

April 6, 1999

Joan:

I have not gotten the information from Bill Shenk, the Area 4 Director of the National Park Service located in Omaha. But I will take a stab at writing as comprehensive an article as I can about my winter at Isle Royale from September 1941 through April 1942.

Upon graduation from WCHS in June of 1941 I struck out to make my musical debut with the Duluth, Minnesota Symphony at the invitation of Mrs. Elliot, who was the chairman of the board. Paul LeMay was the conductor and after auditioning I was put in the first violin section. Way back in the ranks but I was THERE. Much to my personal shock, having been on a straight diet of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and Mozart I soon learned that our conductor played a mean jazz trumpet which he displayed at the rehearsal intermission.

We did a couple of concerts and in September I received a call from my Father or George Bagley (Isle Royale Superintendent) I cannot remember which called, maybe both, to ask if I would be interested in coming to Isle Royale to stay for the winter as a caretaker/ranger along with five other people. I, of course, being the ripe old age of 18 jumped at the chance without knowing what I was getting into.

I left Duluth, MN in mid September aboard the Winyah headed for the island by way of Grand Marais with the first island stop at Windigo Inn. I was instructed to set up camp in the National Park Building near the landing dock. It was a wood barn structure with an office and a sleeping room and a storage area for park equipment. I had a radio to communicate with the Park service at Mott Island and the Fire towers and Park Headquarters in Houghton. Our radio frequency was on the 70 meter band. This was on the edge of amateur radio frequencies which made communication a bit hairy at times. Weather conditions also interfered. Most of the time we got along famously. I had four radio schedules 8:00AM, 12:00 Noon, 4:00PM and 8:00PM. These were used to report the weather conditions as well as any other information other than I was still there and alive.

After a few days the parks only ranger, Carl Gilbert and the park naturalist, "Doc" Bailey, arrived via the park boat called the plouver. This vessel was piloted by my old friend Joe Colombe. They arrived bearing supplies of food, warm clothing, kerosene, gasoline with which the generator was fueled along with the water pump. The pump engine was a single cylinder four cycle brute that would flatten you against the pump house wall if you did not let go of the fly wheel before it kicked over to run.

Some memorable occurrences while stationed at Isle Royale:

One day when while starting my generator for my morning radio schedule, I happened upon a Bull Moose directly in front of my cabin. His antler was hanging loose from the left side of his skull. Apparently he had tried to shed his velvet too soon. The must have made him very angry and quite mean. I was unwilling to chance making his mood worse so I put off my radio schedule until he left just before my 4:00PM transmission. Mott Island was quite concerned as to my whereabouts. I informed them I had been here all the time.

On another occasion I encountered a quarrel between two quite large bull moose. The fight lasted quite awhile with no clear winner. I discovered quite against popular belief that a moose will only fight with their horns. They would indeed charge at each other with their heads down and "lock-horns". They would also rare up on their hind legs and slash at each other with their front hooves. Apparently their front hooves are quite sharp and can do some damage.

I encountered quite a curious lady living at the northeast corner of the pump house. A mink had taken residence there and she soon had several little mink. It had snowed and now her nest was unprotected. I tried to assist her by sliding her nest under the pump house. She was quite upset at her upheaval. She turned her posterior toward me and let go a stream of liquid that hit my arms and legs. If you think a skunk smells bad, try a mink. It took two thorough washes to get the smell out.

In November I was taken by Joe Colombe, Carl and Doc to join the others at the winter camp. The accommodations consisted of: Two electric power supplies, a screened in porch a.k.a. the meat locker. Plenty of cut fire wood for heating and a well insulated building. This is where we would be until spring.

Our crew was comprised of; Carl the "True Ranger", "Smiley" another caretaker ranger, myself. Our cook Lahti, a retired army cook (and quite good, thank you). Iner, a Finnish carpenter/repair man, our "Motorman", who kept our generators and mechanical equipment working. It proved to be a very good crew. Each person doing his job as required to keep all in good order and frame of mind. *I apologize for not having a current list of our crew that winter. It is pending in the office of Bill Schenk.*

Another adventure for November Carl and I were to make the first snow shoe trip. The first day were to travel from Mott Island to Chippiwa Harbor. Following on to Malone Bay the second day. The third day to Siskewett Bay and to Windigo. Two days later we were to return by the same route. The stop over cabins were furnished with provisions of food stuffs, kerosene for cooking and heating and lighting. Due to treacherous weather conditions the first trip was postponed until December. Until then we made short trip to Belle Isle, Duncans Bay, Tobins and Rock Harbors. In addition to these "patrols" the work that consumed us was shoveling snow. We were to shovel snow off of the CCC Cabins at Daisey Farm. This work consumed most of November.

December brought with it a Photographer from LIFE Magazine. In a cub aircraft. He was to take pictures of people in unusual places for the Christmas holiday. We seemed to fit his description. He made his plane at our disposal. We were given two days to count the Moose and Coyote population. The park greatly appreciated this information. However storms kept him from landing in Houghton. After two tries we landed in Lake Fanny Hoo. Lucky to land. We were not much of a help to the Photography since he missed his assignment in Houghton and we were buried in infamy.

By late December and our snow shoe trip was made. Getting a drink from Siskewett lake, Carl fell in the water along the route to Malone Bay. We had to dry him out at the stop over cabin. The next day crossing Siskewett Bay on ice we encountered a major ice split and had to work our way around. When we were going over a cliff Carl dropped into about 15 feet of snow. Having to dig him out I realized he was an accident waiting for a place to happen. To warm our trip, between Malone Bay and Siskewett Bay we stopped at Hama Anderson's house for a Christmas Feed. Including the "beef" that got in the way of her husbands 9 MM rifle hanging over the door.

In January a storm helped break up the ice in Moskey Basin. We saw what we thought was a cormorant, (a small bird that tends to get frozen each time "nature calls") frozen to an ice flow. We put out a skiff with an outboard motor and maneuvered our way to the flow. We realized it was a coyote. He jumped in the skiff wagging his tale and made no mention of a thank you on his dis-embarkation of our craft at shore. We did free several cormorant that winter.

In February, much to my appreciation, Smiley and Carl took the long hike. I was able to do some work around the camp and take it easy.

In March Carl and I we were unfortunate to fight a lighting sparked Cyprus swamp fire. We fought it alone until our relief arrived two days later. It was quite an experience and I slept for a day and a half back to Mott Island.

I do not remember exactly when I stopped working for the Park Service. I stayed at our cabin most of the summer and then joined the Coast Guard in August of 1942. I was then transferred to the Navy in October for flight school.

The winter in Isle Royale was truly a rare experience. I will remember it as a good lesson in working with some very swell people.

John E. Snell

JES/edh

E.J. Jukuri, K.T. Gilbert, John Snell

Mott Island

Winter 1941-2

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VAS Personnel at Mott Island

E.J. Jukuri, Karl Gilbert, John Snell,
and George Baggley

Mott Island

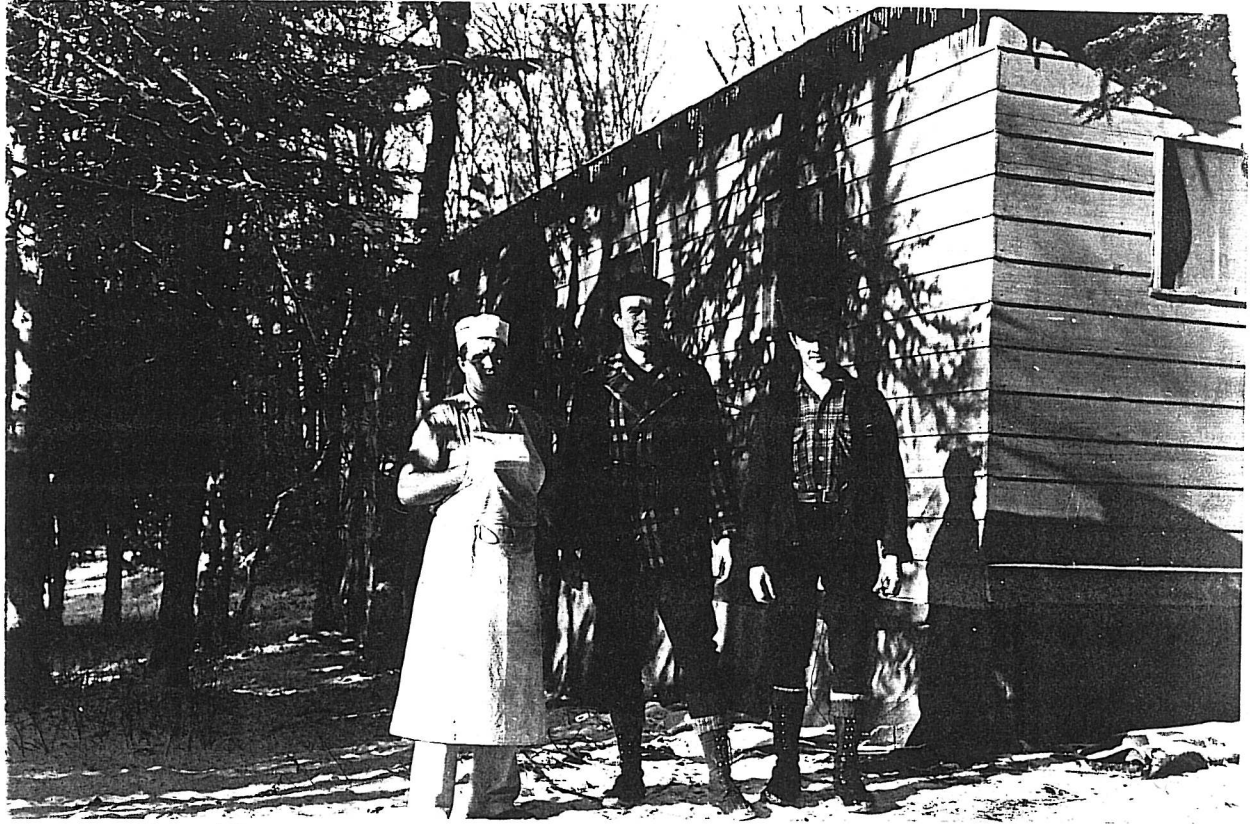
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