

October 24, 1977

Mr. James Deane, Editor  
Living Wilderness  
The Wilderness Society  
Washington DC

Dear Jim,

I enclose a manuscript and some slides that you might wish to consider for the magazine. I returned to Alaska to do a story for NPCA on the Katmai. When that was done, I by luck got a chance to spend a week in a wilderness log cabin built by and formerly occupied by Ernie Johnson who was, as you know, Robert Marshall's friend and guide during Marshall's famous explorations of the Central Brooks Range in the 1930s.

In view of the Wilderness Society's connection with Marshall, and because of the timeliness of Alaska themes, perhaps the enclosed might interest you. Regarding the slides, they are a bit thin in some cases because, unknown to me, the light meter was off by about two stops. Nevertheless several of them should prove useful, I believe.

In a week's time I will be leaving here, and should be again in the Washington area by the middle of November. Mail is usually slow between Anchorage and the real world, so perhaps you could send your reaction and any comments, etc. to my Washington address, below.

Best regards,

Ogden Williams

ERNIE JOHNSON'S CABIN  
*A Memoir of the Central Brooks Range*

The idea of staying in Ernie Johnson's wilderness cabin in the central Brooks Range of Alaska came quite unexpectedly, as so many good things in life do. It all really began a year earlier - back in August 1976 - when I had backpacked a hundred miles into one of the wildest areas of the northern Brooks Range, because it was then that I met Ray Bane. Originally from Wisconsin, Ray has spent more than fifteen years in the Alaskan north and now works for the National Park Service, based in Bettles. So, on my return to Alaska I arranged to meet him in Fairbanks to get his expert reading on things Alaskan, particularly the local reactions to the public hearings on the national interest (or "d-2") lands which had just been held there by Representatives Morris Udall and John Seiberling. I also wanted him to meet my journalist nephew Andy Williams and his wife, Joyce, who live and work in Fairbanks.

IDEA WAS BORN  
It was during that evening that the ~~lightning bolt struck~~. Ray happened to mention that the famous Alaska trapper and woodsman Ernie Johnson, friend and guide to the great Robert Marshall during the latter's explorations of the central Brooks Range in the 1930s, had built a fine log cabin which still survived in the wilderness about sixty-five miles north of Bettles, ~~well~~ above the Arctic Circle. He said it was on a mining claim now owned by Daryl Morris of Bettles, who was very proud of the cabin and ~~was~~ <sup>took</sup> good care of it, and that no one was staying in it. At my urging Ray telephoned Daryl's brother, Neil, and got permission for me to stay in the cabin during the first week of September, 1977. I accordingly arranged to fly to Bettles the next day.

A Danish friend, Esther Lersen, who also likes the wild country and is not afraid to carry a backpack, had taken some vacation from her job in Copenhagen, and together we took the one-hour flight from Fairbanks

to Bettles. Ray Bane was also on board, and he invited us to lunch in his snug house overlooking the John River while we awaited the chartered Cessna 185 floatplane which would carry us further north.

While Ray's blonde and sunny wife Barbara put together some delicious sandwiches I talked at length with Ray's other guest. He was Fred Meader, a slim, intense man who had been living for some years with his wife and children at Wild Lake, northeast of Bettles. The Meaders had settled there to experience true subsistence living, making their own clothes, building their cabin, living on nature's terms and from nature's bounty. Fred told me he even refused to use a chain saw or an outboard motor. He deeply felt that such labor-saving devices, however convenient, interfered with the true relationship of the human body to its environment, contributing to the alienation of people from the natural world and from themselves. As we talked, Fred probably said little that Thoreau had not written more than a century before, but the important thing was that he and his family had really acted on and lived by their convictions. He was passing through Bettles on a return trip from "Outside" where he had arranged final details for a full-length film based on his family's experiences which, he said, would soon be appearing at theatres across the country. As I talked with this sensitive and deeply philosophical man I never could have believed that within days he would be dead, victim of a tragic aircraft accident.

Our plane arrived about three o'clock in the afternoon. Esther and I put our gear into the Cessna and took off from the river for the thirty-five minute flight to deserted Ernie Lake. The central Brooks Range also has an Ernie Creek and an Ernie Pass, all honoring this Ernie Johnson who should now be introduced - and by none other than Robert Marshall himself, speaking from the pages of his classic Arctic Wilderness (renamed Alaska Wilderness in the latest edition.) The year

was 1930:

"The third afternoon, as we were laboriously leading the horses above the bluffs opposite the mouth of Tinayguk River, we were startled by a voice shouting to us from the other side of the North Fork. I ran down to the bank and saw a man poling across the stream. In a few moments he landed and introduced himself as Ernie Johnson. He had a friendly open face and the springing stride of a woodsman. The slight accent of his speech betrayed his origin from Sweden. I had heard frequently about Ernie, most illustrious hunter and trapper of the Far North, a sort of Daniel Boone among the pioneers of this arctic frontier, unanimously admitted by the exceptionally competent woodsmen of the Koyukuk to be their superior. Although Ernie spends practically all of his time in the woods, and is alone most of his days, he is not an anchorite by preference but merely because he seldom can find anyone to share his difficult life...."

"He also told me about his life. He had been born in Sweden fifty years before, and had come to America when he was sixteen. He became a carpenter and, after living in Minnesota and some other states, joined the stampede to Kuskokwim in 1904. He had not been outside of Alaska since. Although he had come north on a gold rush, he had also been drawn by his love of the woods in this greatest wilderness of the continent. Here he spent all but about two weeks of the year out in the hills, away from the "cities" of Wiseman (population 103) and Bettles (population 24)....Bettles was Ernie's base town where he had a cabin and sometimes a garden. He trapped and hunted, averaging a yearly income of about twenty-five hundred dollars. "I can make better money as a carpenter," he said, "but I am staying out here because I like it among these rugged mountains better than anywhere else in the world."

We flew north up the valley of Bettles Creek and then swung left down another valley toward Ernie Lake. At the junction of the two valleys, about thirty yards from the creek, we could clearly see the cabin that was our destination. I carefully checked the terrain over the last six miles to the lake because we would have to retrace this stretch on foot before dark. Soon the plane was on the water. Fish were rising as we taxied up to the eastern shore and passed the gear along the pontoon to the bank. We waved at the pilot, and within minutes the plane had disappeared down the lake and was gone.

After civilization and airplanes, the sensation of being abandoned in the wilderness is profound. There is a heightened sense of identity when one suddenly finds oneself surrounded by a new world totally devoid of human beings and utterly indifferent to them. Nerve-ends of self-reliance that lie dormant in the cities begin to come alive.

The mountain slopes that loomed above us would only later seem friendly and familiar. After a few moments of such reflections, however, more prosaic necessities asserted their priority. The backpacks had to be arranged and shouldered, straps tightened, cup on belt, compass and map in an accessible breast pocket, rain jacket strapped outside in case of need. It being September there were no mosquitoes - just clear cool air, utter silence, and a game trail beckoning eastward from the lake.

The map showed a straight-line distance of six miles to Ernie Johnson's cabin. Ray Bane had described it as an easy three-hour walk. Darkness would not fall for almost six hours, so I was not concerned about that. The path, used often by moose, occasionally by caribou and rarely by bear and men, seemed to offer an easy journey, but after about two miles it simply petered out. I later learned that we should have crossed at this point to the north side of the valley. In fact we continued straight on - across small braided streams, through swamps, and finally through tussocks. For those who haven't walked Alaska, tussocks are wobbly knobs of sedges. You can't step on them without tumbling off, and you get partially stuck when you step between them. With a sixty-pound pack, they become very tiresome very soon. After a while we encountered stretches of alders which, in their own way, were as bad as the tussocks. Time went by. Ray Bane's three hours became four, and Ernie Johnson's cabin was still nowhere in sight.

Eventually we came out in a spruce forest, its higher ground green with moss or white with lichen. I found the bleached antlers of a caribou and put them on my pack. The bones were widely scattered which meant that the kill had been made by wolves. I could almost see and hear the deadly drama which had been enacted here, one straining

life lost to renew other lives in the endless flow of nature.

After five hours, - not three - and guided by map and compass, we debouched as if by magic at Ernie Johnson's cache. Caches are miniature log cabins, perched high on four stout poles to thwart marauding bears and wolverines, where supplies and equipment are stored. They are a traditional part of the Alaskan scene. We were enormously glad to see this one as it meant the end of our journey, a chance to put down the packs, to feel the deep contentment of dry socks, fire and food. Perhaps we also felt a sense of coming home again to the familiar turf of our own species after trespassing for some hours in a world that clearly belonged to others.

The cabin was just beyond the cache. Its door in front and window behind were covered by special bearproof shutters held in place by iron bars. I slid out the door bar and removed the heavy outer barrier to find a second door with a wooden latch. In Alaska cabin doors open inward. Otherwise windblown snow drifts could rapidly pile up against a door and trap a man inside. We stepped into the silence of Ernie's cabin. To the left was the old wood stove, its upper surface badly cracked but still usable. Against the walls were two bunks, one with mattress boards broken and out of commission. (This was to mean that I slept on the floor !) A table and bench stood at the far end opposite the door, while around the walls were shelves loaded with old books, tools, matches, candles, and calendars of years gone by. Corrugated cardboard was tacked to the wall near the bunk on the north side, no doubt to damp down the drafts on sub-zero winter nights. *Embracing* near the stove old tins had been flattened and nailed to the walls to reduce the hazard of fire. On one of them we could read:

" DRAYMERS  
EXTRA  
Fancy American Sliced  
POTATOES

Eagle  
Evaporating Co.  
Seattle, Wash.  
USA "

Others bore the legend: "Pearl Oil Kerosene."

I hobbled on sore feet down to Bettencourt Creek, filled a plastic container with pure mountain water. We fired up the old stove, using kindling and wood already split and stacked, cooked dinner, lit four candles and stretched out in our sleeping bags. For a few moments I read from Marshall's Alaska Wilderness, then blew out the candles and drifted off to sleep.

September 3, 1977

Ensolite pads do not materially soften a hardwood floor, but I awoke in the morning surprisingly refreshed and eager for breakfast. Backpackers, mountain climbers and woodsmen see food in an entirely different light than do satiated city dwellers. They know that the priceless ingredient of any dish is the need and desire of the body to absorb it. We had divided our food, for convenience, into breakfast, lunch and supper bags. Breakfast started with powdered citrus fruit juice mixed and served by the earliest riser. A little firestarter on some kindling sufficed to get the stove going, which soon took the chill from the air. Then we boiled water and mixed generous bowls of hot porridge, finishing off with coffee, hot chocolate or tea. Outside the cabin, light frost and morning sunlight combined to illuminate individually each glistening twig of spruce and freshened a patch of pink autumn fireweed. Heated water splashed on the face for shaving seemed to turn cold almost before the razor could be applied. I noticed once again how the little sensations of life become richer and more important as one's

## LIVING BECOMES SIMPLER AND more elemental.

We spent our first morning settling in and taking a closer look at Ernie's cabin. I paced it out at 17 x 14 feet, with the walls 10 feet high. The roof peaked at 13 feet above ground and was supported by three massive ridge logs on either side of the peak. The spruce logs retained all their bark on the outside of the cabin but had been scraped flat on the inside. The cracks between the logs were chinked with moss and nothing else, but this seemed to suffice. We noticed that the cabin stayed warm for hours after the stove had been allowed to go out. At the front of the cabin the roof projected five feet, making a small porch area for sitting out during rain, but primarily designed to give shelter to the woodpile. Two old sawhorses, a log splitter and some venerable two-handled saws enabled us to replace firewood as we burned it. A path off to the right led to an outhouse distinguished for the great mountain views available from its strategic vantage point, while directly in front of the cabin was the cache.

We raised the spruce-pole ladder and climbed up for an inspection. Inside were an old dogsled, and dog harnesses, moose mittens and old-time skin mukluks, a shedding caribou parka now dry with age, sacks of food, cans of fuel and some tools. Hanging from the walls were a few traps, some old and rusted with interlocking teeth. Most of Ernie Johnson's yearly income of about \$2500 must have come from trapping. I happen to regard leg-pull traps as among the most loathsome devices ever made by man, perhaps because I used to trap woodchucks in Maine as a small boy. One day a young woodchuck escaped back down his hole with the trap still on his leg, to be found a few days later dead in the open field with his foot half gnawed off. I never trapped again. I couldn't be too enthusiastic about this aspect of Ernie Johnson's lifestyle, but it was his living, and the animals probably froze quickly in the Alaskan cold. I decided, in any case, that he was less to be blamed than the well-fed

ladies who flaunt spotted cat coats on Fifth Avenue or the Champs Elysees.

Leaving the cabin area, a trail led northward up Bettenpherg Creek which we crossed with little difficulty after a half-mile of easy walking. On the other side the path continued, kept open by moose whose tracks we often saw. In less than a mile we came upon Colorado Creek which flows into Bettenpherg from the east. I put together my fly rod and tied on a wet fly which had been my favorite for fishing in Montana. I cast the line across and down the stream, and as it swung taut the fly was immediately taken by a pan-sized grayling. After four casts and four grayling I put up the rod, cleaned and scaled the fish with a birch-handled knife I had bought in Oslo and strung them on a willow stick for the return trip to the cabin. We frankly did not know if there were bears in the valley and made plenty of noise as we retraced our steps.

At noon the sun was warm enough for sunbathing, and no mosquitoes or gnats were there to prevent it. The only discordant note was the sound of a distant helicopter which we saw scanning the high mountain cliffs about five miles away and finally settling down on a distant ridge. I waited for the sound of gunfire, assuming that we were watching an illegal sheep hunt, but we heard nothing, and after an hour the helicopter took off. (Later we learned that this was in fact a helicopter leased by the WGM company, prospecting for minerals. It had landed on the mountain top for lunch.)

Toward evening - still uncertain as to bears and wishing to keep the cabin free of fish odors - we carried the grayling down to a pebble beach on Bettenpherg Creek, wrapped them in foil and grilled them over an open fire. This was a variation on our usual backpackers' evening meal. Normally we had tea or soup, a freeze-dried main course

such as beef stroganoff with noodles (or more accurately noodles stroganoff with very little beef), a dessert of freeze-dried apples applesauce and a cup of hot chocolate. Bob Marshall and Ernie Johnson, traveling by dogsled in the winter of 1951, lived more luxuriously, as Marshall describes:

"Ernie was a simple but excellent cook and the meals he prepared added real joy to our life after a day of mushing. The piece de resistance of our suppers was always a pot of boiled meat. Ernie believed it essential for healthy camp life to avoid too much frying, and above all to avoid burned grease. The meat was tender ~~the~~ sheep which Ernie had shot late in the fall. With the natural cold-storage facilities of the Arctic there was no trouble in keeping meat all winter. We varied our suppers by boiling lima beans, peas, dried vegetables, rice, or macaroni with the meat. One potful lasted us for two nights. On the second night it was only necessary to thaw out and heat what was left from the first. The same was true of fruit. We always had a pot of dried apples and cranberries cooked and ready for immediate use. The only fresh cooking necessary for supper on the second night was tea, biscuits and sometimes rice or macaroni."

With dinner over and darkness coming ~~so~~ fast we washed our cups and utensils in the icy waters of Bettencourt Creek, doused the fire ~~reading~~ and returned to the cabin to sit by the crackling stove, ~~and read~~ by candlelight. My Danish friend was engrossed in "Tisha," a fascinating account of a young schoolteacher's life in old-time Alaska, while I reread some of Jack London's classic short stories, starting with his unforgettable To Build a Fire. Ernie Johnson, trapper and woodsman, was more intellectual in his tastes. Marshall recalls:

"At supper and after came the period of leisurely conversation. Ernie had taken along Kristin Lavransdatter and Whitehead's Science and the Modern World, while I had 1,217 pages of Tolstoi's War and Peace (which Ernie had read along with Anna Karenina during his last two-month trip in the wilderness)... Ernie had remarkably broad interests, bred from vast readings during thousands of solitary evenings in camp. Our conversations varied in subject from midwestern Methodist moral notions of the school teacher and Tolstoi's overworking of the phenomenon of love at first sight to the work of the physicists Albert A. Michelson and Robert A. Millikan and how it tied up with the cosmic ray theory. The most recurring theme, however, was Ernie's love for the wilderness. "'If I had a hundred thousand dollars today,' he said with his slight Swedish accent, 'I wouldn't quit this life in the hills. I'd get a little better equipment, and I'd go outside and get married, but I'd come right back in here again. I know what life outside is like and it don't appeal to me. I've lived this free life in here too long."

September 4, 1977

Next day the weather was again superb and we decided to make an overnight trip into the high country. After a breakfast of sausage patties, juice and coffee we packed sleeping bags and clothes, a small tent, and food enough for two lunches, one supper and one breakfast. We again walked up Bettengberg Creek to Colorado, but this time continued on up the latter eastward for almost two miles. The banks rose steeply on both sides. Usually we could proceed by crossing and recrossing the creek but sometimes had to climb up through dense willows and over mossy knobs. We saw where Ernie Johnson had mined for gold, marveling at the enormous amount of hand labor that must have <sup>put</sup> gone into building the dams, sluices and shed that still survive in varying degrees of disrepair.

Around noon the sky suddenly became overcast, ~~xxit~~ and <sup>the</sup> temperature dropped in the damp and dark creek bottom. We paused for a lunch of cheese and crackers, finishing with a handful of "gorp" - raisins mixed with nuts and chocolate. Everything was still clammy from the heavy dew which fell at night, and I decided to see if I could start a fire. I had some birch bark for tinder and broke off dead twigs ~~of~~ spruce. I imagined that it was winter and I had just fallen into the stream and had only a few moments before my legs and feet ~~froze~~ would freeze. I struggled to get that wood burning, but by the time I succeeded my imaginary legs and feet were frozen stiff and I was one more unknown casualty of the Alaskan winter : I remembered talking to an old Eskimo on the Noatak River in 1974. I had hoped to get some ancient tribal wisdom from him as to how to get a fire going with wet wood in an emergency. In response to my question he looked at me with wise old eyes and wrinkled brow, paused thoughtfully a moment and said: "Well, we usually use gasoline." There went the Arctic neighborhood!

Ernie Johnson apparently had no such problem in his day. Robert Marshall describes what happened after he and Johnson had fallen into a river in freezing weather:

"We ran up on the side hill above the river till we cam to a dead birch - a lucky break because birch makes particularly good kindling. Quickly Ernie ripped off a piece of bark and struck a dry match from his waterproof ~~max~~ match case. But his hands were shaking and he couldn't ~~get~~ set the match and the bark near each other, and the match went out. He struck another and I grabbed the bark and held it against the tiny flame. In a moment it was ablaze and then it was simple to heap on dead spruce twigs and later dead spruce limbs. Soon the fire was safely burning, not to go out until we could leave this spot nearly twenty-four hours later.... It was not until the next day, when we were rehashing the experience, that I realized what Ernie and Jesse (Allen) knew, that if we had not started the fires promptly we might have perished from exposure in this freezing weather."

Soon after lunch the skies unexpectedly cleared again. We were nearing the headwaters of Colorado Creek and decided to scale the high ridges to the north where we could camp for the night. I drew a gallon of water from the stream and we started up the steep incline. Willow and spruce gradually gave way to lower bushes as we climbed. Underfoot white caribou lichen formed a backdrop for red berries and small green and ~~green~~ leaves. After about a thousand vertical feet of exhausting work we emerged onto a flat bench ~~maxtop~~ near the top of the ridge. It was late afternoon, and the sun's rays softly illuminated the <sup>upward</sup> red, gold and green display of autumn tundra. We were just at the top of the tree-line, above which vast slopes swept upward to the mountain skylines on three sides. As far as the eye could see to the east, south and west, peaks succeeded unnamed peaks in an endless procession. This was the southern edge of the central Brooks Range country, the "rugged mountains" that Robert Marshall and Ernie Johnson loved so well. The wildness and grandeur of it all put to shame any cathedral ever built by man.

We found stones and made a fire ring, collected dead wood and soon had a merry blaze to ward off the evening chill as sunset came. Two hot cups of pea soup preceded our dinner, with hot chocolate at the

end. The tent was pitched on a bed of moss and sheltered from the northwind by the ridge above us. Darkness fell. We covered our gear with a poncho to keep off the dew, put some water in a shallow pan to see how hard it would freeze, and turned in. At about 3 a.m. we awoke briefly to find the sky a shimmering white curtain of Northern Lights.

September 5, 1977

By morning frost had covered our gear and tent and formed a thin layer of ice in the pan. We breakfasted hungrily on juice, hot cereal, chocolate and applesauce. Then, as taught to me by John Kauffmann and Ray Bane last year on our expedition to Cockedhat Mountain, I cast the stones of the fire ring to the four winds and gathered moss to pack down over the cold ashes. When we finished there was no sign that humans had ever camped here. We struck and packed the tent, sleeping bags and clothes and climbed the short distance to the top of the ridge, pausing along the way to sweep up small handfuls of ripe blueberries. Coming around a rock we flushed two ptarmigan and photographed them as they alighted again ~~without visible marmots.~~ thirty yards away. Marmot holes were abundant but ~~we saw no marmots.~~

We followed our unnamed ridge as it declined gently to the west, noting gratefully that it would take us all the way back to Bettenpberg Creek, avoiding the low country and creek bottoms we had struggled through the day before. Now we could see a new succession of larger peaks to the north, and another valley leading to the headwaters of Bettenpberg. Whereas yesterday had been hard work and uphill struggle, today was our reward. The firm tundra under foot made for effortless walking and the sun shone bright in a still cloudless sky, <sup>and</sup> the cool autumn air sang in the lungs. When we paused for lunch, packs down and tilted against hiking poles, I gently excavated a five-inch white spruce and put it in a plastic bag, its roots well protected in a ball of rich earth. I hoped this tree would adorn the garden of the new house Andy and Joyce were buying in

Fairbanks.

Clouds began to build up as we descended steep slopes to the creek and retraced our steps southward to the cabin. There we took off boots and put on warm dry socks and sneakers, refueled the little backpacking stove, stowed our gear and heated creek water for washing clothes. As the light faded, Esther surprised me with a bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon and a fresh orange which she had quietly hidden away in her backpack. We celebrated the end of a great day and felt glad, as night came and rain began to fall, that we were back again beside Ernie Johnson's warm stove. That wooden floor never became any softer, but the rain on the tin roof was an effective antidote as I fell asleep.

September 6, 1977

Nature's contrasts are ~~over~~ among the joys of wilderness living, but only if, by luck or by skill, one can make the necessary adaptations. Today saw steady, cold, drizzling rain which we could enjoy thoroughly because we were watching it through the open door of a warm and dry cabin. Inside, I unpacked the damp tent and spread it out to air and dry. Even nylon tents can rot if packed wet. In the afternoon we put on rain gear and walked into the spruce forest with Ernie Johnson's saw and axe, to replenish the firewood we were burning. We sawed down standing dead trees and dragged them back to the cabin, placed them athwart the old saw horses and cut them into stove-sized billets, some of which we split. Then we heated water for baths of a sort, put on dry clean clothes, and dispensed the Wild Turkey to congratulate ourselves on a constructive day of subsistence lumbering. Then it was time for a special dinner featuring macaroni and cheese, with butter and crumbled bacon bar mixed in. I contrasted the sheer delight of this wilderness feast with a dinner I had just hosted in Fairbanks. There we were served mediocre food for which we had generated no natural appetite,

struggled to converse over the blare of unwanted music, and I had paid \$100 for the privilege :

September 7, 1977

The float plane from Bettles was supposed to pick us up on September 8 at Ernie Lake, six miles away, but the pilot had said that if low ceilings were forecast for that day, he might come for us the night before. Accordingly we had to start back.

We inscribed our copy of Marshall's Alaska Wilderness and left it on the table for future visitors who might want to know about Ernie Johnson. Then we moved all our gear outdoors and cleaned the cabin thoroughly. We stacked replacement firewood, and with a last look inside, closed and boarded and barred the door and window. I gingerly climbed a rotting old ladder to the roof and covered the stovepipe before we packed up and departed. Pausing at the edge of the clearing we looked back at the cabin, now as empty and silent as when we had found it. Is there a sound if a tree falls in the forest but no one is there to hear it? What happens inside an old cabin in the wilderness when its ~~occupants~~ <sup>gone?</sup> have ~~left~~?

Ernie Johnson died of a heart attack in Fairbanks in 1961 at the age of 81, surviving his younger friend Robert Marshall by twenty-two years. His old cabin with its handmade furniture, with its old stove and tools and books so laboriously packed in, still is there by Bettencamp Creek, a reminder of those ~~exciting~~ earlier days when he and Robert Marshall roamed together the wild country of the central Brooks Range.

Ogden Williams  
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October 1977