

My Life with Oliver
by Joyce Denslow

Oliver came to our home many an evening to discuss with Dan his philosophy of life, to see what Dan thought of his ideas, and to see if they were logical to him.

It seems a strange thing to say, but my own experiences with Oliver were actually very limited. I never had much one-on-one contact with him, since he was relating to Dan most of the time. At first I tried to be a part of it, but Oliver's voice was too soft for my ears. Even though I was in hearing distance for people with normal hearing, I couldn't make out what they were talking about.

Whenever I told Oliver that he needed to speak up so that I could also hear, he would try for the first half of his next sentence, but he was so deep into expressing his thoughts that he was back down to quiet Oliver by the end of it. After a while I just gave up. I seemed to be invisible to him.

So although Dan and Oliver had many interactions, I'm not aware of what they were. I think Dan visited him often. I remember that he spent one evening with Oliver because he was so sick that we weren't sure he would make it through the night. His lungs were filling up giving him a lot of trouble breathing.

I do remember that when we started a garden one spring, we put barrels of fish into it as fertilizer, but I don't remember Oliver having anything to do with it. It seems logical that Dan got the idea from Oliver, but I don't recall.

I also remember that I got the idea of using dried caribou stomachs for fertilizer from his daughter, Dorene. Perhaps she got it from Oliver, but I don't know that. I always associate that bit of knowledge with her.

Oliver told Dan how to build and operate his chain saw mill, but I don't remember the details of how it was built. It did work for us, though, as we made all the board lumber we needed for our igloo with it. I'm quite sure Don Bucknell used it, and could describe it accurately.

As to the incident with the gun, all I remember is that he was helping to fix someone's gun that he didn't know was loaded. It went off in his hand, tearing a hole in his palm. He flew into the Kotzebue hospital. They didn't put stitches in it, but he was to soak it every night in warm soapy water as I recall, and then put a fresh bandage over it. It healed without any problems, but I don't remember how long it took.

Dan and I bought the big river boat that Oliver had built to transport his family of five. It was huge to me, but it was so well built that even I could maneuver it easily. It would push it off from shore and whoosh in for a landing with relative ease. I always felt safe handling it.

I felt so safe that every June, about the time of my daughter's birthday, I would boat into the village to pick up any kid who wanted to go to the beach across the river for an afternoon of fun. Even with the boat piled high with kids, it steered easily. I never had to refuse a kid who wanted to come.

At the beach we were away from those pesky mosquitoes. We played games in the sand. Many went swimming, even though the water was still cold. We had a bonfire to cook doughboys and strips of fish. We had potato salad and carrot cake. We went home at the end of a long day, tired but with full bellies and satisfied smiles. We'd had a lot of fun celebrating a birthday, all due to Oliver's well-built boat.

We were both impressed with Oliver's ability to walk into the woods with only an axe, and survive. After Dan died, Oliver came to me to return an axe that Dan had given him, which Dan had used as a youth in the Boy Scouts. Oliver thought I would like having it back for sentimental reasons—which I did. I like using it back here in Iowa. It brings back fond memories of both of them.

Oliver also helped me stuff a couple of pillows with moose hair to take with me when I left Ambler. I thank him often for them now, as I use them to support my weak back. They feel so good. They stay firm but not too firm, with just the right amount of give. The hair is from the moose Dan had shot that last fall when we went hunting together, so those pillows bring back lots of good memories.

Oliver was quite a guy. I wish I had known him better.