



The Handcrafted Life of Dick Proenneke

Monroe Robinson



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Title page: Dick Proenneke by his Elgin canoe on the shore of Twin Lakes. (Photo courtesy of Thelma Chiarotting)

Facing page: One of two guest books Dick kept at his cabin from 1982 to 1998. (Photo courtesy of the National Park Service)

Page viii: Dick Proenneke's latch and lock handles on his handcrafted Dutch door. (Photo by Monroe Robinson)

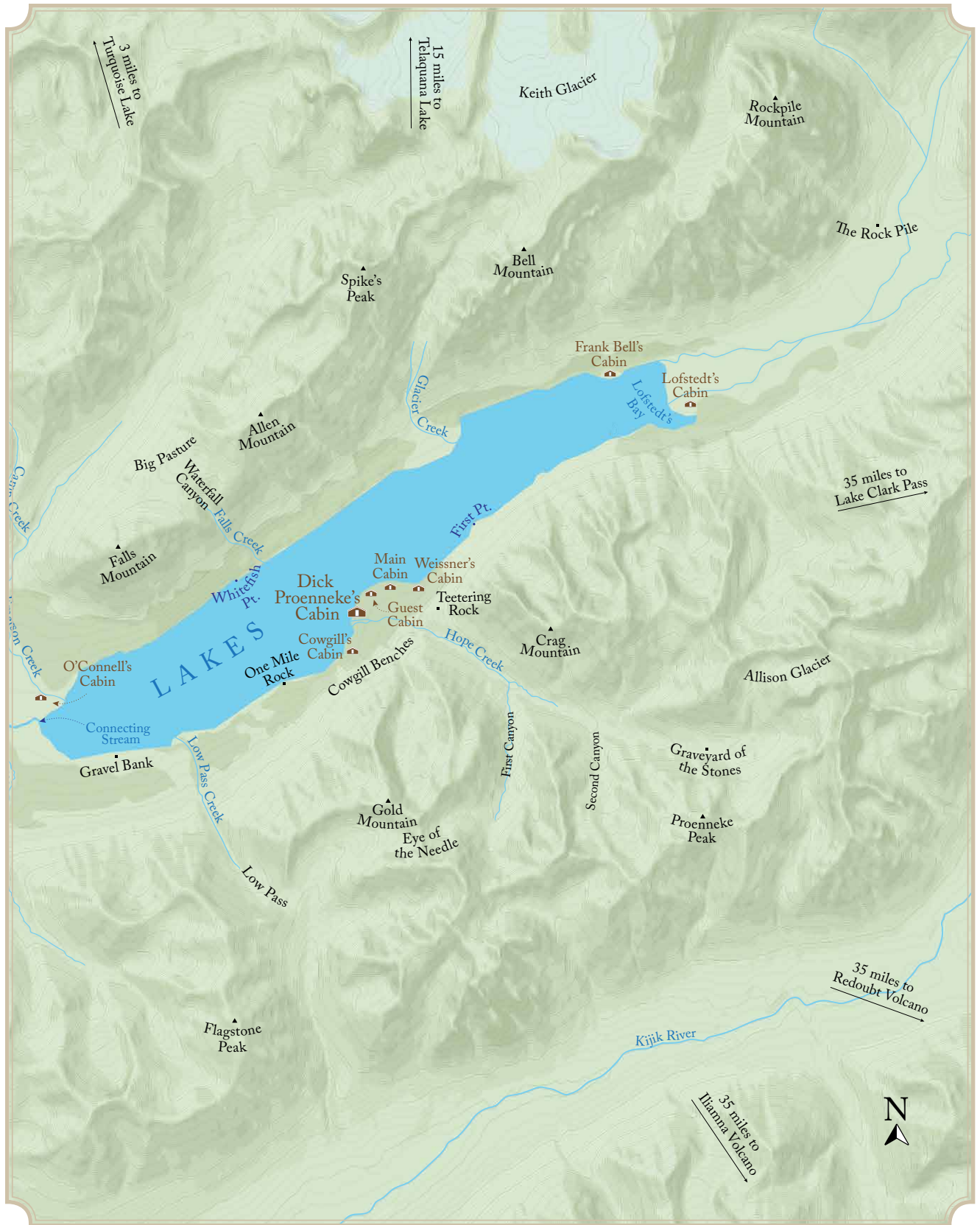
I wish to dedicate this book to my wife and soulmate, Kathryn Schubeck. We first met at Dick's cabin in 2000, fell in love the following year, married and were steadfast partners and caretakers of Dick Proenneke's legacy for 19 summers.

I wish also to dedicate this book to the visitors who told us that visiting Dick's cabin was not on their bucket list, it was their bucket list, and to those so filled with emotion at finally arriving at Dick's cabin, they wept. And to the wife whose husband was so affected touching Dick's handcrafted door he could barely talk. She had planned the trip as a wedding anniversary present, paying for it by cleaning extra houses, which was her vocation.

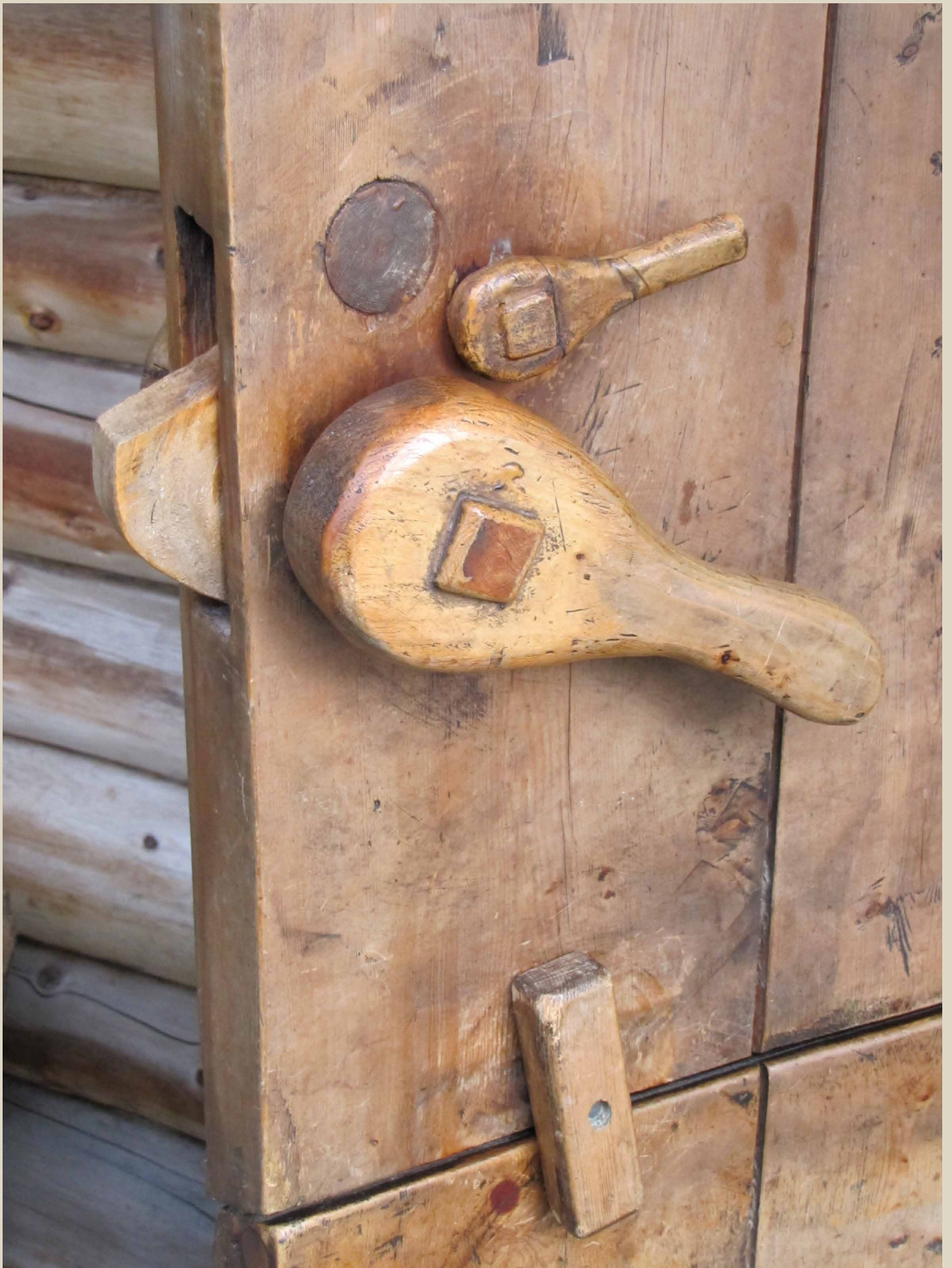




As years passed and ownership changed, Dick changed the name of some of the places shown on this map: Arlen's Cabin became the Ranger Cabin; the Big Pasture became The Meadow; Bonanza Creek changed to Beech Creek; The Cowgill Cabin changed to Farmer's Cabin and then to Erv Terry's Cabin. The Guest Cabin became Hope's Cabin; the Main Cabin became Carrithers'



Cabin, then Spike's Cabin; "my mountain" changed to "my peak" and then Proenneke Peak. O'Connell's Cabin became the Vanderpool Cabin. Dark Lake changed to Snipe Lake; the Butte became Trail Butte; Whitefish Point changed to Wills' Cabin and later to Titus Cabin or Titus Point.



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3

The Cache

*“Nature provides so many things if one has the eye
to notice them. Several stumps with just the right flare
gave me my wooden hinges.”*

– Richard Proenneke

(Photo by Monroe Robinson)

Chapter 1

November 17, 1968:

A little tour this afternoon. Up the far side of Hope Creek to the gorge to prospect for long straight poles 4 to 6 inches through at the butt to use in building a cache in case I decide to and I probably will. Plenty of them there and it wouldn't take many. With the creek iced over it would be no problem to slide them down.

November 18, 1968:

Such fine weather to work. I would cut a bunch of good heavy poles, peel them and let them season till next spring. The wind was still strong but had little effect where I would be working. Starting at the far end, I looked them over and cut until noon. Now they lay at the bottom of the high bank. After lunch I took my drawknife and tripod stand for peeling. I worked until dark and had thirteen peeled. A count on those remaining as I came down – seven left – twenty in all. A real good start but not enough.

November 23, 1968:

Small detail day – do some work on my tripod. Fix the stove draught door for better regulation. Make a pan cover for my bean kettle (one with a fancy knob handle).

I would gather a few more heavy poles. I cut and peeled five and packed them in. That makes a total of thirty-five and about enough. The frozen spruce peels very good with the drawknife. The bark comes off without the sharp edge gouging into the wood. Winter is the time to cut and peel logs, I think.

November 26, 1968:

A very beautiful day with the sun lighting the highest peaks at near nine o'clock. Today I would get the heavy posts for my cache. Fifteen feet long and maybe seven inches through at the butt. Cut and peeled and ready to slide in on the ice when it comes.

November 29, 1968:

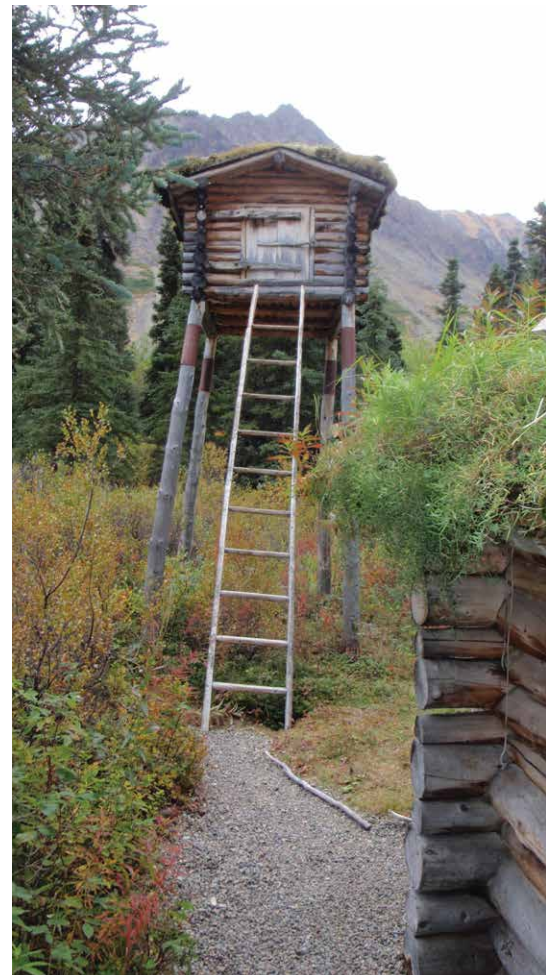
Frozen over and about $\frac{5}{8}$ " thick. Ice as far as I could see up country. It won't be long until I will have a safe highway for miles in each direction.

No need for the canoe so I towed it up to the point and wrestled it into the cabin. A tight squeeze but it is under cover.

I put my new sled to use hauling my cache posts down the lake ice.

March 10, 1969:

My mail read, packages opened and contents stored. Some groceries to go to the guest cabin. My cache is a must now.



Cache. (Photo by Monroe Robinson)

April 7, 1969:

My roof is nearly clear of snow. The gravel is bare in front of my cabin and the ice & snow nearly gone to the lake ice. I shoveled the snow clear from around my cabin to protect the logs as much as possible. I shoveled out the site for my cache so it will thaw earlier.

May 7, 1969:

I would see about my postholes for my cache. No doubt it was frozen solid. Two holes where moss was heavy and I had covered the area with more [moss] when clearing for my cabin had no frost. The other two some frost. Sand gravel and rocks and not easy digging. I packed some water and dumped it in which helped. I would let the frozen ones thaw before working them deeper. I cut my heavy poles to length. It will be at least nine feet above the ground level. That would be better than five feet above winter snow level. I plan to angle the posts in a bit and run the



Cache after a deep snowfall, March 1990. (Photo by Dick Proenneke, courtesy of the National Park Service)

upper ends at least two feet up into the corners of the cache on the inside. This would make it solid on the posts without side bracing.

A snow shower moved in and it was a good one. Big flakes and it lasted for an hour or more.

In order to have the posts set at an angle and still have the portion extending up into the corners of the cache I would have to make a bend about two and a half feet from the end. I sawed out a thin wedge. Stuck the small end between two trees and put a strain on the long end – closing the saw cut. I had made some heavy metal plates to straddle the cut and hold it closed when I took the tension off. Now have them all bent and in traction until I am ready to use them.

May 8, 1969:

Again snow showers and fog blanketed the ice. I would wait and see what developed. I deepened the postholes for my cache and did some organizing around the place.

May 14, 1969:

Time to saw my cache posts to length and pack more dirt, gravel and rock around them. Mosquitoes were busy but no little yellow flies that are the worst.

May 17, 1969:

This afternoon I prepared to build my cache – packed the poles to the beach near the brushy point. A good level spot and the chips easy to clean up. Cut some poles to length. Put down a couple planks for a level foundation to build on. Center to center each way 47" and 68". I am anxious to see it on top of the posts.

May 18, 1969:

Today would be a warm one and it was getting an early start. I would work on my cache today so as to be near if Babe did come. The first course of logs notched and nailed to my planks. I cut notches for four floor stringers and hewed them to fit. I will add the floor when I take it apart for moving and assembly on the top of the nine-foot posts.

Eleven logs in place and the floor stringers in. Pretty good for a start. If I work on it tomorrow by evening it will be shaping up pretty good.

May 19, 1969:

Another day to make chips and I made a lot of them. Notches all a pretty close fit. Tonight finds thirty in place. A total of 29 inches high. I must go at least 36 inches to the square.

May 20, 1969:

A day for more cache building. Forty logs and three feet high to the square. An eight-inch rise in the roof and eight inch eaves. The gables

built up and the ridge log in place. Now for some roof poles which are cut to length and waiting to be dressed up a bit. Everything a good snug fit. I hope it goes together with no trouble when I climb the ladder with all the pieces.

May 21, 1969:

One year ago today I came to Twin Lakes. It was a beautiful day. Babe and I sat on the gravel bar at the upper end of the lower lake and had quite a visit before he cranked up the little black bird and flew for home and I loaded my pack board with the first of two loads that I would pack that day. The ice ready to go out and I walked the beach. More snow on the beach now than then. The sun bearing down – I picked up a sunburn from the sun on the snow. Eight more new lambs on the face of Falls Mountain then as there is now. A bull caribou on the Cowgill benches. That was the first day of what I believe was the most interesting year of my life. What will the next year bring?

Another day to make chips and saw dust. The floor poles to cut to length and the roof poles to dress up and put in place.

It started to sprinkle and the wind blew stronger. The spruce boughs forming my big OK on the ice took off down country. The lake rising and a border of water along the edge. I used my long ladder to get onto the ice. Still plenty strong and 28 inches at the test hole of the day before yesterday. I doubt that Babe will come till the ice is out unless he comes on floats and lands in the open water at the outlet of the connecting stream. I had told him I would hike down if he came but he allowed it was a long way.

More rain – not a day for working outside. I needed to rip a pole for caps on the eave ends of the roof poles, planks for my door frame. One and one-half inch planks for my 20 x 23¹/₂ inch door. A stump cut up to make the hinges. The woodshed was the place for that – let it rain and blow.

Dick's "caps on the eave ends of the roof poles" refers to a half-round fascia for each side of the cache roof.

May 22, 1969:

The hinges done I was ready to take my little log house apart and move it up to the cabin and its nine-foot stilts.

My scaffold up and no. 1 log resting on top of the posts. Ten past six and time to call it a day. Tomorrow evening should see the cache back together and some of the finishing touches done.

May 23, 1969:

Today I would put the cache on stilts. I was anxious to see how it would go. A good bearing surface on the posts for the lower logs. I mixed up a batch of glue and saw dust to get a real good fit. Two



Dick building his cache using his double-bit axe, Greenlee drawknife, the Plumb hatchet, a True Temper hammer and "hurdy gurdy" drill. Note the ice with water along the edge of the lake. (Photos by Dick Proenneke, courtesy of the National Park Service)



sixty-penny spikes in each corner. I had salvaged some 1-inch square tubing from the Tri-Pacer. I augered a $\frac{7}{8}$ " hole through each log on the four corners and on down into the post. A real tight fit and I drove the tubing with the heavy axe. Three quarters of an inch off from square. A line from one front corner to the opposite rear corner pulled it square. The logs fit perfectly. A 40-penny spike in the heavy ends and 16's in the small ends. Up to the square. The eave logs on, the gables and ridge log. The floor stringers and deck poles in as soon as the first four logs were in place. The roof poles on and the ends trimmed. The cap put over the ends and it was noon. I hardly expected it to go up so quickly. It looked good for size and proportion.

Now, the door. The logs forming top and bottom of the door opening were already inletted so all that was necessary was to cut the logs in between. My homemade 10-inch plank four and one half feet long made



*Front of cache. Note the door hinges.
(Photo by Monroe Robinson)*

*(Far left) Close-up of cache door hinge.
(Photo by Monroe Robinson)*

(Left & below) Cache door handle and latch. (Photos by Monroe Robinson)



more than enough for the 23¹/₂ x 20 in. door. Some wood to remove to get the hinges in position. The door hung and it looked even better. Next the roof covering. A course of tarpaper. A sheet of polyethylene and moss on top plus the poles to hold it in place.

May 24, 1969:

Today, plug the slots between the roof poles over the eave logs – the tar paper and the polyethylene. Trouble with the tarpaper. It had laid on the gravel floor under the bunk of the guest cabin so long that it stuck together on the lower side and it took a dozen wraps to get a wrap that wouldn't tear. A good calm day for the polyethylene and I had no problem there. A search for a good patch of suitable moss. Six loads were enough. Poles to hold it in place and a rock on each corner until the poles get bedded deep in the moss. Looking better all the time. Now a door handle and latch. Some scraps from my hinges would do that job.

One can easily look at Dick's cache and see its grace and beauty. It looks like it belongs. By restoring the roof and replacing the legs in 2003, I now understand Dick's intentional selection of the relatively small-diameter poles for the cache, and the proportionally larger, near-perfect logs he used for the legs. I appreciate the stance of the legs and the scale of the door with its hand-crafted hinges and latch, and realize none of this happened by accident. This was Dick methodically executing what had been his idea, his dream.

May 25, 1969:

A big stack of hotcakes and I was ready for the new day. I had thought of taking the day off but if I worked I could finish my project. I was anxious to see it complete so I turned to. The fancy door handle and latch to put on. I'm sorta proud of that piece of work. Ready for the chinking. A little oakum and a lot of moss. A small cabin and it was soon finished. The deck poles dressed up a bit on the lower side for the benefit of the ceiling watchers. For all practical purposes it was complete. I took my scaffold down and got my cameras ... I went out on the ice for a couple shots. Checked the thickness while I was out there and found it 18 inches, down 2 from last evening.

Really a warm day with a high of 76° in the shade. A real corn-growing day.

Some odd jobs to do – repair my shoes that are too good to throw away and not good enough to keep. ... My tools to sharpen – saws to file. Get cleaned up for this is Sunday.

May 26, 1969:

Now I have a cache but no ladder except my 15-footer that is too long and I don't want to shorten it. I would make an eleven-foot ladder of a different style.

Back to my ladder project. I had a real good pole well seasoned. I would rip it down the center and with flat sides in, use it for side rails. The steps would be short lengths ripped and the flat side up and level when in position. A ladder a person could walk up instead of climb. I checked down country again. Caribou, the rocks had come to life. Six head and one very white, nearly as white as the snow. I would like to see that one close up through the pentaprism of the Exakta. Back to my ladder but I knew it wouldn't be finished today. I would visit the white caribou.

With the wind blowing strong I went out to see how my cache was taking it. Some movement in the posts but only enough that I could feel it.

May 27, 1969:

Today I would finish my ladder and it was cool on fingers working bare-handed. Before I finished it started to snow and the wind decreased. The longer it snowed the bigger the flakes. Surely it was only a shower. Soon the ground was white and no sign of let up. My ladder done and a few pictures while it snowed I declared it a letter writing day.

May 28, 1969:

A 12" band of tin around each leg of the cache and 8 inches from the top. I would like to see Mr. Squirrel bypass that barrier. A new gravel path to the cache, the brush pile to burn on the beach and the remainder of my building chips to clean up. A water gauge stake for the lake. The level stands at 22 inches above winter low water.

"Mr. Squirrel" learned to easily run past the 12" band of gas-can metal wrapped around the cache legs. I even rubbed the metal with paraffin to no avail. Every spring I returned to Twin Lakes to find Mr. Squirrel had built a winter nest inside. Once the nest was removed, the squirrel abandoned the cache for the remainder of the summer.

May 29, 1969:

Today would be moving day. See if the cache would hold all that I could find to put in it but first I would finish my screen and check on the livestock. No sheep to be seen but four caribou up country from Bonanza Creek. I was anxious to see cows with calves. They are past due to arrive. No calves. My screen frame fitted, covered and in place. Now I have the mosquito bugs fooled. On warm nights I can open my kitchen window and not be annoyed by their singing.

The canoe for hauling my load and it was a good load with all the good worthless empty boxes. Then a sorting and transferring job. Large near empty boxes and sacks emptied into smaller ones. Winter clothes to box up and put in the back corner. A gas can box with shelves for bacon grease, syrup, cheese, milk, etc. My sheep skin and horns. Caribou hide. The lima beans into a flour sack – and a few worthless but good empty boxes. Room to spare, not for a large moose perhaps but for another



Cache floor stringers, deck poles and 5-gallon storage cans. (Photos by Monroe Robinson)

good ram, yes. There it was and with the ladder down not even a mouse could get in. I only hope I didn't pack one in.

June 13, 1969:

I hated to leave my happy home and all of my one years gathering. Cameras, lenses, gun, glasses and such I would take along. A few things to cache here and there. Closed the door and flipped my patent wooden lock to the locked position. Babe insisted that I drive and we took off down the lake.

June 20, 1969:

Home at last and it was a good feeling to be back where everything goes just the way you would want it. No charge for all the grub and Babe said he felt as if he owed me more. I was happy with the deal as I had helped him only as a favor. He took off for home and I got things squared away. The cache really loaded. Everything dragged out of hiding and back in place. No one had been here. I was sure of that.

This journal entry speaks to how many people spoke of their relationship with Dick. Dick thought of being flown to Babe Alsworth's homestead to do some work as doing Babe a favor, a way to show appreciation for goods and services from Babe's previous flights to Twin Lakes. Babe was expressing appreciation for Dick's willingness to leave home, and for his exceptional skills while working at Babe's homestead.

August 3, 1969:

I checked my new slab of bacon for mold and found none. I do believe that mold doesn't form as soon up in the cache as low to the ground.

August 18, 1969:

My meat [*from a caribou Jerre Wills shot*] stowed away, the hind-quarter hung under the floor of the cache, the neck, heart and tongue hung from the ridge pole inside. The slab of bacon golden brown.

August 26, 1969:

A few things from the cache including a lemon sandwich cookie to go with my dessert.

September 15, 1969:

My fishing reels to clean and oil – rods to take apart and prepare for storage. My cache to reorganize – some one could make a haul there. If they do they must furnish their own ladder. Babe said once he doubted if many are brave enough to climb that high.

September 24, 1969:

Home and the job started. More washing to do. My cache to reorganize. My fancy gas cans to fill and stack in place. I'll be leaving light. Spotting scope, tripods, fishing rods & reels, some of my lenses including the big 400 stays here. Many clothes, socks, boots, pack board – most everything in the cache. I hope Babe is right that very few are brave enough to climb that high. The ladder will be stored in the thick timber.

September 25, 1969:

I got things squared away pretty fast and the cache was getting near full. The covers put over the windows and the stovepipe down and inside. Many odds and ends for the birds and they worked like troopers packing it away. Little did they know that this was it – no more welfare for a long time.



Dick stored winter gear in a 5-gallon storage can in his cache. (Photo by K. Schubeck)

Still the ladder to my cache to dispose of and the grizzly egg and my round granite ball to ditch in the brush. The door of Spike's cabin to bar. Babe says "why not put the ladder in his cabin, out of the weather" and so we took it along and laid it along side of the canoe.

Dick found a second "grizzly egg" and the pair is most often seen in photos at either front corner of his cabin. The "round granite ball" is most likely the rock along the trail from the beach to Spike's cabin. It is a nearly perfect sphere, larger than a basketball.

April 20, 1981:

I was awake at 4:30 and saw that full moon nearly obscured by clouds. By five total cloud cover had taken over. 18° and the calm is what caused it. The morning would be slow in warming. To start my working day I first took the repaired canoe paddle to Spike's cabin and picked up a dishwashing sponge. Then, I would take my cache ladder and go check that nest I had seen two days ago. A tall tree and the ladder got me up to good climbing boughs. Broke a few dead branches as I climbed and wished it was the camp robber tree for it was a joy to climb. The nest was not really a nest but a picnic site for the owls. Not the type of nest they would build. It was more of a thick growth of fine stuff but did have a depression that would hold eggs. In it were bones of small animals. Parky squirrels and red squirrel perhaps. Though I doubt that the great horned one catches many red squirrels. Some pieces of bones that may have been rabbit. Lots of fine hair that looked parky squirrel. So – I decided it was a place to put the meat on the table.

Again I took a tour looking for camp robbers. It was calm and if the young ones were being fed I could have heard their baby talk for quite some distance. I was near Spike's back 40 when one of my birds came by headed for the cabin log timber. Going from tree to tree top and kept going. I crossed Hope Creek and climbed the high bank to look over the tops of trees below to see a robber on the move. None and I took a turn through the heavy timber below the Cowgill benches. Still nothing and I came back by my ladder and packed it in.

This morning I would put my winter gear back in the cache. Clear that lower bunk in case Will Troyer comes to spend a night as he has threatened to do. First a lot of stuff to come out so as to get next winter clothes out of sight in the far backside. Doing famously until I started down with a sack of flour (25 lbs.) Crack! Something went and I felt myself going. I bailed out and landed in the deep snow, the sack of flour still under my arm. One step of the ladder was slanted down at a crazy angle. Nails through the side rail and into the step was the fastening and the wood above the nails had split off letting the step go down. Pretty lucky and the deep snow made it a soft landing. Since I built the ladder in 1968 I have given a lot of thought as to how a better one should be made and still keep it light in weight. I made an emergency repair with



Dick's writing on the top of a 5-gallon storage can in the cache. (Photo by K. Schubeck)



A five-gallon storage can in the cache containing boots and knives. (Photo by K. Schubeck)



Close-up of the wire support of the upper rung of the cache ladder. (Photo by Monroe Robinson)



Two spikes hold each end of each rung. (Photo by Monroe Robinson)



The wire is firmly wrapped two times around the ends of the rungs to help keep the ends from splitting out from the spikes. (Photo by Monroe Robinson)



Another two wraps of the wire hold the sides together and act as an emergency support if a rung were to break – lightweight engineering. (Photo by Monroe Robinson)

light line and finished the job at hand. I would think full time now and come up with something.

Bail out the woodshed and split a batch is what I did after lunch. The day had cleared to partly cloudy and the temperature considerably above 40°. This was a melting day.

It came 2:45 and I headed for the lower end. No sheep or bears to be seen on the south slopes across. Today even the slush that had frozen on top of the ice, early this year, was soft enough to give good footing where it was slippery yesterday.

Still no sign of the den being open and that's good. Going to be cubs there if she didn't die in her sleep. That three-mile trail was a good place to think about my ladder repair. Replace the broken step and nail it as I had done before then, with my hurdy gurdy drill and 1/8" bit drill holes through the front and back edge of the steps near the ends (one inch in). Into the side rails 2 1/2" above the steps drive a nail angling down. Using copper coated steel electric fence wire thread down through the hole at the rear edge of the step and back up through the hole near the front edge – over the nail and repeat the threading procedure a second time. Around the nail again and then with the free end wrap the four strands together. Guaranteed to be completely satisfactory.

Dick's repair of his lightweight cache ladder lasted the remainder of his years at Twin Lakes and until 2004 when I replicated it before sending Dick's to the National Park Service archives in Anchorage.

Dick's cache ladder and bunk bed ladder are fine examples of his natural engineering. By ripping spruce poles into half logs, Dick, in effect, halved the weight of both ladders. This also increased the risk of a rung breaking. To

avoid falling if a rung broke, Dick described his solution above. He did this only to the top rung before thinking of an even safer solution to support the remaining rungs.

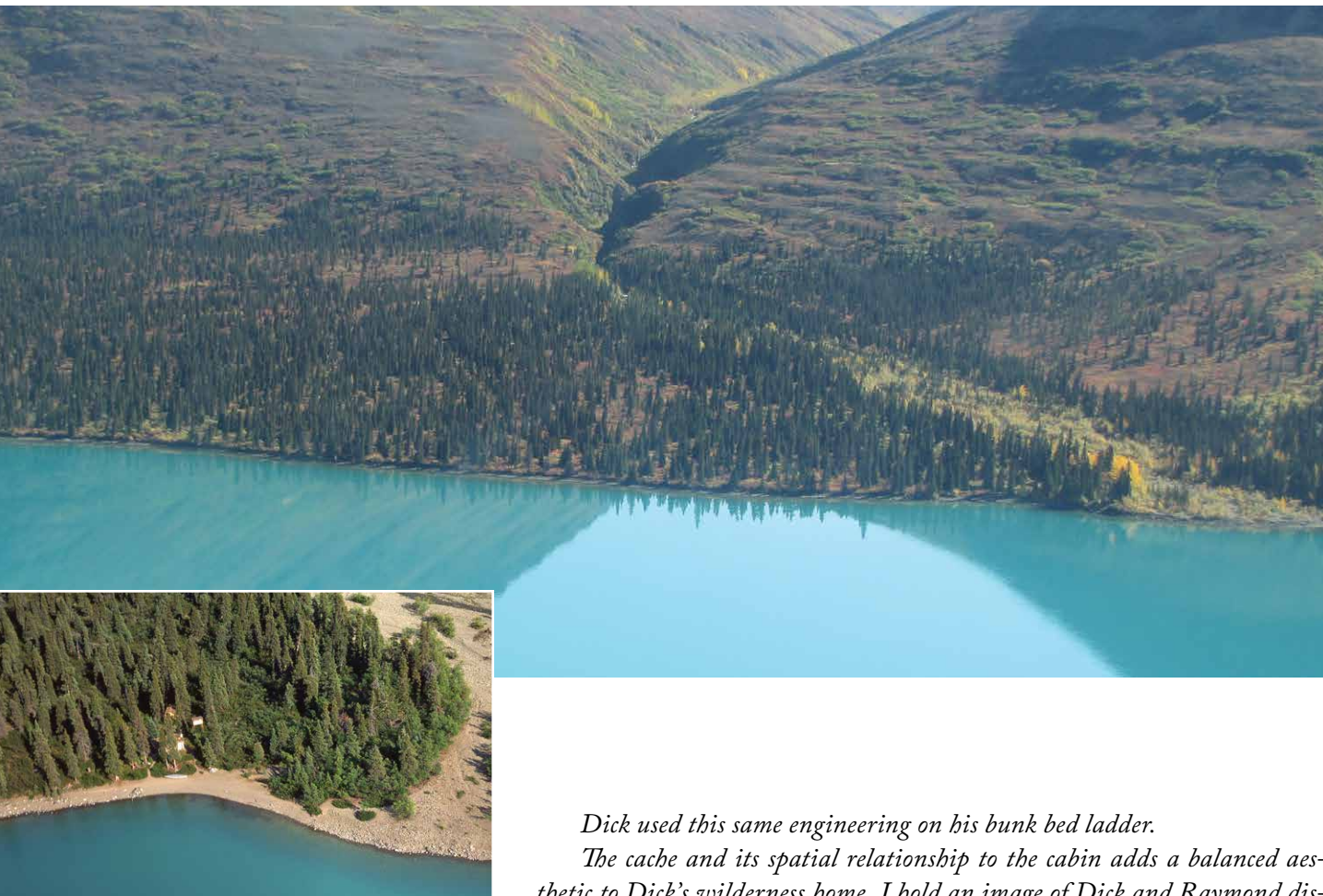
Dick threaded a loop of wire through drilled holes in the ladder sides and twisted the strands below the rungs before holding the twisted loop in tension with a single roofing nail driven through the wire into the bottom of the rung. The twisted wire not only holds each rung in tension but also acts as an emergency support for a rung that possibly breaks. The wire would safely support a climber coming down. The high-tensile steel wire was brittle and very difficult to work, especially tying the knot that connects the two ends of the wire together.

It was easy to find the first knot Dick tied on his cache ladder by the looseness of the knot. Every knot after that is beautiful and tight. This twisted wire is not present on the bottom rung where Dick was not likely to take a fall even if the rung broke. It is also not present on the top two rungs where he did not step when he was accessing the cache.

Every rung has a double loop of wire wrapped around both ends to make the rung less likely to split where the nails are driven into them. Dick gave the wrapped wire a refined appearance by running the wire through drilled holes on the edge of the rung, just as he had done with the twisted wire rung supports. Running all of these wires through the drilled holes makes it less likely that a loose end of a broken wire would catch the clothing of someone climbing the ladder.

Cache ladder stored on the side of Dick's cabin. He hung the ladder on pegs. (Photo by Monroe Robinson)





Dick's small footprint in the wilderness of Twin Lakes. (Inset photo by Dick Proenneke, courtesy of Bob Swerer and Dick Hackard; Top photo by K. Schubeck)

Dick used this same engineering on his bunk bed ladder.

The cache and its spatial relationship to the cabin adds a balanced aesthetic to Dick's wilderness home. I hold an image of Dick and Raymond discussing the location of a cache in September, 1967, when Dick's cabin and cache were only dreams.

Building the cache in the spring of 1969 ends Dick's building phase. He never built a sauna, a shop or a second room on his cabin. He doesn't write about this in his journals but not continuing to build was clearly a decision he made. And for the next three decades living in the wilderness of Twin Lakes, he never wavered from that decision. Dick did not want to increase his footprint.

In 2018, Connie Klug sat with K. and me in Spike's cabin telling stories of attending several of Dick's slide shows in Iowa during the 1970s. As a young farm wife and mother, she was enthralled with Dick's stories. She remembered clearly his early slide shows were travelogs of his adventures. In subsequent years Dick's shows were more about wilderness, and protecting wildlife and wild places.

Dick allowed Twin Lakes to change him. He arrived a hunter and an outdoorsman who wanted to challenge himself in a wild land. He soon became part of the fabric of this wild place. He became an advocate for protecting wildlife and wilderness and rejected the march of civilization conquering and destroying one wild place after another. He did not want the wildlife or wilderness around him to suffer because he came.

*"It was good to be back in the wilderness
which always seems to be at peace with the world."
– Richard Proenneke*



*Dick's cabin and cache, with Dick's butcher block table in front.
(Photo by Dick Proenneke, courtesy of the National Park Service)*