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# One Man's Wilderness, An Alaskan Odyssey

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- Skills and guides - Library -



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**Description :**

A review of Sam Keith's book, "One Man's Wilderness", covering the first two seasons spent by Richard Proenneke in Twin Lakes Alaska.

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## One Man's Wilderness, An Alaskan Odyssey

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**Richard Proenneke's journals kept in 1968-1969 were used by Sam Keith to produce a simply wonderful book of this one man's first 16 months in the Alaska wilderness of Twin Lakes, which is approximately 170 miles Northeast of Anchorage and now part of the Lake Clark National Park.**

This book only covers the first 2 seasons but Proenneke lived for nearly 30 years in his cabin on the Lake. This book covers the building of the cabin and his daily life for those early years. Richard Proenneke filmed much of his activities and these films have been edited by Bob Swerer Productions into an excellent program, covering the same 16 months of time, this runs on many PBS television stations and the DVD is available for sale.

Richard Proenneke was a diesel mechanic who spent some of his early times in Alaska working for the US Navy. In 1967, at age 50, he decided to retire. He spent some time at the cabin of a friend (Spike) on the Upper Lake of Twin Lakes. He found a building site not far from Spike's cabin and dropped a number of white spruce trees that summer. These were left to season over the winter for construction of a cabin he envisioned building the following season. Fortunately, he kept extensive journals and photographed his work and life at Twin Lakes. The book is a straightforward presentation of his journal entries along with several color plates of the cabin, the animals, and the Twin Lakes region.



**Richard Proenneke** Courtesy NPS web site

The Cabin.....

*It was good to be back in the wilderness again where everything seems at peace. I was alone. It was a great feeling---a stirring feeling. Free once more to plan and do as I pleased. Beyond as all around me. The dream was a dream no longer.*

*I suppose I was here because this was something I had to do. Not just dream about it but do it. I suppose, too, I was here to test myself, not that I had never done it before, but this time it was to be a more through and lasting examination.*

*What was I capable of that I didn't know yet? What about my limits? Could I truly enjoy my own company for an entire year? Was I equal to everything this wild land could throw at me? I had seen its moods in late spring, summer, and early fall, but what about winter? Would I love the isolation then, with its bonestabbing cold, its brooding ghostly silence, its forced confinement? At age fifty-one I intended to find out. **May 21, 1968***

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*I stood with hands on hips looking at the plot of gravel and the pile of logs beside it. The logs were decked, one layer one way and the next at right angles to it so air could circulate through the pile. On that floor of gravel, form those logs, the house would grow. I could see it before me because I had sketched it so many times. It would be eleven feet by fifteen feet on the inside. Its front door would face the south and west. It would nestle there as if it belonged.*

**May 25, 1968**

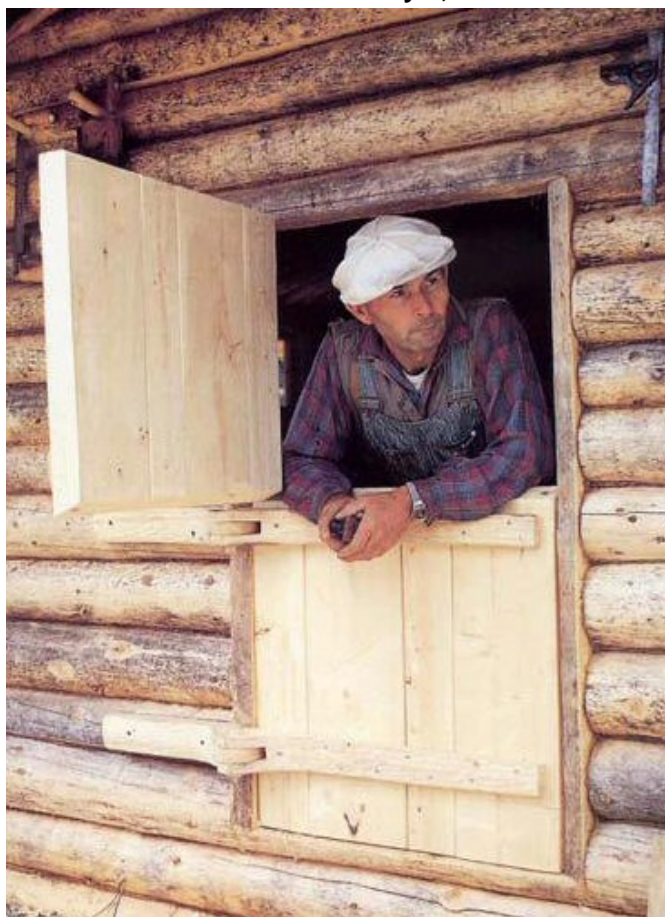
Cabin construction progressed well with Proenneke's skill at log building apparent in both the text and photographs in the book and especially on the DVD.

*A big stack of sourdoughs this morning. Hope Babe does come. I'm out of bacon and eggs, but I can do without.*

*I got a twelve inch arctic char on the trotline. It will be the main attraction for lunch. A char, with a more satiny sheen than a lake trout, is a cousin of the brook trout.*

*I finished the tar paper job on the roof first thing. If I only had the polyethylene, I could have it ready for the moss chunks cut from the forest floor.*

*I worked some on the hinges, augered the holes to take the seven-eight-inch pins of spruce. I am anxious to see how the door will look and operate with this forest hardware. **July 4, 1968***



**Richard, Cabin and Door Hinges** Courtesy MiniFarmHomestead

The construction of the spruce root door hinges is an amazing thing to watch on the DVD and a marvel of both woodworking skill and utilization of natural materials.



**Wood Hinges** Courtesy NPS web site

The Twin Lakes region is a popular site for sheep hunters. Richard Proenneke watches the progress of a pair of hunters across the lake. They bag their sheep and he is confident that they will have left much of the meat. So he plans a salvage trip.

*Clear and frosty at 4:30 AM. At 5:45 I embark on Operation Sheep Meat. Flour sacks, meat saw, and packboard were loaded into the canoe. On the trip across, the sun didn't strike me until I turned the canoe bottom up on the gravel beach....*

*I found the two rams lying about twenty yards apart. More meat had been taken than I figured, but neither carcass had been opened. I dressed them both out and couldn't find anything wrong with the meat. The cold mountain air had kept it chilled.*

*I made up my load of two front quarters, the tenderloins, the ribs, neck and some pieces of sheepskin. I sawed off two of the feet, just to have, and tucked them into the load. Then I sat down with my back to it, worked my arms into the straps, and shrugged the heavy pack to my shoulders. I rose to my feet and with my walking stick, picked my way toward home. **August 28, 1968***

Cabin building progresses through the summer months and finished with construction of a rock fireplace. Richard Proenneke uses tin gas cans for a host of projects and construction of the fireplace flue required making a collapsible form from a tin.

*I was cutting through a seam, which was tough going for a small snips. I was pushing and bearing down hard when it happened. The snips suddenly broke through. My right thumb was sliced open on the back side.*

*I could move it, so I had missed the tendons, but it was a deep cut just the same. I tied it together with a couple of Band-Aids and wrapped a rag around it. Then I went back to my project. Lucky I didn't have on my good leather gloves where were on the bench beside me. I would probably have cut the right one open, and it wouldn't grow back together as I hope my thumb will do. Soon the addition to the chimney was complete. **September 24, 1968***

My favorite thing about this quote was his concern for his gloves which would have been severely damaged by the tin cutting accident...not much concern for his thumb, but concern for his limited resources.

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The other thing apparent in his journals was his concern and care for the land. At the end of the hunting season he made the rounds of the lake putting things in order.

*Why men come into this big clean country and leave it littered the way they do, I will never know. They claim to love the great outdoors but they don't have respect for it. Beer cans, bottles, and cartons were scattered all over the place. Look at the sharp edges of the mountains in the crisp clean air, listen to the creek pouring water you can drink over the stones. Then look around and see all this junk. It's enough to turn a man's stomach. I cleaned up several areas, digging many holes and burying those ugly reminders of thoughtlessness.....Must have traveled close to twenty miles today, but it was something I felt I must do. **September 25, 1968***

Christmas Socks from Mary Alsworth were a special treat. His clothing and experiments with clothing during the first winter make for interesting reading. He tried a cement paper sack hood, paper liners in his boots and gloves...a Christmas gift from Babe's wife seems to have found the correct combination for warm feet.

*Minus fifty-one degrees. Clear and cemetery-still.*

*I find it as much as two degrees colder down on the lake than at the cabin, and there is only a difference of four feet in elevation.*

*I was eager to try a pair of my new heavy socks, along with a pair of insoles in my pacs, one pair of light wool socks, and the heavy over them. It was fifty below zero as I followed the trail up the hump, and thirty below on top. Those sixteen-inch heavy socks with their close knit really kept my feet warm or else I'm getting used to the frost.*

*Within a few days there will be an hour of sunlight at the cabin. **February 4, 1969***

In spring 1969 Richard builds a cache. In his typical fine craftsmanship, he builds it first on the ground as a prefab unit, then reconstructs it on the cache legs high in the air.

*One year ago today Babe had brought me here to Twin Lakes. We sat and talked on the gravel bar at the upper end of the lower lake. I had backpacked two loads that day up to Spike's cabin and had even picked up a sunburn from the sun on the snow. It was the first day of what I believe has been the most interesting year of my life. **May 21, 1969***

One September 25, 1969 Richard Proenneke flew outside to care for his father, but he returned to this cabin the next season and spent the next 30 years watching the wildlife, recording their activities, recording the weather and ice conditions, picking up the trash left by others, and simply enjoying the place. The cabin was entrusted to the National Park Service in 1998 and is now maintained by them, but he will visit no more. Richard Proenneke died in 2003.



**Cabin and Cache** Courtesy NPS web site

At the conclusion of this book, the reader knows that Richard Proenneke spent another 3 decades at this cabin and you are left wondering what thoughts and images are recorded in his journals and photographs. Hopefully someday these will be compiled into another book by an author with as much skill as Sam Keith...one who can keep the interest alive in the words recorded by Richard and one who can convey the spirit and magic of Twin Lakes.

This book is a very compelling read, and especially so if the DVD can also be seen. This book is very much like [Cache Lake Country by John Rowlands](#), a combination of wilderness experiences and skills combined with the beauty of the place. I highly recommend both the book and DVD.

### Resources

*One Man's Wilderness* was originally published by Alaska Northwest Pub. Co. Anchorage AK in 1973.

Alaska Northwest Books, Portland OR released editions starting in 1999. My copy is the recent seventh printing 2004, and sells for \$14.95 at many booksellers. This 223 page softcover has 33 full page color pages done on quality paper. This book was the winner of the National Outdoor Book Award. Recently eBay and some used book stores were selling this seventh printing for very high prices, but it should be available for its cover price. Older editions and the first 1973 edition can command very high prices.

*Alone in the Wilderness* the [DVD](#) by Bob Swerer Productions sells for \$22. It can commonly be found at Public Broadcasting stores also. This video plays commonly on my local PBS station during their fund drive. Swerer Productions also sells [Alaska, Silence and Solitude](#) for \$22, which also uses Richard Proenneke's film.

The [National Park Service Lake Clark site](#) provides additional information.

Additional images (some included in the article above) can be found in the [NPS scrapbook](#) and on the [second page](#) of the scrapbook.

Additional biographical information on Dick Proenneke can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

*More Readings from One Man's Wilderness, The Journals of Richard L. Proenneke 1974-1980* was recently

published. [Schwert has done a review on this magazine.](#)

*Post-scriptum :*

*Version 1.0 7/11/2005*

*Version 1.1 7/21/2005 DVD links added*

*Version 1.2 1/04/2007 Link to More Readings Added*