

Reminiscences about Oliver Cameron

by

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June 2013

Ken

One does not often meet a person like Oliver Cameron. Only once, in fact, at most. Oliver was one-of-a-kind, a completely self-styled man. He fashioned his own lifestyle and religion just as he did his projects and structures and some of the tools with which he built them. Whether they all worked to the satisfaction of those around him I'll leave to someone else. I'll merely relate some of my experiences with him during the fall, winter, and spring of 1966-67 in Ambler, Alaska.

It must be noted that Oliver was a helper and a teacher as well as a doer. He liked nothing better than tutoring young or inexperienced people in subsistence skills that they needed in the North. Though I brought my own store of outdoor experience to Ambler, I benefited substantially from Oliver's knowledge.

Not least, Oliver must be counted as a thinker. He loved to carry on extended discussions about such matters as art, communication, social forces, and the meaning of life. Toward me, at least, he did not excessively promote his religious convictions. I knew him as a refreshingly curious, live-minded person. We shared a range of values regarding simplicity, cooperation and sharing, and respect for Nature.

Oliver and I first met in early October 1966 when he returned from Kotzebue where he had been doing carpentry. His wife Lorene and two of their three children, Dorene and Gary, had arrived a few weeks earlier. Pam and I had been in Ambler since late July and gotten acclimated. We lived in the cabin of friends from Denver who had moved to Ambler to teach for a year. They stayed on for a few more years before returning south but after our year in Ambler, they were drawn back north again.

Freeze-up had just occurred and the fall caribou migration had begun. Oliver and I went hunting on a tundra downriver. We found some caribou that had been killed but not yet gutted out. Just as pioneers helped their neighbors in the 19th century, Oliver proceeded to do the field dressing to reduce spoilage of the meat. When the hunter, Don Williams, showed up with his sled and four-dog team, we helped him load a couple of carcasses to take back to the caribou cache near his cabin.

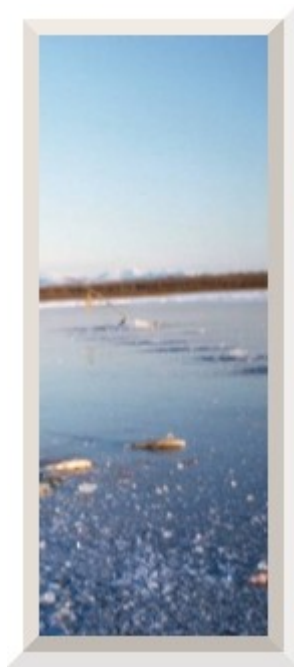
What impressed me most, however, occurred after I had shot a cow caribou and she lay dying. Oliver got to her first, and I overheard him speaking to her in kind, sympathetic tones. Then he pushed his knife between her neck vertebrae and sent her away. To me it spoke of a respect for other Earth inhabitants balanced with a subsistence need, forming a core concept of environmentalism known as sustainability. It gave me a deeper understanding of and clearer commitment to principles of environmentalism.

Pam

In mid-October Oliver, Dorene, Ken and I traveled downriver to hunt caribou with Don Williams for four days. This was my first ever hunting trip. We hunted up on the tundra during the day, where I learned how to gut a caribou, and gathered in Don's tent by the river for the night. Supper was always fresh meat but the night we had brisket stood out for some reason. I learned from Oliver that there's nothing better than the meat next to the bone, explaining why that brisket was so delicious.

Ken

Approaching winter also meant that we needed a better stove than the one we'd ordered from a supply store. Oliver offered to show me how to make one out of a steel barrel. Not simply by adding a door and hole for the stovepipe, though. This one would be cubical in shape, hole cut for stovepipe, and oval door on front for putting in wood and taking out ashes. The result proved to be attractive and lasted for many years. But it meant many hours of pounding on steel and, it seemed, even more time devoted to tea and discussion. Perhaps that was the prime purpose of the project -- ?



Fall ice fishing took place mainly in October, so I helped Oliver put in his gill net. One cuts a series of holes in the ice crosswise of the current, then pushes a rope from hole to hole under the ice. The net is pulled through by the rope and its bottom is held down by stone or caribou-antler weights while the top is held up by wooden or plastic floats. Fish are caught as they try to pass through the net, and are removed every day or two by pulling out the net by one of the ropes tied to each end. The Camerons shared fish with us in part by letting us pull the net one day for ourselves. The church benefited too; Oliver and I took 130 whitefish for the ground-level cache to be used during the upcoming quarterly meeting.

The Camerons owned three dogs and a small sled. Sometimes I used the sled and dogs to run my trap line. Dog sledding is quite an art and science, and I learned a lot from Oliver as we freighted caribou or did other odd jobs with the help of the dogs. Lessons included dog psychology and management, sled maintenance, and the inevitable concerns about trail conditions. I never saw Oliver kick or beat a dog, as many others did. That, more than his technical skills, speaks well for Oliver Cameron's values.

Quite a few projects, small and not so, involved Oliver and us during the year. When an elderly Eskimo neighbor, Maude Cleveland, needed a new outhouse, I helped Oliver build one for her. No charge, of course. Pam and I helped the Camerons dig a foundation hole for their new *ookevik* (half-underground home), needed because erosion by the Kobuk River threatened to undermine the one they were living in. Later I helped cut and haul long spruce logs for the construction. In 1994-5 while visiting Ambler I stayed in the still-occupied *ookevik*.

Oliver showed me how to do many things. They included lashing willow branches to an old pair of Army skis to make a sled I used on the trap line, and making an *ulu*, or woman's knife, that Pam used when preparing food, especially meat and fish. The *ulu* consisted of an arc of sharpened steel cut from the base of an old handsaw blade stuck into a piece of caribou antler that served as a handle. Mine always performed well and the blade never came loose. A forked willow stick handle inserted into a short piece of aluminum pipe served as a skin scraper which Pam used to tan caribou skins for *mukluks* and other skin sewing projects.



Ski-sled; Ambler, Winter 1967



Cutting fish with ulu; Ambler, Fall 1993

Pam

During the winter I decided to make a pair of *tuttuliks* – *mukluks* with caribou skin soles – for myself. The pattern required a one to two inch strip of dyed skin between the caribou leg skin uppers and the soles. I had gotten instructions from one of the village women, using the best English she knew and some hand motions, for how to dye a piece of skin: take strips of alder bark, boil them, let them dry, wet them and lay them on the tanned skin. Oliver happened by when I was valiantly trying to lay the curved strips of alder bark on the skin. Needless to say, the whole piece of skin was not turning a beautiful, rich orangy-brown color. Oliver was able to tell me the preparation step I was missing. Once the alder bark dried, it should be crumpled into small pieces then mixed with water to make a mash to lay on the skin. He also taught me how to use sinew for skin sewing although in the end, using dental floss was a whole lot easier.

Oliver always seemed to be there to offer his help at just the right time. He lent us their Coleman stove while he fixed ours. He repaired our manual typewriter that didn't survive the U.S. Mail between Washington, DC and Ambler. During a heavy snowstorm, he came to check to make sure Ken had made it home safely after a visit with them. When I went to town without my snowshoes and ran into overflow on the way back, he lent me his

snowshoes so I could get home without further frigid soakings. As we were preparing to leave Ambler, he gave us enough kerosene for our Aladdin lamp to see us through until we left for six weeks at Sealing Point and the journey back down below.

Several years later – around 1975 - Oliver came to visit Ken and me in Adrian, Michigan where we lived with our two children, Wendy and Hugh, who were about five and seven years old at the time. He arrived by bus and stayed a few days. My children to this day still have fond memories of the rubber-band guns that he carved for them.

Ken

Oliver Cameron might be described as a prototypical American frontiersman: unconventional, inventive, pragmatic, assertive, always active, always willing to help and share, always curious about what might be around the next bend of the river. Less typically, his search for a place in life went deeper, exploring the proper role of humans in the universe. These concerns meant far more to him than personal physical comfort and financial security. A thoughtful person, knowing Oliver, couldn't help but be changed even though his or her pathway would be different. For me, Oliver's life and perspectives remain a part of how I think about work, technology, society, Nature, and life.