

In the Shadow of Two Carlsons

Sourdough tales from Alaska

BY STEVE KAHN

Einar Carlson

IN THE LATE 1970S, I QUIT A BUDDING CAREER IN marine retail sales in Anchorage and embraced the liberating uncertainty of the wilds. I managed to slip in a 400-mile kayak trip down the Kuskokwim River with a friend before I hastily reorganized my gear and headed to Farewell Lake Lodge on the far side of the Alaska Range. I'd agreed to exchange two weeks' labor for room, board, and a free flight out and back. There wasn't an inkling of a career plan bouncing around in my 23-year-old brain after that fortnight.

The cabin I bunked in was iconic Alaskan: hand-crafted logs, rusty gas can shingles on the roof, a barrel stove, and a huge set of moose antlers haloing the door. It was solid and warm—and my introduction to the legend of the man behind the cabin, Einar Carlson.

When you love the wilderness and the lifestyle it offers, it's easy to hold up rugged individuals that preceded you to a romantic ideal. Alaska is steeped in rich history, with a plentitude of colorful characters, but in a land so immense, many local legends are eventually forgotten, or are confined to regional fame. I learned that Einar was born in Denmark around 1897, and left for America when he was in his teens. How he made his way to Farewell Lake in the middle of Alaska was a mystery. In my mind, Einar was Lewis, Clark, and Daniel Boone rolled into one sinewy sourdough with a foreign accent.



UAF-1975-209-47

The signs of a life lived hard and well gave character to the place, each nick and gouge in the whipsawed plank floorboard an unwritten footnote of Einar's life. Scrawled on the doorframe were names of pilots, bone-chilling temperature readings, and tantalizing hints of untold tales, such as "Sept. 17, '49. Shot Grizzly Bear from right here." Dogsleds hand-built by Einar weathered gracefully outside. As I walked trails that branch out in every imaginable direction, I encountered ancient blamarks on spruce trees and old trapping sets huddled at their bases. Einar's savvy as a trapper was a familiar topic of conversation among guests and subsequent caretakers.

Perhaps the most intriguing glimpses into Einar's life were diaries. His words were spare and sometimes cryptic. I long know more about his time as part owner of the Rohn Roadhouse on the Iditarod Trail in the winter of 1923-24. And what were details of the massive earthquake he endured in March of 1964. More than once during a winter cold snap he wrote "Boiled shirt"—and I could only guess that when the mercury plunged was a good time to stay home and do laundry, even without detergent.

My two-week stint at the lodge underwent a predictable

TOP: Einar Carlson, who lived in a cabin at Farewell Lake in Alaska; interior, hams it up with other men. **LEFT:** The old cabin at Farewell that Einar Carlson called home for many years.



Perhaps the most intriguing glimpses into Einar's life were his diaries. His words were spare and sometimes cryptic. I longed to know more about his time as part owner of the Rohn Roadhouse on the Iditarod Trail in the winter of 1923-24.

metamorphosis: first I became a packer, then a winter caretaker, then a guide. With each passing year I felt more comfortable and confident living the bush life, but I would never lay claim to sourdough status. Assuming that larger-than-life characters from days gone by had long since boiled their last pot of coffee, I was astonished to learn in the early '80s that Einar Carlson was still alive, living in Oregon.

In March of 1983 I was driving south on Interstate 5, when my girlfriend, Cathy, glanced at the map and exclaimed, "Florence, that's where Einar is living!" We took the next exit. Whether it was destiny or dumb luck, we met a man who happened to be the neighbor of the old timer from Alaska. He sketched out a map to Einar's house and offered a bit of news. Several heart attacks had made Einar frail. He'd just been released from the hospital days before.

We decided that if Einar wasn't up for a visit, we would leave. But when we knocked, he swung the door open and welcomed us inside. His voice was weak and his hands shaky as he told us about his early days in America: hopping freight trains,



TOP: Brown Carlson, his son-in-law Tommy Meyer, and neighbor Fred Bowman at Brown's Landing. ABOVE: Brown Carlson holds his neighbor, Anne Coray (the author's wife), in 1960, in front of his cabin at Lake Clark.



Anne Coray stands along the north wall of Brown Carlson's cabin where the logs were rotten seven rounds high. The structure was pulled and jacked into a level position before the logs were replaced.

working small jobs so he wouldn't have to beg for food, his brief stint in the army during the influenza epidemic of 1918 that infected over 10,000 soldiers. He answered questions about his diary entries and told us that he first headed to Alaska for railroad work on the section from Anchorage to Talkeetna.

He had a gentle, confident air, and it was easy to imagine the strength and competence of this man when he was in his prime. He was taller than I thought he would be. We let him know he was admired by a lot of people and would not be forgotten. As we were leaving, he beamed and said, "One minute I'm an old man sitting in my house and the next minute Farewell Lake comes knocking on my door."

The hours spent with him not only justified, but enhanced, my admiration of the life he'd lived. A legend, that's heady stuff, but Einar is one of my own personal heroes. We promised to send him photos of his cabin and the lodge—and to stay in touch. Sadly, he passed away less than a week after our visit.

Brown Carlson

FAST FORWARD ALMOST A DECADE. MY WIFE, ANNE, introduced me to not only the environs of her birthplace, Lake Clark, but to the history of Brown Carlson. Born in Norway, Brown sailed around the world as a youth and was the first permanent Euroamerican settler on Lake Clark.

Reminders of Brown's life surrounded us. The logs he hand-hewed were stained with tobacco and wood smoke. His 1912 ax, his old pipe and hats, lanterns, boots and calendars from his last years at the lake made us feel like his spirit had never left the place.

Animated stories of Brown spilled out from Anne's family and other neighbors. I already coveted my own immigrant sourdough legend named Carlson, and I wasn't sure I needed another.

But with every anecdote about the life and exploits of Brown Carlson, my intrigue ratcheted up. Brown had jumped ship off the coast of Alaska and made his way to Lake Clark country sometime before 1906. Though short in stature, he possessed great strength and agility. He set a bear trap by hand on a bet, packed a cook stove over the Newhalen portage, regularly rowed his hand-built boat 26 miles round-trip across Lake Clark for the mail. Many recall watching Brown do handsprings, an acrobat feat he claimed to have learned in the circus.

He was a Bristol Bay commercial fisherman for years, and la

a miner and highly successful trapper. Brown built his first cabin near Portage Creek in 1906. When that cabin was lost in a fire in 1939, he built another, larger one, on the same site. Lake Clark was his home for about 55 years, and he claimed it was “the best place in the world.” He was married twice, to Dena’ina Athabascan women, and in 1927 his daughter, Ida, was born.

Before Anne and I purchased Brown’s property from Ida, we watched his cabin shift, lean, and rot. By the time the place was ours, my back was nearly as crooked as the roofline of his cabin. We tacked a patchwork of tarps on the roof to slow the impending collapse.

We’d look at the rotten logs, the leaning walls, and the punchy floor and feel discouraged. But we gathered ideas from others and each other and somewhere along the way we began inching forward toward rebuilding—with no expert guidance. We erected a beam inside the cabin as a place to duck under, should the structure collapse. We got out jacks, come-a-longs, and cables and went to work.

Reminders of Brown’s life surrounded us. The logs he hand-hewed were stained with tobacco and wood smoke. His 1912 ax, his old pipe and hats, lanterns, boots and calendars from his last years at the lake made us feel like his spirit had never left the place.

We started recording our progress with photos, then video. Then we realized we needed to film people who still remembered Brown. Some of their stories were informative; others were delightfully amusing and anecdotal.

As often happens, one worthwhile project has a multitude of benefits. The restoration of Brown’s historic cabin will be part of a documentary film that includes the legacy of Brown Carlson himself.

I feel like I am one lucky guy to have carved out major chunks of my life involved with these cabins and the memories of the men behind them. Sadly, in June of 2010, Einar Carlson’s cabin at Farewell Lake burned to the ground during a wildfire. Since that event, every step in the rebuilding of Brown’s cabin has taken on greater meaning for me. Perhaps it’s more than coincidence that the two cabins were built within one year of each other. Two cabins, two unforgettable characters connected by name, by an era, by foreign roots. 🇺🇸

Steve Kahn is a lifelong Alaskan who lives at Lake Clark with his wife, Anne Coray. They are working on a documentary film about Brown Carlson and the rebuilding of his historic log cabin. Follow at [Rebuilding Brown: rebuildingbrown.northshorepressalaska.com](http://RebuildingBrown:rebuildingbrown.northshorepressalaska.com).



In the fall of 2015, all the new logs were in place. A new roof, floor, installation of windows, and door repair were projects for future seasons.