

## **Memories of a Handmade Man**

By Seth Kantner

Snowflakes are falling in this memory of Oliver Cameron. The snow coming down on already deep drifts outside our windows; winter, and a gray world out there stretching to dark horizons.

I don't recall how Oliver arrived at our buried sod house, but I picture him to have come on snowshoes, plodding, dragging one of his home-fashioned narrow-runner sleds, the line of runner tracks already burying by the time he pulled his parka off beside our stove.

Snowshoe travel makes sense; certainly he spent weeks building handmade snowshoes that winter building for my mom and brother in our small house during his visit.

For the first few days, Oliver filed at my dad's rip saw with a triangle file. He filed down each metal tooth until he was satisfied with how he'd modified it, making them bigger and sharper, and adjusting the set of the teeth. Oliver always liked to file and whittle down tools and handles--until he liked them better than before.

He was a tall, thin man. He wore heavy drab patched clothes, wool pants and a wool shirt. He had broad square shoulders inside his shirt, always buttoned at the sleeves. His wrists and throat were pale, his fingers long and rough from making everything by hand. I have no idea what his knees and elbows looked like; they were always hidden. He had big ears and broad lips, and if you paid attention you noticed his hands shook a little, something we hadn't seen before. He had a look in his eyes and in the little cap he wore, too, that look from photographs from the 1930's--of thin hungry men living through the Great Depression.

Of course, we didn't know much of that back then. To my brother Kole and me, Oliver was an encyclopedia of intriguing projects, all of which we adored. We were aware too of Oliver's stature along the river in the extended family of our parents and their friends--more often than not he was the man those back-to-the-landers turned to for expertise. He was perpetually helpful, mysterious and strange, always serious, polite, and impossibly ancient--nearly fifty years old.

After the rip saw was fashioned to his satisfaction, he set up sawhorses across the floor of our little home. Slowly and meticulously he sawed strips out of birch boards my dad had milled the year previous. He wasn't in a hurry. The snow was deep; all of us deep in winter. No one we knew was in a hurry. Time, and tundra, we had in unlimited supply.

Oliver sighted down each strip of birch and then leaned it in the corner against the post there, and began ripping another.

When he was done sawing all the strips, he worked them down with a spokeshave and hand plane. He showed us how to hold the plane at an angle to make it cut easier.

I don't remember the pale sawdust and plane shavings quite as sharply as something else in our possession back then--a store-bought item, and for that reason significantly more interesting to us kids raised on the tundra than anything made from materials as natural as a birch tree and caribou leather.

The item was a bag of Nestles chocolate chips. Somehow my family had that intriguing possession, still unopened.

The Nestles bag was brilliant yellow, smooth, small, and solid. You could feel the chocolate chips inside when you held the bag. It was only 12 ounces, I think, or maybe 16. On the back, printed in tiny perfect chocolate-colored writing, was a recipe.

Kole and I asked my mom if we might be allowed to bake those cookies it described. We weren't sure it would be okay--with Oliver staying the month and all--and that vague uncertain issue he was known to have when it came to sweets. Somehow sugar was extra bad for him, something from his unsettled past. But chocolate chip cookies were so alluring. And there was something more, something about that recipe: on the bag it claimed to make seven dozen cookies! Was that even possible? Kole and I were determined to know.

My family had a plywood table at that time. It was two feet wide and five feet long, with the corners cut off. The grain ran crossways, the narrow way, and you weren't supposed to lean on the ends--they overhung the leg framework and were unsupported; downward pressure would crack them. We didn't have any more plywood, and it seemed very important that our table didn't break; we warned visitors and strangers about this danger promptly when they sat down.

"Careful! Don't lean on that part."

We asked Oliver if it would be okay to make cookies. He nodded and smiled politely, more comfortable with the idea than we had expected. Still, we were a little worried about what might happen.

That evening my mom cleared the table off and wiped it clean with a dishrag. As we slid each tray out of the wood-fired cookstove, my brother and I spread the hot cookies in rows on the table. The air hung with the thick chocolaty smell of cookies. We didn't eat a single one. We waited for the last tray. We wanted to count them all. It seemed important to try to make 84, as the bag promised. My brother and I always had a need to verify numbers, and facts, and to prove or

disprove claims the big world out there had the habit of sending our way.

There were only 47. But still, that was a lot of beautiful cookies.

Oliver put down the red-handled spokeshave. He sat on the flat sawhorse, hunched forward, one leg crossed over the other and his wrists crossed on his thigh, thoughtfully contemplating the rows of cookies. He wasn't fiddling with birch boards now, nor filing tools into more agreeable tools. All he was doing was looking over all those golden brown cookies.

I remember watching him, a little meanly I think--really what we'd done was no different than baiting a trap--and suddenly feeling bad. Mom had told us that Oliver had a problem with sweets--he couldn't resist them--and had health problems somehow connected to sugar. I don't remember what the problems were, just that feeling that probably we should have waited to bake those chocolate cookies, until he left. But people often stayed for weeks back then, with no end to the visit in sight. And that yellow bag of chocolate really was magic waiting to be unwrapped.

At the same time, though, there were no other adults like Oliver, and we wanted him to stay as long as possible. Back then kids out in cabins and sod igloos, far away from neighbors and other children, counted on adults like Oliver to show them amazing things--like how to temper steel, and carve spoons--and with them clamp interesting things in the vise to saw and file and form out of chunks of root and bits of metal.

And I guess men like Oliver, who lived coarse wilderness lives, counted on families for comforts such as warm cookies. I don't remember whether he was sick and low for a few days, like he sometimes got, or not. I know he ate the chocolate cookies, because we watched him do so, and eventually he steamed and bent the strips of birch, and formed two pairs of snowshoes, one for my mom, and a smaller pair for my brother. (I was to get my brother's old pair.)

Oliver soaked caribou hides in the corner in a washtub to slip the hair and made a tiny knife to cut the skin into perfect thin strips of babiche. The strips were soft and rubbery, and he used them to firmly lace the snowshoes. Afterward, he let the babiche dry. It drew up even tighter as it dried.



My brother Kole (left) and I race on snowshoes that Oliver built.  
Image: Sasha Wik

Now, forty years later, I still have the larger pair. I've hunted miles and miles on them. Now, I wish I'd paid attention to how he did all of it, his eyeing the grain of the wood, and that intricate pattern of lacing. But of course I was only six or seven, and enamored, too, by things like that printed promise of an inconceivable quantity of cookies--two very different childhood events, one so meaningless today.

I do remember that during that month, he showed Kole and me how to make crooked knives--for carving wooden spoons out of spruce roots--and how to anneal used files in the stove, to soften the metal to then file into sheath knives. And then how to quench the steel, and how to boil chunks of caribou antler in a pot of water until they were soft enough to pound onto the tangs of our knives, for handles. And finally, to soak ugruk hide to form into sheaths for our knives.

It was a bold and worldly feeling, to climb into your pants in the morning, and walk around as a six year old with a knife on your belt, one that you'd made yourself, just yesterday, with Oliver, of course.

Oliver might have stayed until spring. Or possibly it was another spring when he camped up by Amoktok Slough, along the bluff here, up in the big spruce trees. He walked to our house almost every day the spring he camped at Amoktok. He was our only company, of course, and worked with my dad, showing him how to build a kayak, and then skin it with canvas, and paint the canvas with something reddish to keep it from leaking. When the ice went out, he went back upriver. In a second kayak, I think, that he built at his tent. Maybe *from* his tent!



Oliver's bed frame remains at his spring camp across from Kapakavik. Image: Seth Kantner

A few evenings ago I walked up Amoktok. I was hungry, needing meat, searching for a porcupine or spruce hen to put in the Dutch oven. Oliver's old spruce poles still lean there up against a big tree in the woods. If they didn't, I probably couldn't find his camping spot all these years later. The brush is thick and lush now, growing so tall with our new warmer seasons, and so many years have carried my mind to so many places; I can't instantly remember which tree towers over his old campsite. Only those leaning poles tell me the spot.

Across the river, too, along a cranberry ridge, are the gray timbers of another one of Oliver's spring camps, from later years, my teenage years. The moss and cranberry plants are growing happily up the sides of abandoned poles, planed boards, and sections of firewood. Upriver, I know there are igloos he built, and helped build, and lives he touched, kids and adults, from Kobuk to the coast who remember him.





Snowshoes (left) that Oliver had made previously, and one remaining from Kole's pair made that winter. Image: Seth Kantner

Now I know Oliver really did live through the Great Depression, and World War II, where he was a radio operator on a B-24 bomber--as a young man, before we ever knew him. Like memories--so far back and so strange they feel no longer your own--it seems almost inconceivable that that kind gentle man we followed faithfully to the workbench had been a soldier in that terrible war we read about in books.

Like the heroes we read of, he had been shot down over the northern part of Croatia. The entire crew survived without serious injury. It took 28 days for the Yugoslavian partisans to guide them to safety in Italy. Maybe his health problems started during that time of starving and hiding behind the Nazi lines.

Later, he married, and moved to Kotzebue, and then to the north shore of Kobuk Lake. From there he moved up the Kobuk River, possibly in 1962, and built a sod igloo and then more of them on the north end of Ambler.

As is often the case with little kids, my brother and I didn't know this man's history; we didn't know where his family had gone, only that the knives and tools and snowshoes, and that kayak, too, were enchanted creations fashioned from wood and skin and cloth and rusty metal--boring things brought to life.



My dad, Howard, comes home from checking traps.  
Oliver built the snowshoes for my mom, Erna. Image: Erna Kantner

One spring evening, after the ice had gone, Oliver again showed us something new. To me it will always be the epitome of his teachings. He had told us we had to wait until breakup was well along and sap running in the trees for him to show us.

This is how I picture Oliver, how I see his face clearly: with his ears sticking out and his broad lips, and after his hands fashioned a short section of willow into a stubby flute-like whistle, he scored the bark in a circle, tapped it all around with his knife handle, and then wrapped his lips around it, to get it wet to further loosen the bark. "Spittle," he explained. It was a new word for us, and of course it rhymed with Oliver's other favorite word: whittle. Spittle, and the way he did it was a little unnerving, and I remember paying attention, but looking away too, from that glistening saliva.

Regardless, the willow whistles he showed us how to make were marvels, amazing and valuable toys that fit into your pocket. Walking the game trails barefoot, you could pull your whistle out and blow notes whenever you felt the desire. To this day, I can't make them work the way he did. Basically, they don't work at all. Somewhere along the years, I forgot some important notch with the knife, or the shape of the flat hollow area under the bark, or something.

Down the hill here, below the cache Oliver helped my dad build--which is now nearly gone--is a small clump of willows that grow straight and true. We found them when Oliver sent us out to find the straightest willows around. After being flattened by Breakups, they still come back perfect. Even tonight, those willows are out there, tall. I could run down with a flashlight and cut one right now.

When the sap runs in the spring, occasionally I do wander down with a saw to cut a short section. I feel bad cutting one of those willows, straight as bamboo, knowing I won't succeed. I try to resurrect a perfect whistle. But it never comes out right. It never whistles; it won't make a sound, and I wait more years before I try again.

Thinking about that lets loose a string of memories, and tonight in the dark by flashlight I hurry over to our old workbench, and paw and dig in the drawer. Under new screwdrivers with red plastic handles, and gray hacksaw blades and files, sure enough, there in sawdust and stray pencils are old handmade tools.



Hand tools Oliver helped Kole and Seth make.  
Image: Seth Kantner

A tear comes to my eye when I pull out a tiny antler-handled saw. *My saw!* How could I have forgotten my saw? Oliver helped me make it. I loved that little saw like a friend for so many years. I used it a thousand times to cut caribou antlers and willows, spruce roots and forked limbs for slingshot handles. From the drawer, I pull out a crooked knife, and after more rummaging I find an awl. Kole and I loved making awls with Oliver. They were so sharp and so useful for drilling holes in moose hide, and leather, and wood.

Finally, I find what I've forgotten but somehow instantly knew was in the drawer. A flat spruce handle, a foot long, and half an inch by and



inch and a half: the folding saw Oliver made with us almost half a century ago. When I lift it, its two hand-filed blades swing out, and the stub of a third, snapped off at some point. Peened nails rivet the ends of the wooden handle tight. A bolt with a hand-filed nut acts as a pivot for the two cross-cut blades. In green and red marker, are the faint faded words: KOLE & SETH.

Wind blows outside, and in the darkness gusts of raindrops pelt the roof. Under the small circle of light, now I'm remembering more. Oliver walking with me out on the tundra, behind my dad's cache. He's tall, long legs in wool pants, worn leather boots, him peering at small trees, searching for the perfect spruce. It must be thin and narrow, and a black spruce--whatever that means.

I don't know spruce can be black and white. Only that Oliver is helping me make a bow. And of course that means arrows, too, with tips and beautiful split duck wing feathers, and each arrow pierces another memory. More memories that include that quiet, earnest, eminently resourceful man we all knew as Oliver, up and down this river, along the shores of my childhood.