

CHAPTER 7



ELSEBETH AT HOWARD'S PASS 1995

As it turned out, our friend Shea went tree-planting for the summer, but lucky for John and me, our Danish friend, Elsebeth Vingborg, who had hiked numerous times with us in Kluane, wanted a summer of adventure, so we planned on going to Howard's Pass in the Tungsten/Nahanni area.

On our way, we found no changes along the Nahanni Range Road. The washout was just as boisterous, but this time we'd stuck a canoe on the roof of our truck alongside the bicycles. John crossed with a heavy pack holding him down and a rope attached to the canoe. Then we loaded the boat and lined it across.



We used bikes to haul the canoe from the car to the washout.

The Pitts were home when we arrived. Gerald was busy hauling machines from the mine and medicine cabinets out of the miners' living quarters. Stan, the conservation officer, was on his quad, and our Flat Lakes Cabin was just as we'd left it, although the squirrels had resumed residence. We flattened pieces of tin and pounded them over holes under the eaves.

Our first day out, we cycled 28 kilometers to a trapper's cabin where Mac Creek flowed into the Little Nahanni. The road ran anywhere from a hundred to two hundred feet above the river and was in good condition, although many of the culverts from smaller creeks had washed out, leaving deep trenches across the road.

The cabin was unlocked but full of plywood boxes, used for holding traps. No squirrel activity was evident; no shredded mattresses, no scat, no food on the floor. We dumped the traps outside and slept inside on bunks, with luxurious mattresses beneath us.



We enjoyed the comfort of a trapper's cabin.

The next morning, after storing the traps back inside the cabin and securing the door so it wouldn't blow open, we crossed our first bridge. It had been washed out on the far side and was buckled in the middle. After scrounging around, we found a solid plank, which we propped so that one end was on shore and the other against the bridge, to sort of bridge the gap so we could roll our bikes to the far side of the creek.

The next bridge, which was in good shape, carried us over Guthrie Creek, and the third bridge, at Fork Creek, was washed out at the south end, so we used the same technique as we had on our first bridge. Then, because it was so time-consuming and hard carrying gear and bikes over these bridges, we abandoned our bikes and started walking.

The road was bush-free, and the Little Nahanni River below snaked through the valley, its surface dotted with huge boulders. At one spot, we watched it enter a canyon and heard its threatening roar.



After securing a board to walk off the bridge, John carried the bike across.

March Creek had a good bridge where we had lunch, our pack contents spread over the bridge deck, stove and pot sitting level, our behinds comfortable on the 6-by-6 bridge edging. We found Steel Creek, the next waterway we had to cross, was more of a river, with a solid gravel bottom. It poured a lot of water through a number of braids into the Little Nahanni.

We had decided on Howard's Pass for the summer's destination, but we could see where a winter road crossed the river, just above Steel Creek, and entered the bush on the other side. How that opening beckoned! Being curious, we dropped packs and walked along the winter road down to the Little Nahanni, which was a good 40 feet across. Though it flowed smoothly over a flat stretch, it looked deep.

"We could float across in a rubber tube with a rope attached, sort of like a reaction ferry," I suggested.

"How about a pack raft?"

"They weigh a ton from what I understand, and I think they cost a fortune."



March Creek bridge where we enjoyed a lunch.



Machine shop at Howard's Pass.

We returned to the main road, which ran due west, up the south bank of Steel Creek, and then turned north and crossed over a solid, intact bridge.

It was raining as we approached Howard's Pass. John dully trudged along, not saying much, his arms crossed over his chest, his head down, probably creating a poem to keep his mind off the weather. Suddenly, as the road flattened out, he noticed the trail approaching a level area. He then saw a building in the distance and ran through a gully to get to it, his heavy pack bouncing on his hips. The building turned out to be a machine shop positioned on the edge of an airstrip.

I glanced at the junk in the machine shop and sat outside under the eaves on a backless chair that was far more comfortable than anything I'd felt since we left the Flat Lakes. John pulled out some corrugated steel from the shop and built a campfire, using the sheets to protect the fire from wind and rain. He found a grill to place our pots on and then he located two more chairs. But the rain increased, so we hustled inside, where we found one wall lined with steel bed frames. We dropped our packs on the first one and speculated that hunters must have stayed in the building to protect themselves from the wind. But for me, the building was too big and cold to be inviting.

The sun came out, the shop warmed and we unpacked our wet gear and spread it out on the beds to dry. John kept scrounging around, looking for pieces of leftover junk to make his camping life more civilized.

With lunch and coffee break over, I left John and Elsebeth napping and walked further along the valley, past neat piles of timbers, to an abandoned mining exploration site. As I explored, I saw a tunnel dug into a bluff on the other side of a raging creek. On my side of the creek, I noticed another machine shed with some tools, some of them useful, like an axe and a shovel, which I grabbed. A short distance farther, I spotted a shack with the door torn off but the windows, walls and roof still intact. Inside on the floor was paper, plastic, insulation and animal scat six inches deep. I ran back to the hangar and excitedly told John we had a cabin.

We donned our packs, and John followed me to our new home. It took him just a moment to see the potential. He grabbed the shovel I'd found and then scooped out the scat and took the chemical barrels to a second shed that also had an open door. Elsebeth and I picked up the papers and plastic core-sample bags, hung some of our things on nails and put the "No Smoking" signs in the windows. We helped John replace the ripped insulation and nail the plastic vapour barrier back to the studs, and then John rebuilt the door.



John repairing the Potato Hill cabin.

On the gravel parking area in front of the cabin, John built a firepit and framed it with two sawhorses, onto which he leaned a sheet of plywood to protect the fire from the wind—which seemed, in that spot, to howl incessantly.

Back at the building near the airstrip we collected the chairs, a broom, a pail for water, a coffee pot, a fry pan and nails. On our return to the cabin, we felt and looked like Ma and Pa Kettle moving from the Ozarks. However, by supper the cabin was clean and we were able to put our

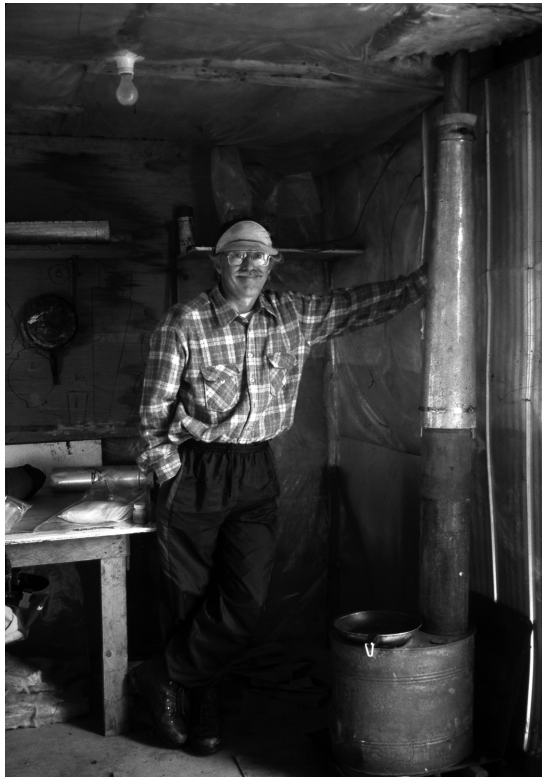
sleeping bags on the floor. The radio code name, Potato Hill, became our new cabin's name. It was also written in one of the books the previous tenants had neglected to shred, and above the window was the radio licence with Yukon Government permit # 981.

Early next morning, John started pounding sheets of roofing material along the outside wall of the cabin, much to the disgust of the ground squirrel perched underneath. There was enough aluminum sheeting and three-quarter-inch plywood to cover the entire shack three feet up from the ground, which would prevent the animals from chewing the wood and re-entering the building after we left. We washed clothes and hung them on the radio towers lying at the side of the cabin.

A three-inch propane furnace chimney outlet was in the wall, so John hunted around and found an old airtight stove and pipes, which had to be adapted in size from six inches at the stove to three inches at the wall. He clamped the pipes together using hose clamps found in the boiler shed. Being paranoid about fire, he lined the ceiling with fiberglass insulation and finished the chimney with a second three-inch pipe rising above the roof.

The stove produced just enough heat in the cabin to carry the chill and dampness away and made sleeping more comfortable than in the tent. Once again, we were in a cabin, just as John had hoped we'd be throughout most of our hikes. Early the following morning, while I was still nestled tight in my sleeping bag, John made coffee. After I got up, we sat sipping our brew in the morning sun at the side of the cabin and watched two wolves—close to three feet at the shoulder, a silver tip and a blonde—come over the hill towards us. They were checking out marmot mounds and gopher holes, looking like two teenagers out for a romantic stroll. Then suddenly they stopped, looked at the cabin, sniffed at the air and made a quick detour toward the northern hills.

*John stands proudly in
his renovated cabin.*

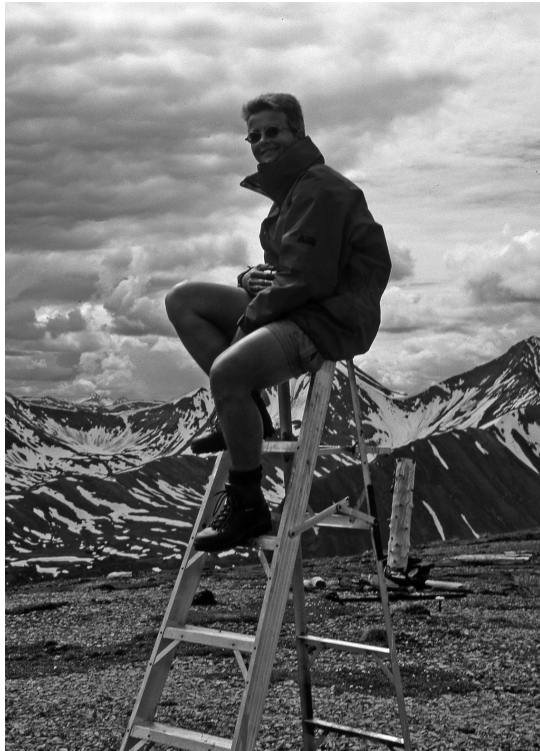


After breakfast, we went exploring. We had seen a tower on the mountain to the north of the pass, so we climbed in that direction. At the top, we found a radio or microwave tower, a wooden box full of twelve-volt batteries, and an aluminum stepladder. Elsebeth climbed the ladder and posed for a photo.

To the north we could see Mount Wilson at the headwaters of the South Nahanni River, and beyond that, we knew was the Canol Pipeline, started during the Second-World War to facilitate the movement of high-grade oil from Norman Wells to Whitehorse. But before the pipeline could be built, a road was needed. The government, in its haste to get the job done, started one end of the road at Norman Wells

and the other in Whitehorse. The two ends met at Macmillan Pass, in the direction we were looking.

Elsebeth sitting on a ladder to get a better view of Mount Wilson at least 100 kilometers farther north.



After lunch, we checked out more of the mining exploration remains on and around the pass. The mess was extreme. We found tons of jelled material, used to fill holes in rock made from the diamond drilling. The material was bursting from its burlap containers onto the ground. In a small shed was a stonecutter with its electric motor removed, and glass containers of high-molarity acids; the strong acids were welding the lids of the containers to the necks of the bottles. Someone had burnt a row of bunkhouses and lined up about two dozen folding bedframes on their sides. There were rows upon rows of core sample containers and hundreds of 45-gallon fuel containers, mostly empty.



Gel used to fill holes made by drilling core samples.



Oil barrels, some full and others empty.

A sewage lagoon and the ruins of a washhouse were close to the creek, and there was an ore-car rusting on the road. We crossed the creek and entered the tunnel, pulling aside the ragged blue plastic tarp fluttering in the wind. At the partly boarded-up entrance we found some hardhats and rubber outfits hanging from pegs. The ground was saturated with oil, and a stream of water flowed from beneath the boards into the main creek.



The tunnel entrance open and accessible.

While John did more construction to our cabin, Elsebeth and I went exploring south of the pass and far above the road we had followed on our way in. We also hiked north, where our road went for a short distance past the exploration site and then dwindled into the bush.

Two days later, we turned back south, overland across alpine meadows, towards Summit Lake. One meadow we walked through had a herd of grazing caribou, and two curious youngsters came close enough for us to touch. We clicked the cameras instead. Then, with the lake visible in the distance, we pondered the bushwhack we would have to do to get there. But we turned east instead and crossed a small pass down to the road again.

After two rest days at the Flat Lakes cabin, we headed out to Watson Lake for burgers, beer and fries—salt and fat.