

Wanderings on Moose Mountain Chris Polashenski '07

It seems like a pretty short time ago that I first started visiting ruins of old D.O.C. cabins as waylays on my fall outings. I vividly remember walking out to the old Harris cabin site while hunting partridge on a beautiful fall day. The foliage was in its prime, the partridge were at the peak of their 11 year cycle, I was skipping class, and the biggest worry I had in mind was the possibility that I'd run out of shells before I ran out of birds to miss. I knew of a cabin site out on Moose Mountain through some D.O.C. lore, though exactly how I'm not quite sure, and decided to wander in its direction.

When I arrived in the clearing the first thing I noticed was the old swimming hole, an oddly large pool in these upper reaches of Mink Brook which had mostly filled with leafy debris. The pool held half a dozen small trout, trapped from moving up or downstream by the low flow of a dry fall. It was their darting about that had drawn my attention in the first place. I pulled out the hand line and hare's ear flies I often leave in my vest pocket and caught one just to stare in wonderment at the blaze of colors that is a wild brook trout.

With the fish exercised I turned my attention to the ruins in the clearing. The front of Harris cabin had collapsed two winters before and had become an operating base for a host of porcupines which were slowly shuffling out of sight. The back kitchen area was still standing, supported by pillars of porcupine droppings and trash pile bracing. The logs were growing fungi of a variety which is apparently immune to Earl's special cabin juice, an abandoned flycatcher's nest was nestled into the cracks of the chimney, and saplings were springing out of the clearing as the forest was doing its best to tidy up and reclaim the site. Above all the mess, proudly asserting that these sorry ruins were in fact D.O.C. property, was the club emblem, high on the chimney. This was a special place, and worth a pause in my hunt.

Later that fall, 2004, I proposed a reconstruction project for Harris Cabin to the then new Outdoor Programs Director Andy Harvard in the form of a forty page proposal, which included pictures, budget numbers, and my timetable for the job. The whole project was going to cost \$58,448.62, exactly, would be constructed entirely with volunteer labor, and was to be ready for rental in the fall of 2006, two years later. The proposal included a ranting

manifesto about the merits of cabin building and a scolding diatribe about the shamefully long pause since the last D.O.C. cabin had been built, but also some more coherent parts. A fairly elaborate plan was hatched to build the facility in two phases, connecting two complementary buildings to reduce the risk quanta of the project. A small cabin would be built the first year, which included the kitchen and a sleeping loft, and a large, single-room meeting hall would be added on the second year. Overall, the proposal was excessively optimistic, almost to the absurd, but convincing in its detail. Everything I had thought of right down to furring strips and screws was priced and included in quantities almost sufficient for a small tarpaper shack.

It's since become clear that Andy Harvard didn't actually believe the details of the crap I was feeding him. Rather, because I was so convinced of its truth and delusionally dedicated to making it happen, he agreed to support me in navigating the myriad obstacles between this idea and a physical cabin. With his nod, the brief pause in my partridge hunt became a four year odyssey. The date of my matriculation, or at the least beginning of my major in the Dartmouth Outing Club, had arrived.

High on life and my new endeavor, I immediately began seeking special people. People who would understand the inexplicable feelings that ultimately made so many of us avoid high paying summer jobs to instead labor among the black flies, in mountains of drawknife shavings, sawdust, and scrap lumber, sleeping among the owls and the stars. To my surprise, these people existed at Dartmouth and included some of the most talented and intellectual individuals I've ever met. From here on, two weeks after submitting my proposal, the "I" in this project became a "we."

One of the first things we realized was that the nicely laid plan which had been conceived in isolation was going to have to change. The site had a history of misuse, was within the zoning setback of a stream, was right next to the Appalachian Trail, had no road access thanks to some beavers, was situated in "prime bear habitat," and, according to local legend, was a prime UFO landing site. Though we knew the concerns had to be addressed, red tape is pretty sticky and we quickly found ourselves stuck in a tape ball. The onslaught of stakeholders was like a wall being put up between us and our goal. Each hurdle resulted in a re-design, but each re-design strengthened our resolve. We

relished incorporating ever grander and more intricate features at every iteration; attempting, like proper college students, to subtly defeat the spirit of the rules while satisfying their letter. Our interactions became more adversarial and new, more descriptive words were employed to describe some authority figures.

Clarity and perspective on these trials came while hunting a few hundred yards from the site. Falling into a brush pile that had looked like a perfect spot to find a rabbit, I found myself briefly perched atop something warm, furry, and black which made a deep, guttural growl as I scurried to retrace my steps out of “prime bear habitat.” A thought occurred. Maybe those stakeholders weren’t all wrong. Perhaps they weren’t even part of an evil conspiracy trying to stop us. Might they have had some valid points? And so I collected myself, apologized to the bear for so rude a January awakening, and wandered off with a deeper understanding. Addressing concerns, even poorly worded, excessively antagonistic, and sometimes utterly ridiculous ones, is just part of being thorough; nothing personal.

Winter continued as we scoured books on log building techniques to shorten the dark nights in cozy nooks of Robinson Hall. Town permitting, meetings with administrators, and log orders filled the days as we did our best to avoid class. Trips went out to transport cement to the site and clean up the remains; burying snowmobiles, destroying saw chains, and numbing fingers. We attempted to burn the debris and doubts were raised about my manhood as I repeatedly failed to burn anything but the kerosene I had brought. A lovely and efficient girl named Norah, who apparently didn’t notice, helped out for just enough trips to catch my attention before letting her true motivations be known. We built a model, thanks to Richard and Allie, and drafted a series of drawings. The two-stage design was abandoned because it was incompatible with zoning and a “go big or go home” design (close to the one we now know) was adopted.

Spring turned into summer of 2005



The first Crew next to the chimney.

Photo: Chris Polashenski '07

with no permits. The flycatchers returned to their nook in the chimney, and we began construction by peeling the first hundred and sixty logs from the Second College Grant offsite at the Organic Farm. A series of work trips put in a bridge to access the site and a field trip allowed us to see the beauty and rewards of full scribe work firsthand at Bob Peter’s worksite, settling us on building that way. More importantly, we took the opportunity to learn the important things: like the coefficient of friction between freshly peeled white pine logs and boots (practically zero), the best way to fell a hung tree (dynamite), and what happens when you dig in the rain (mud—lots of mud). As summer drew to a close and the zoning misunderstandings with the town dragged on, we practiced building a log sauna, put in a foundation capable of supporting several building configurations, and put the site to sleep for the winter with just one log laid. More than a hundred people had been involved and we hadn’t even started yet.

That winter permits rolled in, a crew was hired for 2006, the site was stacked high with logs, and things were finally ready to go. The crew assembled in June, a tent city was erected, and so it began. Drawshave, Scribe, Score, Cut, Stack. Repeat. The shavings flew, chainsaws roared, and the burn pile smoldered through wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of sawdust while the walls grew and JP’s homemade log clock rotated from “Work” to “Sleep” to “Eat” and back to “Work” again. We learned from a few stitches to respect the hazards of the great utility knife and from our sore backs that green hemlock weighs a frickin’ ton. The accident-prone got their ATV privileges revoked, eating contests became hotly competitive, I was forbidden to grocery shop unsupervised, and inside jokes began to form. In just a few weeks, a group was formed that may never be reassembled, a series of jokes was created that simply cannot be explained, and a summer was underway that will never be forgotten.

As alums visited and shared stories of their own crews, we

came to realize that working on a crew is an experience of a special type that can never be precisely recreated, explained, or fully shared. The moments exist only for those who were there, in the rain and dirt, at the end of those long days in the woods. And so we yarned and listened, yearning to become a part of each other's crews but being forced to resign in the simple contentment of knowing we all described the same intangible feeling.

In the blink of an eye, the nesting birds had once again fledged from the chimney, our summer crew was another component of D.O.C. lore, and it became clear that those who oppose the Dartmouth quarter system are right. Summer was over and despite our most valiant efforts, ten weeks and six people is not nearly enough time to build a cabin of such exaggerated measurements. The project ground to a halt just above the second floor and transitioned into its first overtime.

Everyone who visited was impressed by our perceived failure and a consensus formed that the building should be protected before winter. Sean Mann agreed to press on into fall, leading the translation of the summer crew's raw desires and grandiose design additions into reality. A crew was assembled and immediately resumed piling logs, enlarging scrap piles, building friendships, and tucking away memories. Ever good with timing, I rejoined after finals just in time for the crowning achievement of their work. The great log truss, which spans the main room, had been built on the ground, just below its ultimate place of service, but it might have still been in the Grant. The truss was cut of fresh, wet, green spruce, braced by "pond-dried" hemlock, and weighed more than my truck. The chain pull on our skyline rated out at two tons of lift and couldn't budge it. We were back to the drawing board for the sort of work that still makes the engineer in me giddy.

All other work on the site ceased as a stout forty foot log was raised vertically in the middle of the cabin. Cables were stayed and tackle was added as the crew hopped-to like sailors rigging the mast aboard the "good ship Harris". The truss was braced and hitched. Safety lines were added. Pulleys and tackle were added to lifting devices of every flavor. Preparations were slow and methodical. The hazards were obvious, and not something our hard hats were going to protect us from. After three days, the time we nervously awaited had come. With the calculations, plans, and equipment triple checked, safety lines tensioned, and fourteen thousand pounds of mechanical

lifting capacity taking up load, one end of the truss began to inch skyward. Gravity gave its all and the system creaked, strained, and groaned as it took the load—fluttering hearts and testing nerves for minutes that stretched into hours. Finally, to my amazement, the truss hung freely, levitating in space; then crept higher and higher. The progress was slow and the atmosphere tense, but just as darkness descended the scribe joints were cut, the truss settled into place, and everyone collapsed in an exhausted sigh of relief.

This test past, urgency returned to close the building in before winter. Rory pulled out all the stops in his people-gathering and volunteers showed up in droves. For a magical week, as many as forty people scurried around the cabin. Purlins were raised and roof boards installed at a rate never before seen until, long after dark, on the last night before the crew dispersed to the corners of the world, under spotlights, the tarp was stretched and the cabin was closed in, safe from the New England winter.

The winters aren't really that long, though, and the flycatchers soon returned to their place presiding over the site, this time among the purlins. Crewmembers likewise returned to the task, now under a new paradigm. This time there would be no specific Harris crew, but rather all summer D.O.C. hires would rotate through shifts at the Harris site, the farm, the other cabins, and on the D.O.C.'s many trails. As director of this program, my attention was distracted from the Harris site, but new leaders emerged. Crewmembers donned harnesses as rafters, insulation, plywood, tarpaper, and metal roofing sailed onto the roof. Window openings were cut and light poured into the building. Walls were filled in and floors were insulated. Sixty tons of rock and mortar was painstakingly piled onto the chimney. Stairs were built, the site was leveled, and a fine suburban lawn was planted. All the while, the crew formed their own identity and imparted their own character to the building in the form of chimney love seats, added lofts, and secret compartments. The progress was incredible, but the passing of time and the pace of the schedule we'd made was even faster.

Four more weeks. That was the time horizon for completion throughout the project...a euphemism for a length of time close to infinity—or at least beyond our ability to plan. After the first summer, schedule detail trailed off about that far into the future. The fourth week's schedule usually incorporated a work plan such

as “Finish Cabin. Decorate.” The cabin looked like a building now though, and we began to sense the final stretch. Sean came back that winter to put in the final “four weeks,” leading a ten week crew which installed the woodstoves, put in the floors, added cabinets and counters, built beautiful railings from local hemlock, and firmly solidified Sean’s place as the keystone of this building project. Summer crew ’08 rotated through as well for its six week go at the “four more weeks” work, building and filling a woodshed, constructing a privy, adding bunks and sleeping lofts, installing a pantry, and beginning the monumental task of cleaning up the mess we made building the place. These crews no

point or another, for a total of fifty weeks, the project took two years longer than planned and cost more than four times as much. None of us anticipated what a tremendous undertaking we had gotten ourselves into. Not less than fifty Dartmouthians from seven different classes worked on the project as full time crew members. Hundreds more volunteered for periods ranging from minutes to weeks. Mistakes were made, waste was incurred, and my arrogance was regularly humbled. Yet the finished product is leaps and bounds better built than originally proposed. A skill set has been revived in the D.O.C. that the current students are eager to use again, an archive of new tools has been acquired, and a



Photo: Phil Bracikowski '08

doubt have their own colorful stories to tell, but only they know them. I wasn't there. What I do know is that these two crews succeeded in trimming “four weeks work” to “just one or two more trips;” another euphemism, this one for the fact that a project can never really be considered complete by those who build it.

At long last, the building was ready, and it officially opened for rental that fall of 2008, four years after my walk. With five different crews onsite at one

true liberal arts education was provided to a generation of D.O.C.'ers. Only 11 stitches and a few dozen band-aids were required, the generosity of the Class of 1966 replenished many of the funds used to build the building, the flycatchers still nest on the site, and, in the year since its opening, more than 1500 people, including the college president, have used the place. For those of us lucky enough to have worked on it, we've built something that we may well be able to show to our grandchildren.

Not many people can say that before age twenty five.

That a blundering sophomore project proposal, long on passion but short on reality, could turn into something this successful is something each member of the D.O.C. can hold proudly. It is a testimony not to my foolish proposal, nor to any particular person or event in this saga. Rather, this journey is a testimony to a whole organization composed of people too numerous to thank: crewmembers and volunteers who spent thousands upon thousands of hours on the site, alumni who through their past exploits inspired us and set precedents for us to follow, donors who enabled this experience with their generosity, and those members of the college staff who allowed students to learn by taking responsibility for themselves and their learning. I don't mean to say that everyone involved saw eye to eye all the time or that we didn't ever have setbacks, but every component of our beloved organization ultimately worked for this project, and it could not have been accomplished otherwise. The building that

resulted is a tribute to the legacy and ideals of the oldest, strongest, and proudest college outing club in the world. I cannot express in words how grateful I am to have been allowed to be a part of that.

Now as I slowly end my tenure as a student, I realize the visions created by the dreamers in this project cannot be completely fulfilled in a college career, even my extended one. I still want those who come after us to make this building the centerpiece of the trail system which covers Moose Mountain, connect it by ski trail to Hanover, incorporate it into First-Year Trips, break a little sweat cutting enough firewood to heat it, and perhaps even add a caretaker who will cook me a hot meal after my grandkids tow me in on a sled. But you know, I'm not an undergrad anymore. I'm an alum; if a slow one to leave. I'm no longer in charge of the crews or this building. I passed that torch to Phil who passed it to Andrew, who soon will pass it to someone else. The details of this vision may never be fulfilled, yet I am not worried.

Photo: Phil Bracikowski '08



I just walked out to the '66 Lodge today while thinking about this article, five years and 14 days since I first set foot on that ground. It wasn't quite so sunny, the foliage was past its prime, and the partridge are at a low in their cycle. But I still exercised a few birds and pulled out my hand line to catch a trout before turning my attention to some carefully piled wood in the center of the clearing. This time I climbed up onto the second floor porch and sat, just taking in the scene and remembering. It was the first time I've just sat at the site in more than five years. Ten blissfully nostalgic minutes passed as it became clear why I am not worried about the visions listed above. The next batch of students will fulfill my vision perfectly. They will make sure this building and the whole of the D.O.C.'s resources are used exactly the way I want them to. Their way.

Then I climbed down and the nostalgic clarity in my mind left as it raced to thinking about the projects still to be done—the little stuff no one but those who worked there know about. Stuff that will trouble us builders until we check it off. I grasped again for that torch I've already passed along. I'm not ready to go. Just one more work trip, and the place will be done. Really. I promise. Who wants to sign up?



Photo: Phil Bracikowski '08