

2 Building a Wilderness Home

At dawn next day I was awakened by a loud crash. Ed Louette had dumped a sackful of oysters on my veranda. “There you har, neighbour!” he cried. “Some fine hoysters from the hisland for you!” It was his peace offering and was both the first and last easy food I was to receive in the Canadian wilderness.

“Hoysters are good for you,” he said emphatically. “All that phosphorus! Do you know what I eat? Hoysters, heggs, and honions! “

“Oysters, eggs, and onions?” I muttered, bleary-eyed and incredulous, wishing he’d just let me sleep.

“Yessir, hoysters, heggs, and honions! They’re full of vital sea minerals. Ho, if you only had a young lady with you!”

Ed never ate raw oysters but had his own recipes. And he breathlessly gave them to me right then. I could dip them in egg white, roll them in breadcrumbs dried in the sun, and fry them lightly in butter. I could make oyster stew by mixing them with fried onions, rice, peas, and a tin of mushroom soup. Or, his favourite way, I could fry them in bacon fat and eat them with oat or wheat cakes. There were enough oysters in his sack to have stacked a city oyster bar for a week. And all free. Touched in spite of the rude awakening, I thanked him and told him not to worry about his hammering. I had more important things to do than to write.

That morning I drove to the small town some twenty miles south and bought the items on my list. The bill came to \$472 – little enough for the tools for a new home; most of my building materials would come from the beach.

For the next few days I cut a trail through the thick brush and alder to the rear of my two acres. As I’d have to carry things on my back, I wanted to make the route as easy as possible, yet not make it obvious to any occasional passer-by. So I left the first twenty-five yards of alder wood almost as it was. After that the rocks had to be dug out by crowbar. It was hard work, as the salal was thick and its roots were embedded around the rocks. Frequently I would cut through several three-foot thick fallen trees with the power saw only to end on a small rocky escarpment.

I started the saw respectfully by standing on its handle on a flat stump with its twenty-one-inch blade projecting. Trying to emulate the fallers I’d known, I got it buzzing strongly, then directed it head-on into a fallen hemlock. Immediately it shot

up into the air and narrowly missed cleaving my head in two. I tried again, but holding it slightly downward; it again leaped back at me. And when I tried to cut the willowy alders on the upper track they were so whippy they fell at all angles, twisting so the saw became stuck. Eventually, though, I got the hang of it.

It soon became clear that with the underbrush so rank and thick with salal, salmonberry, wild thimbleberry bushes, and fast-growing alder keeping the trail clear alone would be a twice-yearly job. After an hour of machete swinging, blisters made the work even harder because the pain forced the hands to relax, and if one wasn't careful – goodbye foot.

On the third day it began to rain. I'd never seen rain to equal the torrential downpours on the British Columbian coast. As I worked it seemed to have a vengeful malice of its own. It beat into my eyes, sneaked down my back, and even crept through the ventilation holes of my rain jacket and trickled down my armpits.

After six days I had a passable trail, though I had to manoeuvre sideways through clumps of trees when my hands were full. The next two weeks were spent assaulting the rocky site on which I was to build. I dug out the loose rocks with pick and crowbar and rolled them over the cliff. This had a treble effect: it made the forty-degree slope level, raised the height of the beach below, and trimmed a good deal of useless fat from my waist. Once the site was ready, I dug holes through thick fir roots down to bedrock to anchor the two front log pillars of the platform. But how long would these logs need to be so the platform would be level! I had forgotten an essential item – a spirit level. Faced with that forty-mile journey, I improvised. Using a flat bottle of suntan lotion left over from Hollywood and a weighted tape measure dangling from a straight cedar pole held level in one hand, I found the logs would need to be nearly eight feet long.

At the back of the site I hacked holes in the exposed bedrock into which I could hook and cement the rear foundation logs so the cabin wouldn't fall into the sea. As I hacked away at the granite with a rapidly blunting pick and crowbar, a chip flew out and embedded itself half an inch below my right eye. I was lucky not to have lost the eye, but from then on I wore an old pair of plastic swimming goggles for that work. At first I'd been loath to use the boat to carry materials. I wanted to conserve energy, and rowing to the site, working there all day, and then having to row the four miles back, often against heavy winds, seemed like unnecessarily hard work. But faced with having to carry heavy joists and fourteen-foot boards down the long trail, I was forced to use the boat more.

When I first arrived with the laden rowing boat the tide was half out, and in that exposed rocky place I couldn't land. The rest of that day was spent cutting out a rounded boom log, fixing a spike and pulley to it, and attaching it to an anchor to make a mooring buoy.

One day I took an afternoon off and stayed in the rented cabin to write. As I worked, I saw half a tree float past the window. Ed Louette was beneath it, his head twisted with the weight, shuffling along quietly with little stumping steps. Later I heard him row off in his little boat. He always rowed with short, jerky strokes and on

windless days I'd hear the quick, rhythmic *clunka clunka clunka* of his oars banging in their locks. Then I'd look out and see him rowing away like a little clockwork man on his eternal search for cabin logs from the island beaches. I thought I'd try and help him.

Down on the beach lay a yellow cedar he had already cut into eight-foot lengths. I lowered one onto my shoulder and shakily set off over the rocks. I wobbled and wavered, and halfway up the stony cliff path a whitish mist swam before my eyes and I had to drop the log on one end and pause to ease my pounding heart. I couldn't get that log up to my cabin, let alone Ed's, without stopping twice. I had yet to learn fully the lesson one learns many times in that land – what a city man deems fitness counts for nothing there. Years of hard work in those great forests creates a thickness of tendon, bone, and ligament alignments against which artificially trained muscle means little.

After the pauses and a further hour's writing, I went down and repeated the process with another log. Twilight had fallen before I heard him rowing back, towing more logs behind him. I snuffed out the candles and stood in the dark so he couldn't see me as he walked up the cliff path. For a few seconds he looked at the two logs I'd brought up, then went on his way. Several days went by but Ed never said a word about them until one morning I met him on the path and told him I'd brought them up.

"Ho, did you," he said, removing his checked cap and scratching his grey hair in what I thought was embarrassment. "Hi wondered about that. Hi couldn't recall bringing them up myself. Well, well! " And he went on up to his cabin.

I felt slightly miffed he hadn't even thanked me. A few more days went by, then one evening I found Ed sawing the logs into short lengths. "Hello there," he said. "Hi just thought you may not have a saw" (I kept it at the site) "so I'm cutting them up for you!"

Embarrassed, I explained I'd only carried them up for *him*, to save him the bother. "Ho, well, I misunderstood you." He laughed. "Hi thought ... well, thank you, professor, thank you. But hi've started now so we'll put these on your fire!" And he went on cutting them up.

To show gratitude I took my axe and started chopping the chunks of yellow cedar into quarters. Ed watched me silently. It was hard wood and my axe got stuck in it. "No, no, that's not the way," he cried suddenly. "You'll not get hanywhere haxing them like that, you have to twist-chop. You halways hold the hax at an angle," he said. "You point the blade out to the left but you bring it down straight." With that he halved the block with one blow. Kicking one half aside, he raised the axe and with swift blows reduced the block to a neat pile of two-inch-thick dominoes. It was like watching a machine. I never did achieve old Ed's proficiency.

Back on my land the next day, I searched my beach for stout yellow cedar logs for the cabin's foundations. The beach was stacked high with drift logs of all kinds – fir, hemlock, spruce, with a few yellow and valuable red cedar spars here and there. I cut the first two thick eight-footers from a straight yellow cedar, drove nails into their tops and with quadrupled nylon rope around the nails, painfully dragged them over the rocks.

Several times as I rested the logs on each step of the staircase after an almighty heave, they nearly rolled off – and me with them. But finally I had the logs in place as the front pillars. There were no others straight enough for the rest of my foundation on my beach so I rowed half a mile to another, where I found two the right thickness. By the time I'd cut them up, dragged them to the water line, and then towed them back, the tide was well out.

I realized then I wasn't being too intelligent. Rather than drag or carry heavy logs over two hundred yards of rocky beach, why not use the tides to float them in! If I worked *with* the high tides, I could stack all usable drift logs and lumber just above high-tide level on various beaches, then fetch them later with the boat. The sea's broad breast would do most of the work. The only problem now was that the next high tide wasn't until four in the morning. I dared not leave the fourteen-footers to drift, even on a line, in that exposed spot. It took me the rest of the afternoon to drag them to the foot of the cliff, but they were too heavy for me to haul up the staircase.

It was time for more hard thinking, for many problems were looming. I sat on a mossy boulder watching some cream-pated wigeon drakes crowding around two dowdier grey-brown ducks, and made a mental note that I needed four of these fourteen-footers for the cabin base, eight more for the rafters, four logs for the corner posts. To haul them up the cliff I'd need a gin pole and a block and tackle with a ratio of at least four to one. I could also use this to haul up the floor joists, side studs, boards, the cedar shakes for the roof and, later, for hauling my boat onto a log wharf I intended to make. In a few days I would have to leave the rented cabin and its little boat, so I needed a boat of my own. And while I liked rowing, I wasn't sure I wanted to tow the basics of an entire cabin with a mere pair of oars when the only place I could put loads into the water was a dilapidated government wharf some four miles away. So I'd hire an outboard engine for a few days. Above all, I needed a good strong tent in which to live for the rest of the summer.

Next day I hired an old 5½-horsepower outboard, then drove on down south and caught the ferry to Vancouver. There I scanned the boats sections of the papers and found a secondhand ten-foot plywood dinghy for \$56. In one of the stores I bought a heavy nine-foot-square tent and an elegant throne of a plastic toilet. I bought the block, tackle, and rope at a pawnbrokers' shop. The place was full of logging bric-a-brac at bargain prices, and I picked up old axe heads, cold chisels, and other tools. All had been made by real craftsmen in the days when iron and steel didn't splinter with the first hard use.

Too late to catch the return ferry north, I spent the night in the truck by the waterfalls of Furry Creek some twenty miles out of town. After a sizzling breakfast of fried trout, caught with feathers as a bait, I picked up the boat, crammed it into the milk truck – breaking my wooden bed in the process – and caught the ferry back to the wild coast. Rising early next day to catch the high tide, I launched the new boat at the dilapidated old wharf. The hired outboard coughed and spluttered but a new plug solved the problem. Then with all my purchases aboard, I happily pattered the four miles to my site.

Over the next few days I set up the gin pole, tying its support ropes to various trees, hauled up the big logs for the cabin foundations, curve-notched and nailed them into place, and cut in the slots for the floor joists. As I came back to the rented cabin one evening, Ed was waiting.

“Ho, so you have a new boat,” he said heartily. “I saw you go past this morning. Hi thought you were hup to something! Are you staying here now?”

I couldn’t hide it from him any longer. I told him about my land and the platform I was building for a tent. He laughed, surprised. “Well, good for you, professor, good for you! Hi wondered what you were doing, leaving early hevery morning.”

He looked into my boat and noticed I still had the oars from the rented cabin. “Ho, you’ll need some hoars. Hi’ll make some for you.” He turned suddenly and picked up a piece of springy spruce he’d found on the beach that day. “They made hairplane wings from worse spruce than this during the war!” he said, fondling the wood lovingly.

Two days later he handed me two perfect oars, copperbound at the ends, that he’d carved from the spruce. And he refused to take any payment for them. I had cause to thank him that very day. It was windy, and when a mile had been covered in choppy seas, the engine broke down. As I’d forgotten the pliers for removing the fouled sparkplug, I couldn’t restart it. With the boat and joists drifting toward some jagged rocks, I had no alternative but to row the rest of the way – awkward when towing a load of heavy joists as the jerky action of the rowing caused the joists to bang against the stern of the boat.

Transporting thick plywood for the floor and to box in the pie-shaped kitchen and toilet between the cabin floor and the sloping bedrock of the cliff proved less tedious but on one afternoon dangerous.

I loaded the boat with some sea-sodden drift timbers, tied five sheets of plywood across the top to keep them dry, and set off. But the wind sprang up, the sea became rougher, the waves began hitting against the plywood and splashing into the boat. Suddenly I was in six inches of water, which started to lurch ponderously about inside the dinghy, which then became uncontrollable. Throttling the engine up to top speed, I tried to use its powerful thrust to keep the bow up long enough to hit land.

We didn’t quite make it. Some forty yards offshore the plywood slipped slowly from its fastenings. The front and left side of the boat, went under with it, forming a graceful downward arc under the extra weight of the sodden lumber in its well, and the flooded engine chugged to a stop. Then the stern of the boat, under the weight of the heavy, old-fashioned engine came to a stop, the engine prop clanking against the rocky sea bed in ten or twelve feet of water. I realized with horror the engine’s safety rope had tangled itself round my left boot. I frantically kicked and wrenched off my boot, then managed to swim to the beach. Luckily the tide and wind were coming in, and freed of my weight the boat rose slowly again until the bow quarter broke surface, then drifted toward me until I was able to reach it and haul it onto the beach. I had learned my lesson and I never again tried to keep any wood dry on top of the boat.

Such accidents weren't rare and one quickly learned to respect the sea and take nothing for granted.

My most immediate problem concerned my inadequate mooring. Sometimes when I was working, a high wind would cause the mooring line to chafe through at the pulley setting the boat free, unnoticed, to crash on the rocks. The steam-tarred nylon and smooth pulleys I needed lay in piles in Vancouver chandleries, more forgotten items. In choppy seas, too, it was hard to leave the boat near a rocky beach while levering logs into the water for towing. It was some time before I learned to use a stern anchor. In the process my gumboots and legs were soaked nearly every day. I lost two watches through seawater immersions and, as I watched the last one twinkling down to vanish into the kelp on the seabed, it seemed a symbolic, last farewell to my civilized life. I had no appointments to keep now.

On the last day in the rented cabin I ferried out all my belongings – a mahogany filing cabinet with four long drawers with a score of books to maintain my “education” in the wilds, a tape recorder, fishing gear, bedding, ornaments, a gilt mirror, two more cardboard packages of books and notes for my novel, shoes, four suits (which were never used again) and other clothes, boxes of personal documents, photos and classical records. Also, there was the two-burner camp cooker, fuel, kitchen implements, a laundry basket, and a couple of antique lamps. And there was a nine-foot-square blue carpet that had landed with a thud at my feet as I once walked past a Hollywood apartment house. The workmen who'd dropped it from a window had shouted that it belonged to a well-known actor who'd bought another. Finally there was a slimline TV set I'd bought to help out a friend in Hollywood who'd been in need of quick cash.

As I was loading this paraphernalia into my boat, Ed came down the cliff path and offered me his. It was a calm day and by towing his boat astern of mine, I took everything at once. I set up the cooker in the pie-shaped kitchen and hung the pans from nails in the floor joists above. While I had cursed when making this basement to find the bedrock ended in a jagged series of shelves, I now had cause to be thankful. I stowed all the unwanted relics of my life in civilization on these rough stone tiers, placing the gilt mirror in such a way that when I sat down to eat meals from a small driftwood table (which saved me carrying my food up to the tent above) the mirror reflected the superb view over the islands, an idyllic scene of which I was now sure I would never tire.

On my fortieth birthday, I took up residence. It was a proud moment. The piping *whew-oos* of the male wigeon came up now from the placid gold and blue waters of my bay, and I looked down possessively from the sun-drenched platform at a small courting party. A grey-brown female was swimming around in apparently aimless circles, closely followed by three urgent drakes. What superb creations they were, for their finery would have graced any admiral of the fleet. Their creamy head-crests that give them their nickname Baldpate shaded abruptly into the green eye-stripe and speckled chestnut of their heads, and their pinky-brown flanks changed suddenly into dazzling white underparts. Their greyish backs, finely pencilled with black, were

broken by broad wing patches of startling white, and their secondary wing feathers overlay their primaries like black epaulettes.

As they crowded around the lady, they raised their head-crests slightly and sometimes lifted their wings. Not for them the squawking, squabbly notes one usually associates with ducks, for their soothing *whee-oos* sounded so plaintive and sweet they seemed the very embodiment of peace on that late spring evening. Occasionally they jostled each other to get nearer to her, like men at a bar when a beautiful girl comes in alone, but there was no fighting. She plodded solemnly along, making an odd purring note, but her bright eyes betrayed her air of studied unawareness. She seemed to be sizing them up, for after a few minutes she quietly moved away, followed by only one drake. The other two stared mournfully but, accepting the situation like gentlemen, they paddled slowly toward the rest of the flock, now diving for eel grass and weed titbits near a small island away to the south.

Relaxing sleepily on my platform as the sun winked and dipped with golden flashes between the firs on the islands, I opened the bottle of cheap pink champagne I had bought for the occasion. It tasted like nectar.

3 The Sea Provides

*E*ach morning dawned in a silent primrose sky, the early light filtering through the firs and pines, etching the tangled, twisted shapes of the arbutus trees against the canvas above my head, turning the tent into a warm cauldron of green. Rising early, I'd see a salmon swirl against the placid water as it headed down the coast, scenting for the creek or river from which it came and where it was now returning to spawn. Or I'd see one of the lordly eagles passing by in lazy flight, though its glassy marigold eye missed no likely prey.

At first, I'd begin to work on the novel after only a hasty breakfast. Guilt was as much a spur as any desire to write. Only hard work makes an honest man, my generation had been taught. Yet such work can really only be measured against the efforts of others. And here there was no one; my only neighbours were the deer, mink, eagles, raccoons, skunks, gulls, ducks, mice, pack rats, the free-running salmon, and the occasional cougar or black bear. For weeks I suffered an obscure pressure, the guilt that I was not shaping up to "responsibility," that I was too old for hippiedom.

Nature solved the problem, for along with the fine, dazzling days came rainy ones. I learned these could be used for writing, while on the others I could work on my shelter, explore, or merely relax. There was no real hurry. I had no deadlines to meet.

Fishing daily from the tiny rowing boat with Ed's home-made oars became more than a hunt for food or even a day's sport – it became my way of life. To be able to haul the boat down the ladder of cedar poles Ed had shown me how to make, and to row out into the superb tree-fringed bays and sit fishing in the sun seemed the finest freedom I had ever known.

I learned to live almost entirely from the sea. Apart from the oysters that lay two feet deep in a bay on one of the islands, I found clams and I fished for red snappers, rock, and ling cod, as well as occasional coho salmon. On windy days when rowing would have been a chore, I tied a cut-off trouser leg onto my belt and swam out to the nearest island, filled it with mussels, and swam back – dinner secured. I also felt much better than after merely lining up at the corner fish store! Many were the devious recipes cooked on the little stove. And occasionally I bought meat at the distant store for a special treat. With care I could live easily on five dollars a week.

At first for bait I bought packets of frozen herring strip from the store or rowed to a tiny marina six miles up the coast that sold live herrings. Then I rowed out to a natural gully between two islands, estimated where the big holes lay, then baited up my two treble hooks as if for river pike and cast them out with a four-ounce weight. Instantly the rod would be almost jerked from my hand and I'd start hauling up the rock cod. Once I was pulling away when my rod bent almost double. I felt a great surging run, the reel spun on its check, and I felt sure this must be my first salmon. Feeling naïvely that the few skills I'd learned when sea fishing off Littlehampton, England, were still there, I played the big fish. Keep the line at seventy degrees, don't point the rod at the fish, let it run but keep the line taut ... gradually I worked it up to the boat until in the green misty depths I saw not a salmon but what looked like a small shark. It was a dogfish and I stunned it with an oar and gaffed it into the boat.

Rowing back, I almost banged into Ed, who was returning from a trip behind Oyster Island. "Ho there, professor! What have you there?" Proudly I showed him my catch as we pulled ashore. His face dropped. "Rock cod and a dogfish. What are you going to do with *them*?"

"Eat them, of course."

"Heat them?" He stared at me in disbelief. "You can't heat fish like that. Well, rock cod are hall right if you've nothing else, but a dogfish! Dogfish are vermin ..."

"Well, we eat them in England," I said defensively. "We call them rock salmon, eat them with chips."

"Vermin!" he repeated. "Scavengers! They heat the young salmon and they wreck the nets. Just bang them on the head and throw them back, that's what we do with dogfish!" He turned back the wet sacking in his boat to reveal two five-pound ling cod and a fat vermilion fish with bulging golden eyes. "Those are the best eating fish here," he said. "The ling cod and the red snapper, next best to salmon. Here!" He stuck a finger in the red snapper's gill and flicked the nine-pound fish into my boat. "Try that. Fry it in bread-crumbs and corn hoil and when you eat it, dip it in malt vinegar!"

He stared with good-humoured contempt at the broken herrings about my boat. "Were you fishing for salmon?"

"No, just rock cod."

"Good God," he snorted. "You don't need herring for cod. You pay ninety cents for twelve herring and all you end up with is cod? You could buy two cans of salmon for that!"

He showed me his own fishing rig. He used hand lines and never bothered with costly rods and reels. His lines ended in a rough, metal bar with wires from each end, carrying large treble hooks. On them he had impaled pieces of red and white rubber that he had scissored into little grass skirts. To catch the big red snappers Ed would row out a mile or more, then heave the metal contraption overboard and let it down into a large hole. Once there he'd jig about till the fish struck, then hand over hand it

up again, often with a six-pound red snapper on each hook. Ed had no time for “those finicky sports fishermen.” He was fishing for his food.

I learned from him that the way to catch bait herring along that coast was to tie two dozen hooks to a weighted line and jig the line up and down through a shoal. Some always became impaled. I tried it, and stared dismally as my hooks shot up and down and the herring dodged with irritating ease. Finally, taking another cue from Ed I made a paternoster from which I dangled *two* weighted lines of hooks, rowed to the small harbour mouth five miles north, where the herring shoals were more constricted, then jiggled it with a zigzag movement. This new method worked and I caught all the bait I wanted.

Ed also taught me the best way to catch ling, the huge, green, snakelike Pacific cod that looked like the river pike of my English boyhood. “Ling cod har always in holes,” he said. “They can’t see down, only hup as their eyes are on top of their heads, so you must come at them from above.” The idea was to find an underwater slope, then to row away from it, or let the wind drift you, and bounce your bait downward over the rocks. The ling would see it coming and would surge out of their holes and grab it. You could use a tiny crab for bait, a mussel (half-cooked to hold it firm), or just a chromium cod jigger, a strip of light rubber or tin. I soon found out why Ed did not waste his pension on real herring. The bays were so full of fish and since there was barely enough food to go around, they attacked anything bright before any other fish competitor could reach it.

Watching Ed gut a fish was an entertainment. He’d take them to a drift log, pick up his hand axe and, while discoursing about some natural marvel like how young geese rejoin their parents thousands of miles away in South America each winter, he’d go chop and off would come the head. *Chop*, that was the tail. *Chop, chop* and open the stomach; a quick pinch like milking a cow’s udder and away would go the insides. Two quick slashes down the back and he’d rip out the spiky dorsal fins as if they were on a zipper fastener. The whole operation took a few seconds and he never missed a word of his conversation.

In truth, however, I usually saw little of Ed, and it was three weeks after that excellent fishing lesson before I met him again. I had mislaid an axe head and was sure I’d left it under the rented cabin. I drove back along the forest road in the truck and just as I found the axe head, Ed’s chunky figure blocked out the light. He held a bottle of rye in his hand.

“Hello, neighbour! Hi thought that axe head was yours, so I sharpened it up but put it back there.” He had, too. “Well, hi’ll be leaving here soon, so would you care for a drink?” It was the first time I’d ever been invited to his cabin and as I stepped inside the whole place smelled of linseed oil. His floor was covered with wood shavings and his tools, fashioned by craftsmen at the turn of the century, lay everywhere, the symbols of his passion for creating in wood. He walked over to a kitchen corner, dipped his hand in a large bucket and pulled out two red snapper fillets, rubbed them in his sun-dried breadcrumbs, and popped them into sizzling oil in a skillet on his wood stove. I asked him what the bucket was for.

“That’s my refrigerator,” he said. “A bucket of brine! Best thing for keeping fish fresh, y’know. Vinegar’s good too - if you can afford it!”

As we ate the crisp fish in the flickering candlelight, mere hors d’oeuvres Ed explained as he heaved a vast pot of oyster stew onto the stove, we started on the rye. I noticed there were small spiders’ webs in some of the cabin’s window frames and high log corners.

“Hi always leave spiders alone,” he told me. “They are good friends of man, y’know. They kill mosquitoes and hall the flies that get on the food. No, I never harm the spiders. They’re more than welcome!” I felt guilty. I had hated spiders since childhood and always whacked them to death when I saw them. From that evening on, like Ed, I left them alone.

Shyly at first and then with growing confidence as the rye warmed him, Ed showed me some of his work – the new A-frames of small squared logs to support his roof, an elegant serpentine-fronted garden seat with hand-axed slats of red and yellow cedar, the gables outside his front door made from natural cedar crooks found in the forest above his cabin. Most impressive were the natural “art works” that he’d discovered hidden in the roots of old trees – a giraffe’s head from a burl of fir, a chunk of hemlock that looked like a seaman’s head complete with cap and beard, and a fir root carved into an abstract running rooster. His gnarled hands fondled the objects lovingly. He had only carved them enough to bring out their natural lines, then to preserve them he had dipped them into boiling linseed oil. He thrust the rooster into my hands, waved away my protests, and insisted I keep it. It is my talisman to this day.

Ed was a gifted creator. He had no artistic pretension and sought no recognition. As a youth, just after the era of the bullock and horse teams, he had toiled in Canada’s great forests as a logger. Approaching forty, knowing he would soon be too old to climb and top the big trees, Ed had turned to carpentry and cabin and bunk-house building. As his skill had grown, so had his reputation, and the province governments across Canada had employed him as a working foreman. And now I saw in the faded, yellowing pictures he held out that all over Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and northern British Columbia there were great log ranchhouses, beloved by today’s tourists, standing as mute testimony to the life of this man, one of the last of the North American log craftsmen.

We put the world to rights that night. He demanded to know about my life and told me some of his. He listened gravely, never interrupting. Then he talked and I listened. In the wilds any talk was rare, and good talk a luxury, to be respected and enjoyed. Two men meeting over a bottle of rye or a few pipes of tobacco was an occasion, and just to hear the softly expressed feelings of another filled one with well-being.

Ed loved the wild and free creatures with a passion that matched mine, and he kept many wildlife books on his shelves, checking the birds he saw each day with the pages at night. He dropped a hint once about a wild grizzly bear trek he had made when younger, but withstood my queries with, “Well, professor, I may tell you about that one day when you’ve been here a bit longer. But hi’ll be leaving here tomorrow.”

He was going to Lasqueti, one of the southern gulf islands, for the rest of the summer.

“Shall we write?”

“Well, I’m not much of a letter writer,” he replied, but he told me the post office where he would be checking his mail. And that he would be back on the coast around September.

When I left Ed in the early hours, I felt presumptuously foolish for once having resented his presence. He was a part of that harsh land, and I knew I would miss his company.

As I left he asked, “Have you a a lamp?” “No, but I’ll manage.”

He smiled. Suddenly he got up and, picking out a large silvery can from his garbage container, banged a hole in its side, thrust in a candle, and held it out to me, using the candle end as a handle. “Light that when you get onto your trail,” he said. “Good as any battery lamp you ever had.”

I thanked him. But after I left the truck and faced the pitch-black forest I cursed to realize I had run out of matches. I learned that night that alcohol and the wilderness were a poor mix. I could only find the trail by feeling for the spaces I’d cut between the brush and the trees. I fell into every dark hole and hearing occasional scuffles nearby thought “Bears!” I desperately sang and talked to myself, trying to keep my spirits up and to frighten any bear or cougar that might be around. By the time I finally found my cliff top, in the faint glow that came off the Pacific, my imagination had every bear and cougar in British Columbia coming after me. Hardier spirits than mine quailed before spending nights out alone in such wild forests, and I swore I’d never again leave day or night without some means of ignition.

In my kitchen I lit Ed’s candle lamp. It threw out a faint beam like a searchlight, and the sides of the tin helped throw the beam forward and protect the flame from wind. I hoped Ed would be back in September. I did not intend to face winter in that exposed place in a tent, and if any man could teach me how to build a good cabin it would be Ed Louette.

I woke before dawn with a raging thirst and as I climbed down the rocks from the tent platform to my kitchen, holding the gin-pole rope for support, I heard a thumping, scraping sound. I shone my torch and there on the log rafters sat a huge pack rat as big as a beaver, with a long bushy tail and eyes glowing red in the sudden beam. I shouted and followed its flight down the rocks, its plop on the toilet floor, and its hurried exit over my feet with hefty swipes from my broom, I didn’t relish the thought of a rat that size rummaging around my tent as I lay sleeping.

Next morning dawned bright and clear and I rowed three miles out to the reefs where the homing coho and big spring salmon fed, gathering their strength and awaiting the rain freshets for their spawning migrations up the rivers. When you’re far from land in a small rowing boat, the sea at first seems more dangerous than it is. Nothing between you and a watery death but half-inch plywood, so that fishing for supper was spiced with a touch of adventure too, as I hauled out like some amateur Viking for unknown lands.

For weeks salmon eluded me completely. I saw the pleasure boats come up from Vancouver and the fishermen aboard pull out the fighting, silvery form of salmon. As I wended among them in my dilapidated rowing boat I felt like a pauper. City men or not, these B.C. Canadians knew more about salmon fishing than I did. I did everything by the book. To attract the fish I towed bait behind my boat by trolling with lead weights, and flashed dodgers and strips, spoons and plugs at the end of my traces. I varied the lengths of the traces to change the action of the lures behind the dodger. I trolled near the surface, at mid-depth, and almost bouncing along the bottom. I tried drifting slowly over the reefs and letting down herring slabs and strips, retrieving them jerkily in the true “mooching” method. Nothing. Once, emulating my days on the professional trolling boats, I tied four traces onto my line weighted with a three-pound lead ball, tied on four different lures, then lost the lot when the ball wedged tightly between rocks. That was a loss of some six dollars on one snag, so I didn’t try that again. I caught rock cod, which I now dropped back in disgust, and ling cod, some of which also broke my tackle, for a twenty-five-pound or bigger ling often will suddenly barrel straight down and snap even a twenty-five-pound breaking-strain line, especially when you’re trying to stop it from reaching the rocks where it could cut the line.

One morning, I had been sitting for an hour over a ledge and was about to give up, when the water surface broke a few yards away and out came a bowler hat with two nostrils. It turned toward me, and I saw two huge dewy eyes regarding me with interest. It was a small hair seal, its furry body marbled with dark brown, olive, and white, and as I turned, it slid silently below water again, then rolled forward and down, like a slow porpoise, and swam under the boat. All around me now seal heads were popping up, looking, and quietly diving again. It didn’t seem much use fishing for salmon if a herd of seals was there, and I was about to pull up my line when I felt a tug. Immediately I started hauling in. The tug was heavier than a rock cod but unlike the twisting of dogfish or the violent jerks of a ling. As I reeled upward, wondering what it was – surely not a salmon – the line stopped dead as if it had hit a rock. I waited, let it go, pulled again, then there was a vast slow heave down, as if I’d hooked into a submarine. I resisted as hard as I dared without breaking the line, then suddenly it went free. I hauled it up with just a few minor wriggles and straight into the boat. There at my feet lay the ugliest, oddest-looking creature I’d ever seen. It had a boxlike head, long snout, bulbous eyes, spiky fins, and a long skinny body – skinny for the simple reason that a long nine-inch curve of it had been cleanly bitten out. Whatever it was, clearly one of the seals had intercepted it on the way up and had taken out its chest, stomach, and abdomen with one crunching bite.

Anxious to know if I had caught a rarity, I took it back and consulted a coloured fish chart I’d bought. I found it to be a ratfish, not unduly common but not rare either. Its most interesting quality was that its flank skin had bright rainbow hues, brighter even than a mackerel’s skin. I felt if I stripped or mooched with a piece of that it might show up better than herring strip. I was sure too, that I had been using strips the wrong way. Holding it near the boat I had seen my strip turn around in slow spirals behind the dodger as I trolled. Surely, it ought to wriggle through the

water, as would a small fish. Laboriously I cut two similar strips from the ratfish and sewed them together, giving a rainbow sheen to both sides of my lure. Then I experimented until I got it to go through the water in a straight path.

Late that afternoon as the sun began to sink toward Telnarko Island, I rowed out again to the ledge and tried my new bait. Again letting the boat drift over the reef, I mooched jerkily, let it sink, trolled a little, and was just about to give up at a fourth spot when I felt a sudden jag on the line. I flipped the rod tip – nothing there. As I wondered if it had just tipped a rock and whether I ought to take a look to see if the bait was still on the hook, the rod was almost pulled from my hand. The reel screamed, my rod tip shot below the surface, and all I could do was hang on – try to keep my fingers from the whirring reel handles yet still keep a slight pressure on the line so it didn't all unwind and get snagged up. On its first run the fish took out nearly fifty yards of line, then seemed to stop. Terrified it must have turned and might now be boring back and down to the reef and weeds to bury itself or cut the line, I reeled in frantically, ready to let the handle go at the first tug. When it came, the line was already travelling in the opposite direction. The fish must have stopped, turned upward toward the boat, passed it, and dived down again when my reeling in had caught it – for the loose line flashed to my right, slicing through the water with a musical swish. Then, unbelievably, the line started to curve upward again. Suddenly twenty yards away a silver giant shot clear of the water and hung in mid-air, shaking its head and whole body with a wet rattling sound. I just had time to see my hook embedded in the fleshy back part of its upper jaw and the lead weight sliding back, now loose, before the fish splashed down again and started to circle the boat. It dived twice more, the last one shallow, then I had it near the boat, gasping at the surface, its gulping gills forcing out jets of water as I held it there and luckily managed to gaff it the first time. My heart pounding more with excitement than with effort, I dropped it into the well of the boat where it snapped and jumped about so strongly I was afraid it would leap overboard again. I threw my coat over it and then, without even taking the rod down, I rowed home elated with joy.

It was my first salmon, caught with my own homemade lure – a great victorious day. I had no wish to stay and catch more. In my exultation I had a sudden wish to share my triumph with someone, even to have one of those ridiculous photos taken of myself, standing grinning beside the fish's inert body strung from a pole. But as I rowed back, my isolation was all too obvious. There was not another sign of human dwelling as far as the eye could see.

I got back and weighed the salmon with some fish scales I'd had since childhood – eight and one-half pounds. Was that all? I was sure it scaled at least twenty! I gutted the fish, removed its gills, then decided not to eat any until suppertime, when I'd be really hungry. I hit upon what seemed a cunning idea to keep it fresh. Instead of an indoor brine tank like Ed's, I'd hang it in the sea itself. Just as the old pioneers would hang a ham from a nearby branch, safely out of reach of marauding bears, so would I hang my salmon from a spar that projected out near my boat, midway in the water, safely out of reach of marauding crabs. Many times I had noticed when I'd thrown my cod heads into the ocean that dozens of tiny purple shore crabs with the charming

Latin name of *Hemigrapsus nudus* (sounding like one of the glamorous James Bond lady spies) would appear out of nowhere, scenting the fish heads from twenty yards away to converge upon them. I wrapped the salmon in a trouser leg and suspended it from the spar, weighting it down with a stone. Then I retired to sunbathe for what was left of the day.

Near the tent I had found a natural armchair formed by three rocks that faced due west. The rocks were covered in thick moss, a green carpet that softened the contours, and as I lay there on those blue and golden days, watching the ocean surface shimmering up into the balmy summer air, the seagulls wheeling silently above me, the distant ducks faintly spattering over the water, the moss seemed to pull the tiredness from my body. Around my inert form, the great yellow grasshoppers bounded upward into the air, then flitted about *zit zit zit* searching for their mates and flashing their pale green underwings before vanishing again into the grass. Even the mosquitoes and deer flies who would deliberately land out of sight under a knee or arm and probe furtively for a place to plunge seemed more amusing than annoying.

How ironic it seemed that I was now living with great joy on barely five dollars a week yet I was doing everything – sunbathing, swimming, fishing, rowing, trekking the wild places – that everyone I had left behind was slaving and saving for during their short holidays each year. Yet for me it was becoming just part of a natural way of life, not a brief frenzied escape when years of city life have so blunted one's senses one can barely understand the manifold subtleties of the wilderness. I had a lot to learn yet but what an open air university!

In the evening I hauled my salmon, deliciously cool, from its trouser-leg sea fridge, cut off a sizable steak to poach lightly in basil and marjoram for supper, and returned the rest of the fish to its bag. As the tiny purple crabs who had gathered beneath it but had found it far beyond reach scuttled away at my approach, I again congratulated myself on my brainwave. That night was unusually calm, and at times, half asleep, I fancied I heard faint splashing from below, but I took little notice. A morning earlier when peeping from my tent, I had seen my pack rat wobbling out of the kitchen and weaving its way over the rocky cliff. Following it quietly from above, I had seen it disappear into a crevice and had later examined the area. There seemed to be at least two nests in the crevice which ran back into a small tunnel between the rocks. The rats had hauled in sticks as thick as a man's thumb and lined them with leaves and shredded plant fibres. Outside, the rats' faeces seemed to have been deliberately dropped so as to make a short smooth black road over the angular rocks. And near the outside nest was a small store of fruit seeds, mouldy cheese rinds, meat scraps and vegetable peelings, all purloined from my garbage container. I resisted the temptation to burn out the nest. After all, if the rats could put my rubbish to good use it was as good as my burying it. They had as much right to be there as I had and they were not doing me any harm. In a way they were company. As I heard the splashing that night I imagined it was probably the pack rats having a nocturnal bath.

Next day as I sleepily walked down the rocky slope to my kitchen, I saw that the spar to which I had tied the salmon was twitching slightly. I hurried down the staircase

and hauled up the salmon while the snaky shadows, which I now saw were dogfish, sped off into deeper water. All that was left of my prize fish was its backbone, ribs, and head. The pants leg looked as if it had been torn apart by tiny sharks, which dogfish basically are. I had forgotten how, like little bloodhounds of the sea, dogfish can scent dead fish hundreds of yards away. No wonder Ed had a brine tank in his kitchen. I realized now, too, that seawater was not a strong enough saline solution to preserve fish. And it also had bacteria that would cause decomposition at a rate not much slower than fresh water. On my next visit to the store I sheepishly purchased some block salt. But I didn't give up the sea fridge idea entirely. The other pants leg kept clams, oysters, and mussels alive and fresh for many days, as their shells made them impervious to dogfish attacks.

The decision not to burn out the pack rats was perhaps the unconscious start of my desire to fit in with nature as far as possible. In my years there, I never built a boundary fence or cut any live trees apart from topping a couple of overcrowded pine that blocked sunlight from the platform. Even my little trail wound in and out around trees. Stumbling over root clusters seemed a fair enough price to pay for just having the trees that went with them still around the place. Slowly I found myself making friends with the animal life around me.

One day when I was cleaning codfish and throwing the entrails to gathering crabs, a group of seagulls landed. Straight away two big males began dominating the flock. There was a strict pecking order and, with wings up and beaks outstretched, they screamed at the others to stand back while they first ate their fill. But sometimes, I noticed, they slung out their throats and shrieked their unholy *keeyow keeyow ow ow* even when no other gull was near, as if for the sheer hell of making noise. Suddenly I felt a dab on my boot. A young brown-and-white speckled gull had waddled and belly-flopped over the rocks until it was right under the fish I was gutting, and was gulping down cod's tails, fins, skins as fast as he could, cramming one thing into his mouth before the other had gone down. He had a huge head, a soft duck-like beak, and I noticed his left foot was all bunched and twisted inward. As gulls are lucky if one chick survives to maturity from a nest each year, the chances against this odd runt surviving must have been fifty to one. I never saw its parents feed it although it peeped plaintively at any gull flying near. Clearly desperation had forced him to come close to me to pick up food the others dared not reach.

Gulls are the sheep of the sea-bird world, ungainly when not in flight and awkward over rocks and rough ground for which their webbed feet are ill-equipped, but Bert (I named him Bert because he looked like my concept of a Bert) was more awkward than any. After that first visit he took to hanging around the bottom of my staircase and he must have had a stomach made of steel, for he swallowed fish spines, heads, chunks of crust, potato peelings, decaying tomatoes, anything. My reluctant monthly fire to burn what little refuse I had left after the bushy-tailed rats had delved into my garbage almost ceased. I had little rubbish to burn when Bert was around. One morning after he had gulped down a particularly large set of fish spines, he suddenly flew to a rock, threw up the lot, and flew away, keeping to the side of the cliff. I couldn't understand it – until I saw a bald eagle gliding low over the water a mere two

hundred yards away. Gulls often gulp down food in a hurry, regurgitate in a safer place, and eat again at leisure. And if there is danger about, they shed their load swiftly so they can fly away at top speed unhampered by the weight of the food. Sure enough, once the eagle was out of the way, back came Bert to gulp his breakfast down again.

Ugly and stunted though he was, nature had compensated Bert in one way – he had magnificent wings. They seemed almost a quarter larger than those of the other fledglings. Already he flew more easily than they and soared with less wing action.

As the other birds shunned or were actively antagonistic toward his efforts to stay part of the flock, Bert became more and more a loner. I had an odd feeling of kinship as I saw him by himself down there on the sand at low tide, stamping to bring worms to the surface or tossing over pieces of seaweed on the rocks as he looked for molluscs or baby crabs.

No sooner was I used to having Bert around than another guest arrived, also without a visiting card, and while he overstayed his welcome, he was the sort of guest one hardly asks to leave. Sitting at supper one night, I was astonished when a small black-and-white animal wandered straight into the kitchen, blinked at me in the candlelight, decided I was no danger, and promptly toddled over both my feet, sniffed at me again as if to say “Do you *have* to stick your big feet out in my way like this?” and started rummaging among the empty cans in my garbage box. I was so astonished I didn’t move – which was just as well, for with its pointed head, broad lateral white stripes along its glossy black body, and its arched bushy tail, my new friend was a striped skunk. All I knew about skunks was that if you scared them they promptly discharged twin barrels of acrid oil at you that smelled so obnoxious the only way to get rid of it was to burn everything it touched. I sat there petrified, not moving a muscle, while His Lordship ambled about good-naturedly, ignoring me as if I were some lowly tenant on his estate and he was just making sure I was keeping everything in good order.

The skunk is the true king of the animals, for his stench glands have won him a unique respect and he knows it. Not even the coyote or cougar dares assail his dignity as he toddles about unless they’re nearly starving in a harsh winter. So confident are skunks of the deterrent power of their twin anal guns that their biggest enemy is probably automobiles, for they trot along highways as arrogantly as this one was now inspecting my premises and of course they often get run over. Only the great horned owl and the golden eagle, who probably have no or little sense of smell, regard the skunk as a tasty dish. As my forceful guest retired behind my filing cabinet with some boiled fish scraps, I quietly sneaked up to bed. Halfway through the night I was awakened by loud snoring noises that seemed to come from right beneath me. I was sure the skunk was sleeping off his meal in the box of woollen scraps I kept on the cabinet. I wasn’t going to disturb him, so I stuffed bits of handkerchiefs in my ears and went back to sleep.

Next day I paid one of my infrequent visits to the distant store and as there was no sign of the skunk at breakfast, I thought he’d probably moved on. One of the men who ran the store saw me stocking up with bottles of milk and asked if I’d like some

fresh, from their own cow. I jumped at the chance, for fresh milk was a rarity on the coast. Out back we went and he handed me almost a whole pail. I carefully placed the treasured creamy liquid on the truck floor by the seat, where I could hold it steady when driving, and went back for a tin of strawberries. I intended to skim off the cream when I got back and treat myself to a good, old-fashioned English country tea. Getting that pail of milk back to the tent was a tricky business. I even left the truck by the road so as not to jolt and spill it, then carried it down the old logging track and winding trail carefully.

That evening I had no sooner demolished two large helpings of my treat when His Lordship returned and, as before, ignored me as he waddled about helping himself. Cautiously placing my precious pail of milk between boxes on a high shelf, I quietly crept up to bed.

Next morning there was milk everywhere. Although the pail was still half full, black and white hairs told the whole sad story. The skunk, greedily drinking, had momentarily fallen in. It was no time to be finicky, however, for fresh milk was far too scarce to waste. I strained it through the treble thickness of an old sheet a few times, and apart from a slight muskiness, it tasted good enough.

For four more nights the skunk shared my home and was the epitome of good manners, apart from his nightly snoring. He was easygoing, amiable, and his motto seemed clear: "You mind yours and I'll mind mine. If you don't, look out!" Why the skunk is called the devil's child I don't know, for skunks never look for trouble. They even share their homes with a scared rabbit or woodchuck, amicably forage for food alongside porcupines or raccoons. Then he disappeared. Two weeks later an old retired logger was complaining at the store that a couple of skunks had set up home beneath his cabin three miles north of me, and he was going to smoke them out. I said nothing. His Lordship had clearly decided my dwelling was substandard – or his wife had.

Now I began to notice an odd thing on fine mornings just as the sun was winking through the trees – all the rocks below the cliff seemed covered in a sort of fur. At first I took it to be a trick of the light or the way the tide left the seaweed, but one day I went down for a closer look. As I drew near I heard a clattering sound and then all the rock surfaces were *moving* – thousands of little crabs had been sitting on them, basking in the early warmth, and the sound was made by their tiny armoured bodies hitting the shale as they scuttled away from my shadow.

Although the shore crabs always flocked to my feet when I was gutting fish, I'd never realized how vast were their populations until that moment. No wonder at times they appeared almost to wait for me to return from fishing trips, to compete for the scraps I dropped! There were crabs everywhere, none over one and one-half inches across the shell, and along with Bert and the other gulls, they ate everything I didn't burn.

That afternoon when the sun was at its height, as an experiment, I dropped a cod's head into the edge of the sea. There was not a crab in sight. In four minutes forty-two crabs had appeared from nowhere and were scrambling over each other, the bigger

ones elbowing their smaller cousins out of the way. Grabbing what they could when they could and daintily transferring nips of fish flesh to their mouth parts, they looked for all the world like little jewellers delving into a bag of rough diamonds, squabbling and quarrelling, moving jerkily about, hiding in the thousands of stony crevices as my shadow moved.

Crabs are the most extraordinary creatures. They have chemical perceptors on their antennae, mouths, and legs so they can detect food at great distances and even taste with their legs as well as their mouths. If a fish grabs one of their ten legs they can snap it off at will and grow a new one. They can even grow new eyes. They have 180-degree vision, camouflage their bodies with dark and light pigments according to the twenty-four-hour rhythm of night and day, can bulldoze objects forty times their own weight under water, and are able to reverse their breathing systems so that they can hide under sand and still breathe if an enemy approaches. They have special wipers to keep their gills free of dirt, most can run over land faster than they can travel in water, and they can also breathe above and below water with equal ease. Unlike most marine animals, they take a good deal of time over their mating, and the male crab treats his girl friend, who can only make love when her new skin is soft after a shell moult, with exaggerated courtesy and care. Above all, most of the world's 4,400 species of crabs are perfect scavengers and, with man treating the oceans as an external disposal dump, they do trojan work filtering and breaking down pollutive sewage, offal, rubbish, and waste products. Over the summer weeks, I gradually learned such respect for the crab kingdom that I lost my appetite for crab dinners.

Occasionally, usually in the early morning, I saw the bald eagle flying low over the tent. Sometimes I'd hear the high-pitched *kri-kri-kri* first, an oddly squeaky sound for so large and powerful a bird, and I'd rush to the mosquito netting to catch a pre-breakfast glimpse as he set off on his regular hunting trip around his territory. It never occurred to me there might be more than one eagle in my area until one morning I was awakened by an odd drumming or flapping sound near the tent.

I hurried to the window to see an extraordinary sight. High above the bay two eagles, their giant talons interlocked as if in a fight to the death, were whirling down in a great spiral, tumbling over and over for several hundred feet, and as they fell their wing and snow-white tail feathers were being beaten backward and forward by the rushing air, sounding like flapping sails. Just as I thought they must fall to their deaths, they let go, and the smaller bird pulled out in a beautiful curve and effortlessly banked upward again, riding higher and higher, while the larger eagle flapped away to the south, also gaining height. As I watched spellbound, the smaller eagle angled toward the other and as it flashed down from the windless sky, great talons extended, the other performed a perfect somersault and presented its claws. Once more interlocked, they fell until again, just above the surface, they separated and the larger female set off to the north, with the male beating along, seeming calmer and more content now, in her wake. What I had seen was not a fight at all but a rare part of their courtship display, and as they flew over the last spit of land their faint metallic cries came back to my ears long after they had disappeared from view. It was the most impressive sight I had witnessed in the wild.

Now a swallowtail butterfly came hopping and dropping through the warm air before alighting on a leaf. As it spread the yellow sheen of its wings it was the very ornament of nature, a lovely insect that had changed from a heedless, insatiable grub to become a joy to the world. I suddenly felt as if I was back in the magical days of childhood. The memory of the eagles' display stayed in my mind for days, yet it perplexed me too, for by this time of year they would hardly be courting. It was late May and surely they must have a nest somewhere, with perhaps a youngster in it if they had bred successfully. I didn't think of looking for the nest. Eagles easily cover two hundred miles in a day of normal hunting and I assumed any nest they might have would be many miles away.



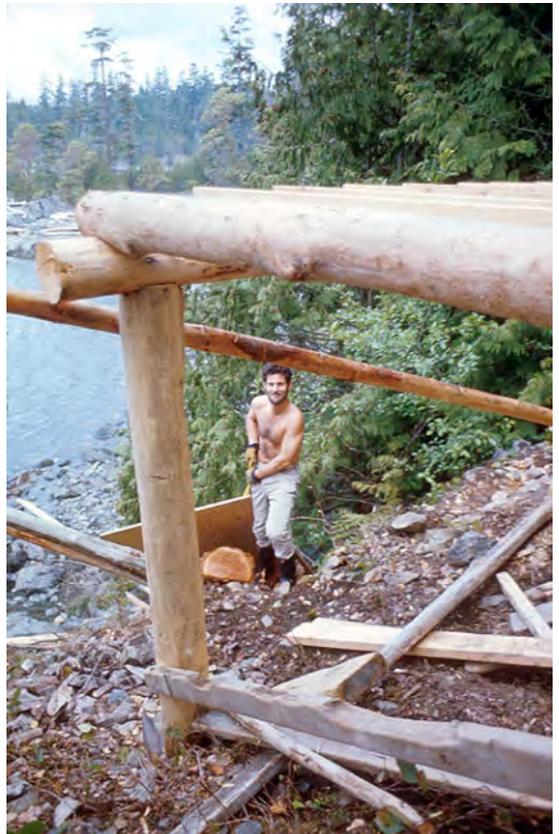
A rainbow touched the nearest island, as if showing this was the good place.



Enough drift lumber for a dozen log cabins.



The twin log staircase made it easier to haul up building logs.



Plywood sheets were best for the floor.