

John Ellis Snell 1923- 2007

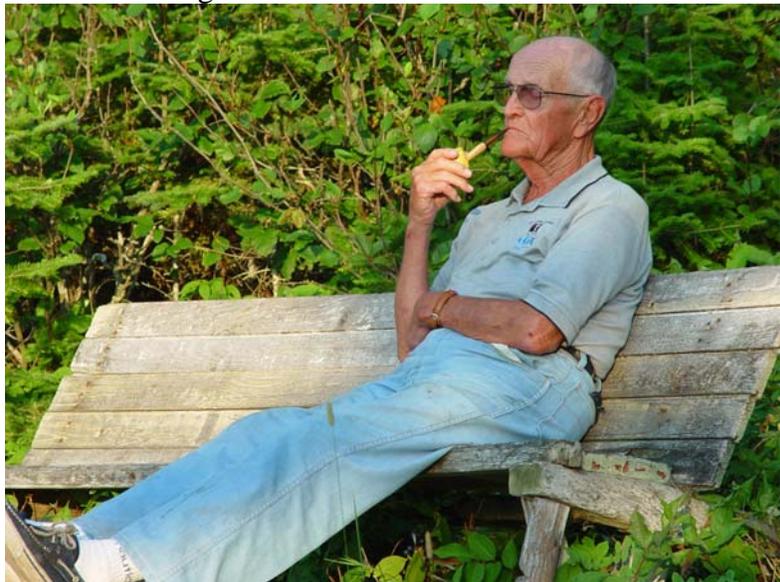
Our Uncle John Snell died suddenly while driving home from his regular volunteer duty at the American Red Cross. As sad as the news was to hear, it was appropriate that he spent his last moments helping others just as he has done his entire life. His life was a whirl of perpetual motion and tasks that needed to be accomplished.



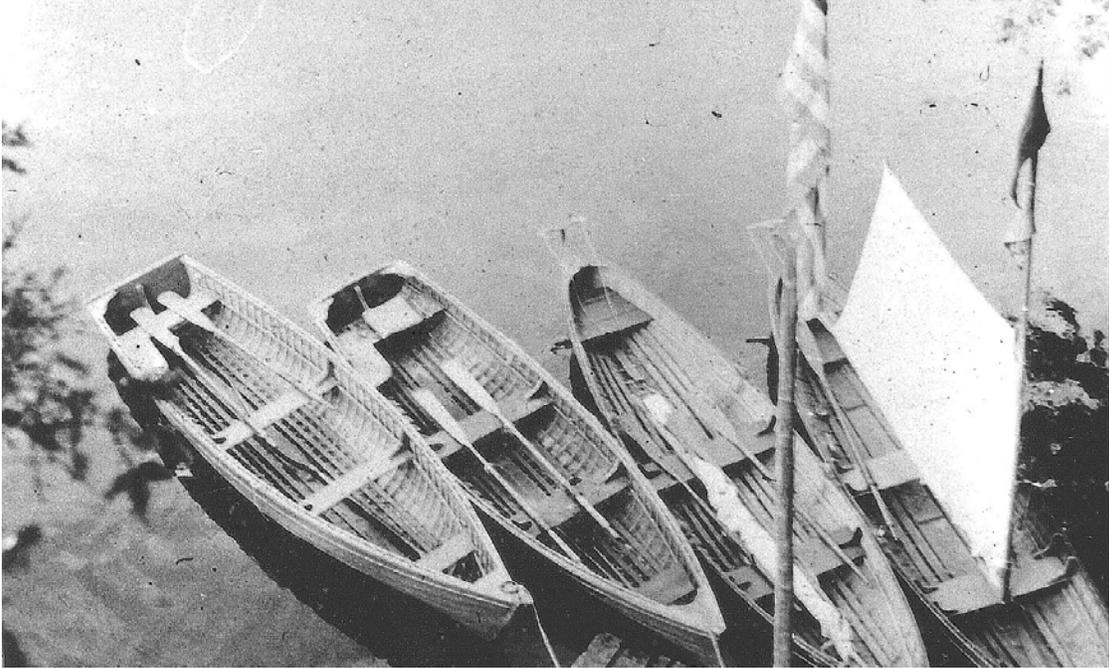
For those of us who knew him through our visits to Isle Royale this translated into early wake up calls (thank goodness we finally gave Birch Mussleman his trumpet back) and one adventure after another. He was rarely satisfied simply sitting around when there were fish to catch, roofs to repair, water pumps to design, and stories to tell related to just about anything we said to him. John's classic line would begin with "you know, that reminds me of a story when....." He had a line for just about everyone and could make a connection with perfect strangers in five minutes or less. There was no hiding from Uncle John.



From our vantage point nothing ever came easy for our Uncle John. He was the middle son of three boys and, as our fathers have relayed to us was often the odd man out. Both brothers were a foot taller and accomplished athletes and students. From an early age, however, John learned to make the best of any situation he found himself in. He was one of Coach Orsborne's devoted tennis players at Rock Harbor tennis court and kept playing the game well into his 70's. The same thing with golf, a sport that he reveled in during his winter escapes to Florida with Jeanne to get a few more rounds in.



According to John, he was the best fisherman of the three brothers. The three boys spent most of their summer rowing out the harbor each morning in wooden boats they bought from the families that sold out when the park was established. According to John he had never been “skunked” until his last trip to the Island two years ago. You should have seen the sad look on his face. When Uncle John got a little older he worked down in Windigo for a commercial fisherman and later in Rock Harbor as a fishing guide.

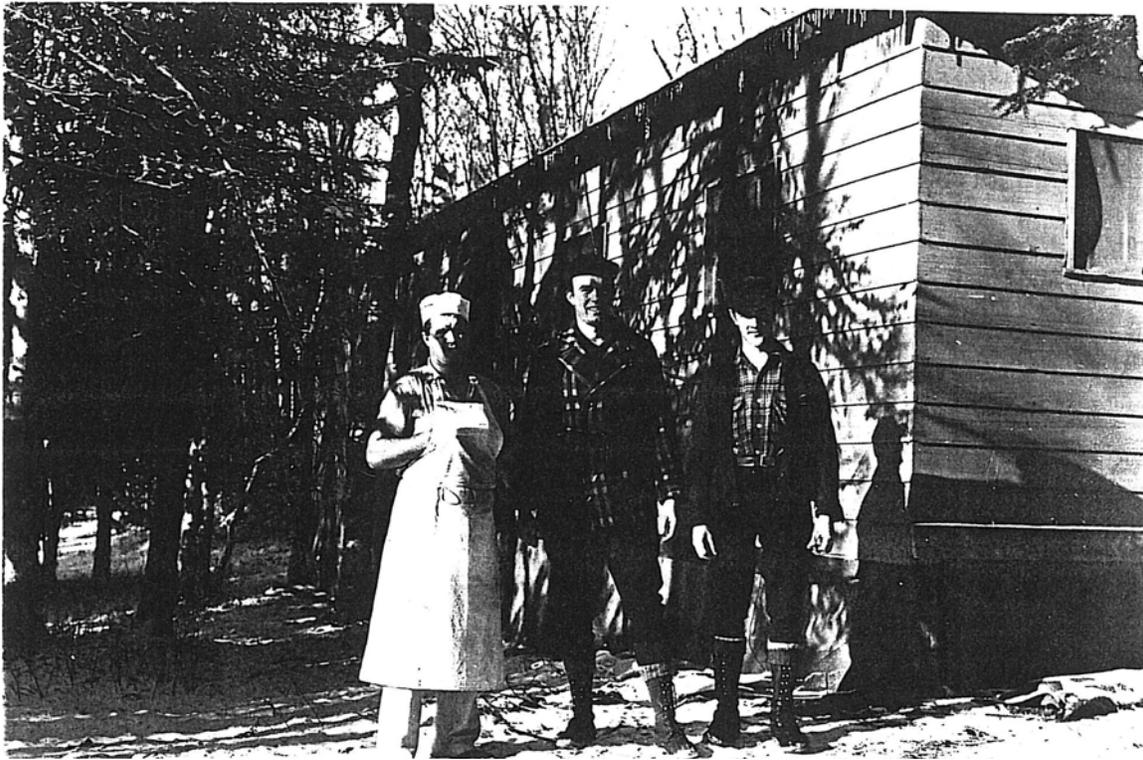


The highlight of Uncle John's career on Isle Royale was the winter he spent on the Island September 1941 through April 1942. He had just graduated from Wheaton High School and was playing in the Duluth Symphony Orchestra that summer when as he writes:

"I received a call from my father or George Bagley 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 in mid September aboard the Winyah headed for the island by way of Grand Marais with the first island stop at Windigo Inn. 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.

Our crew was comprised of: Carl-the "true ranger", Smiley-another caretaker ranger, myself, Iner-a Finnish carpenter/repairman, and our motorman, who kept our generators and mechanical equipment working. It proved to be a very good crew.



E. J. Jukari, Karl Gilbert, John Swell,

By late December a snow shoe trip was made. 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. To warm from 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 husband's 9mm rifle hanging over the door."

That winter was full of other experiences that he loved to share with us that often went against conventional wisdom. John loved to be the contrarian in the crowd. According to John the moose on Isle Royale could have come over from the mainland on the ice just like the Wolves theoretically came over because he personally saw a moose run across a frozen lake that winter.

Obviously John lived to tell the tale and went on to achieve many exciting adventures until his death last week at 84 years old. One other interesting note that not many people were aware of John had lost an eye in an industrial accident in 1970's. For the last 30 years managed all he accomplished with one eye, a feat that not too many realized. He was a Navy pilot, played his viola in many symphonies, and volunteered for many community service activities. He finally retired about six months before he died and was almost as despondent at this decision as he was on the only day he was skunked fishing on Isle Royale. His wife Jeanne and he were married for 58 years. He has three daughters, many grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren (with another on the way).