liners.

Oliver never accumulated unnecessary items, but if he needed something, he made it—for example, kayaks, dogsleds, furniture, sod houses.

He struggled with poor breathing as he said he had frosted his lungs in Shungnak. He wanted to get off prednisone.

He said that he had shot four caribou and had the carcasses on sled. He had six dogs, but still had to run up the big hills to help them. Even though it was 65 degrees below zero, he was getting hot as he ran uphill hanging onto the dog sled, so he threw back his parka. There were lots of those hills. His lungs were never the same. That was in the winter of 1961 or 1962.

John Cooper got Oliver writing to me when I was in New York State with my parents and my daughters, Tonya and Paula. Tonya and I missed Alaska, so we were happy when Oliver suggested that he help build a sod house on my property in Manley Hot Springs.

In June 1980, when Tonya was eight years old and Paula was two, we returned to Fairbanks and met Oliver at Charlie Nottingham's. Oliver was helping a young couple build a sod house on Goldstream Creek, down the road by Northern Light cemetery.

We built our sod house in one month—two adults and Tonya, who went to school. We used shovels, mattocks and handsaws. We never even used a chain saw for firewood.

Oliver was amazing at measuring cloth and always having just enough. For the 8' x 14' sod house he knew exactly how much Visqueen [plastic sheeting] to bring so that it would cover the entire frame and allow for an apron that held the dirt so the edges were sealed.

We unrolled the huge roll of Visqueen by folding it over a pole that was as long as the house. We carried it up and over, and then brought another section from other side the same way, so that only the edges were double and rest were four layers. We had exactly the right amount. I am still amazed.

We carried everything on our backs, and set up a wall tent to cook and sleep in. Luckily we had good weather for 30 days. We got all the material from the land except, for the Visqueen. We put spruce boughs and rugs on floor until we got a plywood floor.

That house is still standing after 32 years, and is still livable.



Exterior view. Note propane tank (for lighting).
Photos by Michael Fricke.



Entry



Interior, front area. Note the Visqueen vapor barrier.



Interior, rear area

Oliver also made a stainless steel top barrel stove with an oven. It too is still in use 32 years later.



Oil barrel stove with oven. Note stokehole cover on the floor.



Oil barrel stove with boots drying in the oven. The heat from the firebox circulates down under the oven and back up the other side before reaching the stovepipe.



Outhouse

Oliver taught us how to dig a seep hole to get water, and how to dig a hole in the ground and line it to use for refrigeration. He taught us how to render the fat from moose, caribou, and bear. We ate liver, heart, and tongue.

He also taught us how to make headcheese, using moose nose. I'm sure that others have written about that. The term is usually used for pig meat.

Basically, I took out the tongue and skinned off the fur of the nose of the moose. If there is not enough meat on the nose area, you can use bits from the neck.

Then I boiled up the bone and meat until all the meat fell off. I poured the meat bits mixed with the firming gelatin into easy-to-use wide mouth plastic containers. Once cooled, the headcheese was like a firm substance that we spread on bread. It was delicious.

Oliver really wanted to stay, but I just negotiated for his expertise. I did not want to live with a man that was the same age as my father. As a result, though, he did use this sod house as a staging area when he was starting to build a big flat boat to go up the Kantishna around 1983-1986 to get to his property on the lake.

Oliver loved children. He carefully drew out Alaskan pictures for ABC cards for two-year-old Paula. He made wooden tool boxes and taught her to use a small hand saw. She cut up small dead willow branches for fire starters. He taught Tonya how to sharpen her knives and axe.

We did not see Oliver for a while, until he established his place at the lake. In 1991, Paula and I were housesitting for the Hannans, a family who had settled on a homesite a quarter of a mile from Oliver. We helped Oliver get firewood. We used his lovely Collie, Shep.

Paula and I pushed the fire burned spruce trees out of the ground. Oliver wanted the root systems for carving bowls and other items. Paula and I piled the spruce on the nice Oliver-made wood hauling sled. We cut the firewood to lengths that would fit.

We sent Shep by himself, hauling the wood back to Oliver. He off loaded the wood and sent Shep back alone with the empty sled. We did this over and over. Oliver never was able to get his other collies to perform in this way. He had strict discipline with his dogs, but they loved him for his consistency.

Oliver had wonderful CB radio connection with Duane and Rena and with Green Giant at Mucha Lake. They rarely saw each other in person, but they kept track of each other.

Oliver shared his rifle expertise with both my daughters. Paula was the captain of the University of Nevada, Reno rifle team for 4 years. She always shares that Oliver was the first to teach her.

He was the gunman on an aircraft in WWII that was shot down over Yugoslavia. His ability to honor and respect other poor people's lifestyles enabled the underground to deliver him and the other airmen safely to American troops.

The poor farmers were willing to give them food because Oliver helped with chores or fix-it jobs that he had the expertise to care for. The folks were very pleased for his talented help. Thus he got medicine for the other more badly injured crew men. I believe he shared this story with others, so I won't go into detail.

One of Oliver's mottos was: "Do not wait for someone to ask for help. If you see someone has a problem and you know how to fix it, just fix it."

I had this same kind of work ethic drilled into me from my German grandparents, who lived with us. That is what made Oliver and me very good friends. I followed his instructions to the best of my ability. Once you proved your worth, Oliver would listen to your suggestions on projects, but first you had to have the good work ethic.

Norway

I don't know much about what happened there, but he did enjoy being appreciated by so many Norwegians. He thought of Heidi and Rein and their children as another family. Hopefully someone else is sharing his Norway chapter.

He was so quiet and far from communications that Alaskans did not truly get to share in his knowledge. There are at least ten people in Manley Hot Springs who still come to check out the sod house and remember the skills Oliver taught them.

Oliver enjoyed honing the skills of folks already skilled in living off the land, rather than teaching rank beginners. It is really nice to know that lake property will be passed on to another family.

Memories of Oliver at Lake Minchumina

Oliver had his own cabin, and loved to share his skills. He had teenagers that came and visited him. Not always did this younger generation depart on good terms.

Around 1992 or 1993 there was a German fellow named Hartmut, who wanted to live remotely. He found out the realities of getting firewood and living without electricity. Oliver was very demanding, and expected jobs to be done certain ways. Hartmut ended up helping Duane and Rene Ose.

Tonya was helping Oliver get situated for the winter, but none of the cabins built by the Haydens were meant for cold winter inhabitation. He really enjoyed the warmth of his sod house.

Again he tried to live at lake, but he wasn't walking very well. Tonya went out and helped him get winter firewood, but without the Hannans as neighbors, he was starting to feel vulnerable being alone. In order to be independent but near people, he started going to California and Oregon in the winter.

Oliver was always asked by me, and many friends, to write a book on "How to Live on \$0.00". He never felt that was necessary. He thought those skills were best learned by actively practicing and learning from other people. He was more interested in why to do it. Those were the last writings I did with Oliver when he lived at Donnelly, Idaho.

Also he was always working on his book "Thoughts Born of Turmoil", writing longhand. Other folks can tell the saga of that book.

Oliver felt that it was truly paramount that people have the proper philosophy if they choose to live off the land or live a self-sufficient lifestyle. His hinge pin was his philosophy of accepting God as your friend, in order to live a productive life without debt. (See "Thoughts Born of Turmoil"). I do not know if I truly understood all of his thoughts, but now I say I try to be a steward of what God has given us. I live a God-sufficient life style in Minchumina.

He never had excellent health, so all the tasks took longer, never allowing for much leisure time. He did read very unique books. His favorite author was Immanuel Velikovsky who wrote the books *Earth in Upheaval* and *Worlds in Collision*.

Oliver talked about just dying of old age out at the lake, but when those last days came, he appreciated being with friends and relatives. He had George Hobson fly him out. He did not want to die alone.

I like to remember the smile of joy he had when he was eating ice cream with Richard and Dorene in Donnelly, Idaho. One of the last books he read there was about Harry Truman as President—the end of WWII and after. It came from the McCall, Idaho Library.

Tonya, Paula and I are eternally grateful to Oliver for helping us return to Alaska and make a home. That is why we were always trying to help him with whatever dreams he had.

What he gave to us was priceless—shelter, warmth, and clothing in a community where the girls had wonderful schooling and I had a job. He gave us independence, but he really wanted a family. We were his long distance (come & go) family.