

By Seth Kantner

Kotzebue—This past month we faced a new and different winter dilemma; we needed it to get colder so we could go camping. That's a spring problem, not something that folks here generally fret about in December.

The first half of the month the temperature hovered close to freezing; the snow was pasty at times and south winds flooded overflow onto our not-so-thick ice. Finally, the weather turned reasonable and dropped sixty degrees. It was colder upriver—Don Williams called from Ambler and said he was reading minus fifty-five.

By the time the cold snap eased and we got Christmas out from underfoot, our tenting plans had altered again; Frank and Linda Greene offered their old cabin across the ice in the hills. Daylight was short; I pictured icy gear and kids wanting to tramp in and out, and decide to swallow my pride and leave the tent home. Although now I didn't know what to call it—not camping?

Andrew Greene even went ahead and thrashed a tunnel through downed trees, deep snow, and thickets of willows that had grown up around the unused cabin. I wouldn't have found the place, buried like a mushroom in the woods along a creek. He removed the nailly anti-bear boards from the windows and door, and built a fire.

This was getting more and more like reserving a motel and less like my customary and traditional dark, cold, windy, fighting-with-tent-poles experiences. Beside our snowgos, I took off my parka and tried to feel useful by chopping willows to get to the basket sled to untie the load.

Inside, the cabin was small and nearly dark. We put the grub box along a wall and spread out caribou hides. A cot was in one corner; a small table beside the door; a calendar on a nail hung open at April, 1989. Gray came in two small windows. Andrew pointed out a National Enquirer and other magazines—all 1989. I realized I'd forgotten to bring the book I had been reading, *The Firecracker Boys*.

I unpacked the Coleman lantern but didn't light it. No use starting our evening inside at 2:30. Outside twilight was falling. Andrew strapped on his rifles and roared away through the brush. I laid out snowshoes and skis. China had brought along her friend, Brandi Williams, and I knew some ten and eleven-year-old energy needed to be burnt before the long night.

Behind the cabin, the snow in the creek was soft and deep. Black holes showed where Andrew had kicked through the shelf ice to get water. It looked perfect for entertaining the girls.

I broke trail with Brandi snowshoeing behind and Stacey and China following on skies. Small patches of water were dark and open. Occasionally the ice dropped under us, but the water was shallow and the snow formed bridges.

Finally, we climbed the steep bank and worked through willows to the tundra. A depression marked where a moose had been laying recently; a lynx had come by later and followed in the moose's tracks. On the tundra a cold east wind blew. The sky was gray, the snow gray, the trees black. We turned back.

At 3:45 I lit the Coleman and instantly it was night out. Stacey got out dried meat, pilot crackers, and a roasted caribou shoulder. With flashlights the girls ran to the creek repeatedly to haul water. I eyed China's icy mukluks, and heated water to make coffee.

Stacey had brought along a beading magazine, and an issue of Cooking Light. I wrinkled my nose, no. Cooking Fat, or Eating Muktuk, I would have at least leafed through. Brandi loaned me two pink pages out of her diary. I lay on a caribou hide but didn't write a word—too much work.

At 5:30, after a certain amount of examining the walls, I went ahead and took a look at the National Enquirer. Eddie Murphy and Whitney Huston were in love. Some farmer had sewed up his knee, by himself. The only obvious sign of progress since then in our country were the lawsuits—back then you could make the news suing someone for a \$100,000. Man, we've come a long way.

It was hard to get 1989 to seem less than a few years back. I felt like I do when reading those signs at grocery store check-out counters, stating the date kids have to be born by to purchase cigarettes. I always catch myself thinking, kids were born that recently?

By ten in the morning the windows were gray against the black cabin walls. I lit the Coleman. At noon the snow and sky were blue-gray. Flakes sifted out of spruce swaying overhead. The weather service had predicted we would add six seconds or so to our one-hour-and-forty minute daylight—but not today apparently. We lashed axes and snowshoes and the saw on our freight sled, started the snowgos, and went looking for wood.

Out on the tundra, snow was moving, drifting, and there was little definition between sky and ground. Off in the west a bruised black strip marked the reflection of open ocean on the winter sky. The wind was picking up; it wasn't very light but already getting dark.

We stopped after a few miles, and along the creek I snowshoed a trail to a tree that looked like dry firewood. My trail dropped into the creek for a stretch, but the ice held when I brought the machine around to pack it down.

After an hour of chopping, sawing, and complications in the brush, I was sweating. The girls were cold, especially their feet. "Run back and forth and warm up," I told them. "We're not going yet." They turned and headed out, each with one snowshoe cinched on.

Hurrying now, Stacey and I loaded the logs. The track spun and the snowgo got stuck. Over the engine I heard what sounded like a rabbit screaming.

Down in the creek, China and Brandi had broken through a sinkhole and both had one leg caught and wet to the thigh. They weren't easy to yank out, jammed in together, and mad. "Told you to get your feet warm, not wet," I commented.

I plopped the girls in the snow and went to get my kit and some dry branches. It was a perfect place to learn about wet feet--and rare to just have one each. The wind blew overhead, but not down in the creek; it was only around zero; spruce branches were heaped nearby, handy to build a fire. And I had dry socks and boot liners in my bag.

On the way back, the trail had drifted in and it was almost dark. At the Greenes' cabin, I got the stove and lantern going, brought in one stiff boot and one mukluk, and then headed across the tundra to get the rest of the wood, axes and things we'd left behind.

By 5:30 we'd finished coffee and I was wishing for another cup. Outside it was dark again, snowing and the wind rising. Over on the shelf, after all these years, Eddie Murphy and Whitney Huston were still in love.