

Seeley Swan
PATHFINDER



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A Place for All: Christmas Trapper Tales

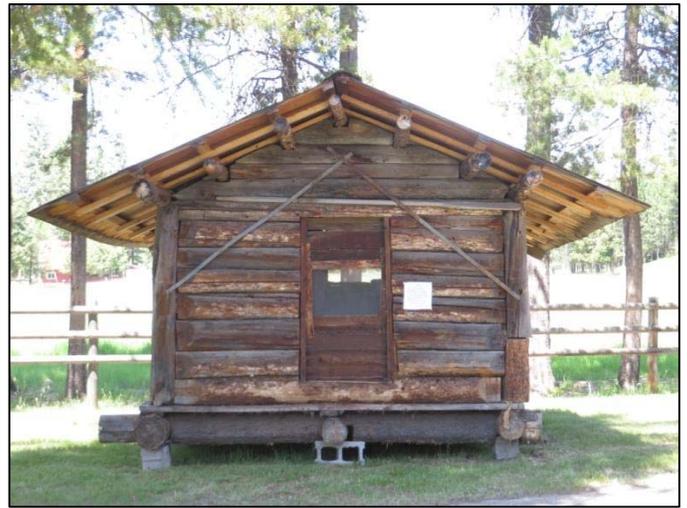
By Steve Lamar, President of the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society

Since time immemorial, Christmas has been the time when friends and family gather together to share gifts and good will. Most of us can't imagine spending Christmas without the companionship of those most dear to us.

The desire for yuletide fellowship was evident in the Swan Valley when early-day trappers spent long periods of time in the backcountry during the winter. In *A Christmas Tale of Two Trappers Who Passed in the Night*, printed in the *Missoulian* around 1988, Greg Tollefson relates a story told by Jalmar Laine, a tall wiry trapper who lived in a cabin near Salmon Prairie. Jalmar was one of several Finlanders who were trapping and eking out a living in the Swan in the 30's and 40's.

As the story goes, on the morning of Christmas Eve Jalmar decided to leave his cabin to visit his friend, Torvald, an old Norwegian who was trapping in the South Fork camped at the mouth of Little Salmon Creek. He loaded up magazines, newspapers, and a bottle of whiskey, strapped on his snowshoes, and headed up Lion Creek Canyon.

The blowing snow made travel difficult, but he had helped build the trail so he was able to stay the course. By the time he reached the top of the pass the weather had cleared. With the aid of the moon and stars, he kept going down the other side into the South Fork.



The old trapper cabin on exhibit at the Swan Valley Museum.

After a grueling 25 mile trek he finally arrived at Torvald's camp around noon on Christmas day. But to his surprise, he found that nobody was there. With the fresh snow covering everything, there were no visible tracks of his friend. He stayed for several hours, building a fire in the stove, eating some of Torvald's camp meat, and catching a few hours of sleep. Leaving a note and the gifts of magazines, newspapers and whiskey, he decided to head back home. In the remaining daylight he once again struck out on the trail. Come nightfall the moonlight helped guide him along his packed trail and he made good time heading home. Finally, around noon the next day he arrived at his cabin to find none other than Torvald there! Apparently, each man had the same idea of spending Christmas with his friend, yet, unknowingly they passed like two ships in the night as one trekked over Lion Creek Pass while the other came down Smith Creek Pass. Howls of laughter must have echoed across the valley when they realized what they had happened!

Another local trapper, Bud Moore, spent Christmas in the backcountry on more than one occasion.

In 1924, when Bud was seven years old, he woke up to find three traps and a hatchet under the Christmas tree. He never doubted that he would spend time in the mountains trapping.

As a youngster in the Bitterroots, he set his traps each morning on the way to Woodman School near Lolo Creek. Even as a teenager Bud was an avid outdoorsman and spent several winters in the Bitterroot backcountry running his traplines.

Eventually, he had 80 miles of traplines in the Lochsa River country. Once, his sister and younger brother snowshoed over Lolo Pass to his camp deep in the backcountry to spend Christmas with him. Another time, a young woman who later became his wife, did the same.

Later in life, when Bud was 66 years old, he spent several months during the winter of 1983 in the Little Salmon Creek drainage of the Bob Marshall Wilderness just as the old Norwegian Torvald had done decades before. Bud had prearranged to come out around Christmas to be with family and friends.

On Christmas Eve, Bud wrote in his *Journals of the Little Salmon*, "Millions of people will open gifts tonight and millions more will do so tomorrow. It is too bad that I have not been out to get and give gifts for Janet, Bill, Jean, and a few other very special people. As for me, my gifts are here in this great wild land and in our homestead and love and life in the Swan. It is gift enough to be a participant in this world as not yet fully converted to the whims of industrial men."

On Christmas morning it was cold, very cold. Bud thought it was probably -20 degrees when in reality it was closer to -40 degrees below zero. While heading out that morning, he found himself humming the tune, 'I'll be home for Christmas.' He traveled at a steady pace climbing up and over Lion Creek Pass, altering his route to avoid the avalanche hazards on the way down. He thought of camping at his 'Half Way Camp' but the day was early and the lure of getting out to family and friends was strong so he kept going.

Around 9 pm he finally reached the trailhead that night only to find no one there. What he did find were gifts that a trapper could treasure - a pile of dry firewood, kindling, and pitch. His wife, Janet, along with Butch Harmon, and Les Hostetler had waited for Bud for several hours after dark. When Bud failed to materialize they headed back to their homes leaving the firewood

and a note. In the note Janet wrote that they would be back in the morning.

Bud hadn't exactly made it home for Christmas but he was close. He built a campfire that not only warmed his body but also warmed his heart. He later crawled into his sleeping bag under the shelter of a large cedar tree – his Christmas tree that cold winter night.

This past summer, the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society, Inc. obtained an old trapper cabin to exhibit at the Swan Valley Museum. Built by Fred Messerer in the late 1920s, early 1930s era, the cabin originally was located in the Elbow Lake Lookout area above Lindbergh Lake.

In 1975, hearing that it was going to be burned down, Sharon and Dan MacQuarrie went the Forest Service and asked to buy it.

Herb Styler, Alternate Ranger, agreed to sell the cabin to them for \$1.

Along with friends, the MacQuarries numbered the logs, dismantled the cabin, loaded the logs into two station wagons, drove to their home at Cygnet Lake where they reassembled the cabin on their land.

In June, 2014 the MacQuarries donated it to the USVHS. Dan Hamilton, Neil and Dixie Meyer, and Ronnie Matthew volunteered their time and equipment to move the cabin to the Swan Valley Museum and Heritage Site. Future plans are to restore the trapper cabin and display an exhibit of artifacts and photos depicting the early trapping history of the Swan Valley.