

Canoes and Mosquitoes

By Laura Wright

This winter was tough on Big blue, my 17' fiberglass canoe in a strange electric blue color. When the snow melted there were some big holes and scrapes in the canoe. I don't know how they got there but it was definitely not going to float. I brought this canoe from Montana, strapped to the top of my pick up truck, in 1995. I did a poor job of tying it on and pretty soon after leaving Bozeman I could see it wasn't going to stay there so I pulled into a truck stop and feebly tried to tie it down better. And as happens in a truck stop a trucker took pity on my head scratching tangled knot tying attempts and taught me the truckers knot! That canoe was on there tight! And I wasn't going to untie it until I got to Talkeetna. The canoe didn't look like a canoe as it was completely wrapped up for shipping but that ended up being too expensive so I was bringing it up. When I got to the Canadian border there were some raised eyebrows. What was in that heavily wrapped giant banana shaped package? It's just a canoe, I said, thinking to myself, please don't make me untie it as I don't remember that knot and I'll never get it on there tight again! Lucky for me they let me go without inspection.

Little did I know how important that canoe would be for me soon after arriving in Talkeetna in the summer of 1995.

I was living in a screen tent on my new property; a beautiful birch forest. Inside the screen tent I had a tiny back packing tent. The screen tent was floppy and didn't have a floor so it only gave me a short break... enough time to get into the backpacking tent for total safety. Being in that was my only respite from mosquitoes. Mosquitoes like I had never seen in my life! Getting bit as I tried to figure out how to start a chain saw and cut down a tree, many trees, build a platform and finally erect the yurt I had shipped to Alaska. I was working in thick woods with hand tools. I was over my head in every way and I was loving every minute of it. Mosquitoes were no deterrent to my enthusiasm for the project: shelter!

Any time I couldn't take it anymore I would run to the Big Blue canoe and paddle as fast as possible to the middle of Question Lake, kill any mosquitoes around me, and then lay back and relax. Mostly I didn't relax but tried to puzzle out the next steps in land clearing and building. To be

able to think without having to swat, to have silence instead of buzzing, to take off my head net. I would eat my lunch out there. It was so freeing.

June 2020. Twenty five years later I've long since moved out of the yurt and into a hard sided cabin.

When the first mosquito showed up and landed on my arm I didn't kill it but brushed it away. Every living organism should have a chance to live, I thought they are just getting a meal and moving on. The sentiment lasted about 3 days. Soon enough a mosquito here and there turned into a humming swarm of moving black masses plastered against my window screen, feasting on my dogs muzzles, alighting on any bare skin especially at my wrists and neck. Enough I said. Not everything gets to live. Swat, ouch, thwack, ouch, slap. Out came the fan, bed net, citronella candles, bug spray and my beloved electric tennis racket skeeter zapper. I plugged up every possible place I thought the mosquitoes were getting in... the wood stove door: check, kitchen stove fan: check, bathroom fan, check. Twenty minutes of patrolling the cabin with the tennis racket and I can jump into bed under the netting and get a good night's sleep. Going outside I wear a button down shirt, collar up, ball cap, head net and gloves... the same uniform I wore in the summer of 1995.

Last month I took Big Blue off the lake shore and turned it into a garden bed. I bought another canoe, it is small and dark green. I think I'm going to call it, Green Peace. I'm still paddling out to the middle of the lake for a break from the skeeters. But I have other things to think about besides building a shelter, things happening in the larger world beyond my Talkeetna bubble. How can I help, how can I make a difference, how do we move forward. I don't want the solitude that is now forced upon me. I am hoping that being in my Green Peace is a place to find peace and perhaps, answers in these troubled times.