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One Man's Wilderness, More Readings...John Branson Editor

Schwert

- Skills and guides - Library -



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Description :

A review of a compilation of six years of journal entries by Richard Proenneke of his home area in the Lake Clark area of Alaska.

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More Readings From One Man's Wilderness The Journals of Richard L. Proenneke 1974-1980

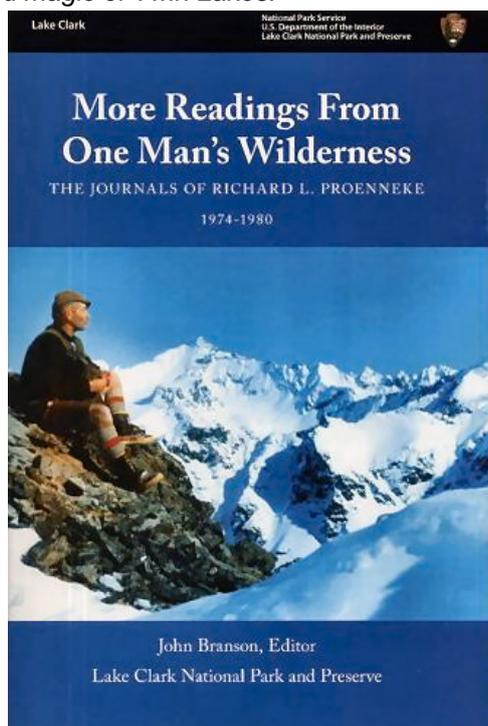
John Branson, Editor Lake Clark National Park and Preserve Published by the United States Department of the Interior



Richard Proenneke Courtesy NPS web site

In my earlier review of [One Man's Wilderness](#) I had wished for a continuation of Richard Proenneke's observations.

The reader knows that Richard Proenneke spent another 3 decades at this cabin and wondering what thoughts and images are recorded in his journals and photographs. Hopefully someday these will be compiled into another book but 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.



Book Cover via Amazon.com

Well this voluminous text is an edited presentation of Proenneke's journals covering six of these years. Ranger Sven left a note attached to my original review about this new edition of Proenneke's journals and I immediately ordered a copy from Amazon. The copy cost \$35 in a large format, medium quality, paper edition and can also be downloaded as an Adobe pdf document (see Resources).

Since this edition can be found on-line I will not do extensive quoting as is my usual review method, but will primarily look at the introductory materials by the editor, John Branson as his discussion is particularly interesting.

The first issue to address is that according to Branson, Dick really did not like the way Sam Keith rewrote his journals in the original book and wanted a straightforward presentation of his words in any subsequent edition(s).

Nevertheless, Proenneke was not completely satisfied with Sam Keith's paraphrase of his journals. Proenneke told historian Ted Karamanski in 1990: I think Sam probably...wanted to be an author so I said you just go ahead, I don't care. He [Keith] was editor, but where does author come into it, but the way he wrote is, it's pretty much,...he tried to make it sound like it was mine, my thinking...He tried to put words in my mouth. Nevertheless the book was well written and thousands of people have been inspired by it. Overall, I think that Proenneke was more pleased than not with Keith's version, at the very least it shone a spotlight on what Proenneke felt was a life worth noting. p vii

Richard Proenneke told me he wanted any subsequent book of his journals to be in his own words not paraphrased. I have tried to honor his request by have standardized punctuation, spelling, and capitalization where Proenneke tended to be inconsistent. p xii

This tome certainly looks to have addressed that concern. This edition seems to have been lightly edited by Branson with the text primarily that of Richard. Branson has added extensive footnotes to clarify or add information to the various journal entries, making the whole thing an excellent historical document. Branson met Richard in June 1976 at Governor Jay Hammonds homestead. Branson was asked in 2001 to edit the Proenneke journals for publication based on his friendship with Richard and his other historical editing done for the National Park Service.

These six years were specifically chosen by Branson as they represent the time frame most important to the transformation of the area to the Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. The various journal entries with Park representatives, area guides and hunters, the Alaska Governor, backpackers and others all fill in much of the activity that changed the status of this area. Branson perfectly sums up these years of journal entries with:

I have condensed the voluminous journals to about 250,000 words, covering the tumultuous years 1974 through 1980. My intent was to present a broad array of Proenneke's daily activities. Readers will find Proenneke during his adventuring days on the trail and battling strong winds in his canoe, they will see him on more prosaic days of cutting wood, mending his clothes, cooking, writing, feeding his camp robbers, and contending with an apparent limitless number of porcupines bent on chewing his cabin to dust. His keen observations of brown-grizzly bears, great horned owls, moose, sheep, caribou, wolverines, lynx, and red foxes demonstrates just how knowledgeable Proenneke was of wildlife behavior.

Additionally, I wanted to document Proenneke's interaction with various NPS personnel as they planned and created the new Lake Clark National Monument in 1978-1979 and the national park and preserve in 1980. p viii

This volume represents just six years of the approximately 30 years and 90 pounds of journal material that Proenneke donated to the NPS. The good news is that:

Subsequent volumes covering the late 1960's through the 1980's are planned to round out Proenneke's most productive and unique years at Twin Lakes. p ix

I will now present a few randomly selected quotes (simply because I cannot seem to write a review without them):

Dick has a couple of references to his Old Timer knife, and since many readers of this Outdoors Magazine enjoy using a good knife I could not resist this quote. Here we see him using this knife in an unfortunate case where a couple of hunters wounded a caribou but did not care to track it:

I looked and looked for sign of the cripple but couldn't come up with any evidence. Where would it go—it was climbing towards me.....Again I hit a trail lower down and headed up country through the jungle. Through it and into a little opening and there layed the caribou against the brush along the side I had entered. I was no more than twenty feet away when I saw it. It was breathing fast and heavy its head laying on the ground. I would kill it and stop the suffering. All I had was my Old Timer. I figured it would be a big struggle if I grabbed its antlers. It was a two-year old bull. If I had a big club I would strike it a heavy blow on the neck and maybe stun it enough to get its throat cut—so—I cut a heavy willow club about six feet long. When I came in view it raised its head as if to get up but how could it possibly get up with a hind leg broken and on the opposite side a front leg also broken. How it traveled so far, a half mile at least, I shall never know.....It laid its head back down and I moved within reach and dealt the mighty blow. It flopped over and I grabbed the antlers and pinned its head to the ground. My Old Timer was open and in my hip pocket. I cut its throat and held it until it was completely helpless. I field dressed it and dragged it in the deep cool shade of the willows. September 1, 1978, p 312.

Here Dick's journal highlights his foot doctoring method and an ulu project that is dear to my heart (see my [ulu fascination here](#)):

This dark morning I took care of my calluses. An awful lot of hiking makes them thick and no problem unless I am on the mountain. Uphill, downhill, side hill makes my feet sore. Some coarse sandpaper and a sanding block is good medicine. Sand them down to the pink and they will behave for a month or two. Another project I have been thinking of. Make an Eskimo ulu (women's knife). I have an old rusty worn out crosscut saw blade from Erv's dump. A length of axe handle (broken) to fashion a grip from. I would give it a whirl. To cut a length from the end of the saw blade I used a landing gear leg (broken) that I salvaged from Lofstedt's [Cessna] 180 bust up in the brush at the upper end. 3/4 inch thick and sharp edges on the upper end. I laid my length mark on the sharp edge and hit it a few licks with the claw hammer to weaken the metal. Then mashed a line on the sharp edge I weighted the saw blade with the 8 lb. splitter head and hit the extending end a mighty blow. Broke like glass. I trimmed my rough ulu blade to shape the same way and then filed it to shape. Went pretty good but a file in good shape would hasten the process. After getting it to shape, I thinned and sharpened the cutting edge plus cleaning the rust down to clean metal. The length of the grip 4 1/8 inches. I sawed a saw cut length wise a half inch deep. Now when I get it all dressed and polished I will epoxy the grip on. A thin blade and good steel, it should be a good one. June 3, 1980 p 436

Proenneke apparently had a copy of Nessmuk and this passage about a long distance walk he did in 1978 seems to highlight some of Nessmuk's lessons, as well as his lucky streak in finding useful things:

I was traveling light. A wool shirt and my nylon wind pants which I would wear at night in my sleeping bag liner and in my folded space blanket. John had a big lightweight ripstop nylon tarp in case it rained. My little double bit axe would be good to make a roaring fire possible in short order. John was packing his usual too much and I would end up packing part of it. We got away soon after six and paddled to Low Pass Creek and the start of the trail to the pass. The sun was out and warm, the shade of the mountain felt good as we climbed into it. I was trudging along with my eyes on the moss and noticed a little long rectangular stone laying there. Strange that a natural stone should

be so true and I picked it up. It was a knife sharpening stone lost by some hunters. Probably he had been sitting resting and sharpened his knife and layed the stone down.

It was near twelve when we crossed the entrance to the Big Valley. Too much dwarf birch along the Kijik and the lower slope of the mountain facing the river so we would travel the north slope with solid footing and no brush---then climb over the mountain and down the same rout that John, Craig, and Heidi had come up last summer. Trudging along and there laid a hunting knife. A Russell belt knife made in Canada. I was doing alright in the finding department.

Here again we took a break and soaked out feet. I had calluses that were giving trouble so I sharpened my knife and trimmed them thin. Heavy stiff calluses pull the skin surrounding them when the walking is other than level. July 10, 1978, p 293-294.

Overview

This volume of journal entries is much more about Dick Proenneke's daily life after becoming quite settled in his Twin Lakes cabin. The skilled use of tools and natural materials presented in the first book while he builds his cabin, woodshed and cache are in many ways more exciting and compelling to the reader. However, that is not in any way a criticism of this book, it is just a natural outcome of him becoming more an observer and participant in his environment rather than a builder. The journal entries here are more concerned with animals, weather, visitors, and walk observations. I do find the original book somewhat easier to read than the straight journal entries of this new edition. Whether that is due to Sam Keith's attempts to be an author or not is not known, but I think that, as well as, the more gripping nature of cabin building to likely have played some role in how I find these two books to read.

The first book gave me the impression that Dick was pretty isolated and alone on Twin Lakes. Babe flying in often enough but other than hunters and guides at certain times of the year he really was alone. By 1974-75 it seems there is nearly daily air traffic into the lake. The park service was providing him with film as part of their desire to document the area as National Park, they and many others are flying in and visiting him several times a month.

I came away with a feeling that the successful publication of his first book actually may have done more to eliminate the "Alone in the Wilderness" aspects that are definitely part of his first year and a half at Twin Lakes...he had so many visits that it almost seems he could have used an air traffic controller for the lake.

I recommend this book overall, it is not quite as compelling as the original book but a good read, particularly since it is available as a pdf file.

Proenneke's natural abilities with wood, his curiosity of the environment and documenting of these aspects of his life are fine reading, but it is reading of the sort that a few pages a day are satisfying. I did not find any real compelling reasons to hurry through it to see how it turns out as I could pretty easily guess about what each day would bring. In many respects this book really makes me curious to find out what he did in the years just after 1969 before the publication of *One Man's Wilderness* in 1974. The years following *More Readings* seem to likely be much like these six years, but the years from 1969 to 1974 before he or this area were discovered by the outside world or the NPS might just be very interesting.

Resources

[One Man's Wilderness, An Alaskan Odyssey](#) the first of Proenneke's books as reviewed by Schwert.

One Man's Wilderness, More Readings...John Branson Editor

On-line link to the 500 page scan (50MB) of [More Readings](#) available as an Adobe pdf file. A huge document, but the price is certainly right.

[Amazon.com](#) link to this text. Currently costing \$32 with a 4-6 week delivery time. This edition is large format, medium quality paper, with 16 pages of color images in the middle (no where near the quality of the first books images however) and a few other images scattered about. Vastly much easier to read than the pdf file in my view, but apparently somewhat hard to get.

Additional background material on Pronneke can be found [here](#).



Cabin and Cache Courtesy NPS web site

Post-scriptum :

Version 1.0 1/04/2007 Inception

Version 1.1 1/04/2007 Fini