

Remembering the Mt. Jo Lean-to in the 40's & 50's at Heart Lake, Adirondac Loj

From 1944 to 1960, my family spent the first two weeks of each August camping at the Mt. Jo Lean-to on Heart Lake. When we drove the last 4 miles on the teeth rattling wash-board dirt road into the Loj. You knew you were entering a deep, dark, and wild wilderness welcomed by the unique and wonderful smells and sounds of the Adirondac primeval northern forest. We were always warmly greeted like family by the Loj caretakers Myrtle and Joe Trapasso. All my memories of those days at Heart Lake are wonderful, but as you will learn it wasn't always pretty. Remember this was the 40's and 50's and the ways of the wilderness were different in many ways from today.

The Mt. Jo Lean-to was perfectly located with one of the most inspiring vistas in the Adirondacks. It was situated on the North shore of Heart Lake about 200ft. west of the Mt. Jo trail junction. The open side of the lean-to faced the Lake and therefore had one of the premier views of the High Peaks which included the entire McIntyre Range, Mt. Colden, Mt. Marcy and Phelps. Today this view of Mt. Marcy is blocked by 50 years growth of Pine trees along the east shore of the lake. The area around the lean-to was filled mostly with paper and yellow birch, balsam and cedar trees providing a cozy private campsite. The sandy bottom of Heart Lake by our lean-to deepened very gradually allowing a safe and wonderful watery playground. I could wade out quite a distance and this continued around the lake to the Loj, dock and boat house. As a small boy, I would spend hours hunting salamanders and frogs along the lake shallows and under the bushes along the shoreline. About 10 years ago I installed a bench in front of the former lean-to with a plaque as a memorial to my parents. If you are ever looking for a private, peaceful site to read or contemplate, spend an hour on our bench.

One of the many things you are no longer allowed to do (and shouldn't do), is to modify a lean-to to your own liking. But in the 40's and 50's this was common and accepted so those who did use the lean-tos regularly, like my family, came to the view that they practically owned them.

Although my Father had a great reverence and love of the wilderness and was considered by all an experienced woodsman, this was still the time before Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" revolutionized the mindset regarding the wilderness and the environment. Even for those who were respectful and appreciative of its beauty, as my family certainly was, the wilderness ethic in the 40's and 50's was one of how to skillfully and easily live and survive within it, rather than how best to protect it. Most hikers and campers were careful and respectful of the woods but they were also oblivious and ignorant to the consequences of some of our wilderness habits and traditions. Thus, I have had to unlearn many of those same wilderness living habits I grew up with. For example, one of the first chores I was given upon arriving at the lean-to each summer was to find and cut enough balsam boughs to cover the wooden lean-to floor. You can imagine what a wonderful forest smell it was. I would also have the chore of collecting loose bark off the paper birch trees along the slope of Mt. Jo which served as fire starters. Then I would help him find a dead tree to cut down for our daily fires. Other camping routines included the daily brushing of our teeth in Heart Lake and

bathing by simply wading out into Heart Lake, soaping up from head to toe, and then going for a swim. I was also assigned the task of washing the dishes, pots and pans. After scraping all "left-overs" into a grocery bag, I would rinse everything off in the lake using the fine bottom sand of Heart Lake to scrape the pots, pans and dishes clean. Thank goodness you can't do any of those things anymore. Because that was just the way it was and had always been, nobody complained or even seemed to me to notice. But even as a young kid, I understood that this was not a good thing.

Other renovations and alterations to our lean-to included building a roof over the fireplace with a corrugated iron chimney and then rebuilding the fireplace to fit. Also were added numerous cubicles, shelves, hooks, both inside and out, new tile on the lean-to roof, and caulking the log walls. The fireplace and chimney combination worked perfectly, allowing us the great luxury of having both a great campfire and a cooking fire without the smoke drifting back into the lean-to. One of the biggest projects was installing a birch log deck with built in birch log benches on a small rise next to the edge of the lake. The view of Marcy from the deck was inspiring and my parents would often sit there after dinner watching the sunset over Street and Nye Mountains. For me the ultimate addition to our ever improving summer home, took place in 1950 when my father installed a long dock that jutted out into Heart Lake about 30ft. This of course made the brushing of teeth and washing of pots that much easier and also made a great fishing spot. This was followed the next year by a floating raft anchored about 50 ft. out from the shore. Then came the canoe and large rubber blow-up raft and our little piece of paradise was complete.

We also installed a top loaded icebox to preserve our perishables. At that time you could not buy firewood but you could purchase large blocks of ice at the Loj. Every winter Joe would cut ice from Heart Lake and store it covered in saw dust in the ice-house behind the Loj. The ice-house also contained the electric generators. There was no electric service at the Loj at that time. The generators were incredibly noisy and smelly and I wondered about having the ice share the same space as the oily generators. Joe would run the generator so the Loj could have electric lights and power from about 6-7am until 9-10am and then again from 5pm until literally lights out at 10pm. When he shut down the generator there was a palpable sense of relief at the sudden absolute stillness of the forest.

After breakfast we would either head out for an all day hike or on an "off"day occasionally take day trips to some of the tourist spots. I always looked forward to trips into Lake Placid walking along main street looking for souvenirs. One day while driving down Main St., Dad excitedly pointed out a rather short woodsy looking man with straggled hair down to his waist going into the barbershop. He pointed out that we had just had the rare privilege of seeing the famous hermit of Cold River, Noah John Rondeau, in town for probably his annual haircut. I was very impressed and felt privileged to have witnessed this event. Some of our "Off"days were spent at Heart Lake. I would spend hours bushwhacking all over Mt Jo climbing the cliffs and often collecting blueberries from the upper open slopes. In the 40's-50's Mt. Jo still had a treeless top left over from the 1903 fire and thus great views all around including Lake Placid and Whiteface Mt..

I would also spend a great deal of time on these off days, which were often

also the rainy days, hanging out either in the Loj kitchen or at the Trading Post. The trading post, which was the 1940's version of today's "High Peaks Information Center", was basically a converted lean-to with a front counter and a swinging overhead door so it could be locked up at night. It was located about 30 yards from the original ADK Loj site noted today with the memorial boulder and illustration. The Trading Post, like the Information Center today, sold Guide Books, trail maps, soda candy bars, post cards and some selected camping supplies. It also served as the information center for day hikers and campers and was the parking area for the primary trail-head into the Adirondack High Peaks. This was also the "public square" at the Loj and was where hikers and campers would meet to socialize, gossip, and plan their hikes. I was the Trading Post attendant for 2 summers in '58 & '59.

Hiking technique, equipment, and clothes, in the 40's and 50's were of course notably different from today. From the time I started hiking in the high peaks in 1944 until I became a 46er in 1958, I never once carried water and nobody I ever hiked with did either. We simply drank from the mountain streams but mostly we did not drink water at all until we were on our way down the mountains heading home. It was incorrectly thought that drinking water would give one cramps and slow you down. I carried only a very small day-pack with maybe a light windbreaker or wool sweater, a couple P & J sandwiches and Hershey bars. I did not have hiking boots, I just hiked in the same sneakers I wore all the time.

Today of course there are a great deal more hikers and backpackers trekking in the High Peaks and yet today the trails, campsites and mountain peaks are pristinely clean. Also now even though the trails are much more used, they are also in much better condition. In the 40's & 50's most of the popular ADK destinations were badly defiled and absolutely filthy. Marcy Dam, Indian Falls, Plateau Lean-to, the Marcy summit stone hut, and four corners lean-to were all places to be avoided. They were for the most part, dreadful, smelly eyesores and could in a moment spoil the whole wilderness experience. Because of this we tried to avoid the high use trails and instead began to favor the trail-less peaks and more out of the way destinations of which one memorable long trip was climbing Mt Allen from Elk Lake.

After dinner at our nightly campfire, the Stone, Trapp, Green and other families would often gather at the Mt. Jo Lean-to for some 'hiking talk". I was always awed and impressed that what I considered to be a peerless group of "adventurers" would want to visit my Mom & Dad and this greatly raised my admiration of them. Mesmerized and hanging on every word of their discussions of hiking plans and past treks, it was here where I was first introduced to the magical and mysterious Adirondack places and names; places I knew I had to get to. Cold River, Duck Hole, Noah John Rondeau's village, bushwhacking Couchsachraga, "The Great Range", "The Trap Dike": "Hitch- up Matilda" and of course the "46" all became my great goals and obsession.

Two of the more famous incidents that took place when I was a kid camping at the Mt. Jo Lean-to were the Lake Placid murders and the hurricane of 1950. The devastating hurricane of November 1950 dramatically changed the hiking in the high peaks for many years. We all had to develop the new skills of hiking thru or around "blow-down". I will never forget perhaps the worst hiking day of my life. My

father and I hiked Street & Nye in 1951 the first summer after the hurricane. It was an unusually hot day for the Adirondacks and the deer flies and mosquitoes were out in full force. Add to this the gruesome task of trying to hike thru the veritable "pick-up-sticks of "blow-down. It was impossible to hike around it, so you literally had to climb up and down a maze of fallen trees while at the same time climbing the mountain. The Lake Placid murders, which I think occurred in the summer of 1952 or 53, were notable to me because of the over-reaction of everyone. They not only closed all the highways while searching each car for several weeks after the murder, they also closed the trails into the High Peaks, which we all thought ridiculous and as it turned out we proved to be correct.

In the 1970's, I had the very satisfying opportunity of extending to the third generation of camping at the Mt. Jo Lean-to with my son and daughter. I now have 4 grand-kids all under the age of 3 who I am impatiently waiting to introduce to our beloved Adirondacks. In conclusion, my favorite place in the world is that which Sandra Weber aptly named in her book "The Finest Square Mile"; namely, the Adirondac Loj, Heart Lake and the broader Adirondac high peaks. For 60 years now, I have been returning to this precious place in all seasons and plan to keep coming as long as I can. I have only the most wonderful sweet memories of that finest 500 square ft., the Mt. Jo Lean-to, of that "Finest Square Mile" on Heart Lake.

Dick Ernenwein