

March 16, 2010

To: Dr. Chuck Smythe
Ethnography Program Manager
Northeast Region National Park Service

From: Dr. Douglas Deur
Research Coordinator
PNW Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit
University of Washington

Re: Inner Cove Fish House, Otter Cove, Acadia National Park, Maine

This brief report is a follow-up to our telephone conversation in December, 2009, and your question about whether I have obtained information pertaining to the fish house located in the "inner cove" (inside the causeway), in Otter Cove (see Figure 1). I am responding to your request for a summary of ethnographic information collected to date regarding this structure from our ongoing study of the Otter Creek community. The information presented here has been distilled from a number of formal and informal interviews with current and former Otter Creek residents, including an interview with members of the Smith family recorded during a visit to the fish house in November 2009. While the topic of my research has little direct relationship to this individual structure, interviewees have often mentioned it in the course of formal interviews and informal communications related to our research. I provide this information in the hope that it will be of use to the National Park Service in its efforts to manage the Otter Cove portion of Acadia National Park.

Oral history interviews give some details regarding the origins of the current fish house, which was constructed by Steve Smith. Smith constructed the structure on the site of a defunct fish house that was built and used by Austin Walls. Mr. Walls is reported to have used a fish house at this site for roughly four decades prior to Smith's occupation of the site, principally for fishing but also as a base camp for hunting and other activities on the cove. Smith reports having secured permission from Walls to reoccupy the house site after it was abandoned. Steve Smith reports that the Walls structure was in such dilapidated condition that he opted to build a new structure on the footprint of Mr. Walls' building. The new structure is made in no small part of materials salvaged from demolished or remodeled buildings from locations around Mount Desert Island, which Mr. Smith was able to identify for me during our visit to the fish house in November of 2009 (see Figure 2). Smith and his family have retained items dating from Mr.



Figure 1: Steve Smith, with his daughter Caroline Smith, standing in front of the inner cove fish house, November 2009.

Walls' use of the site which contributes to a sense of connection with the past. These include a few of Mr. Walls' lobster buoys (which hang from the roofline of the new building, with Walls' license number of 9006 clearly visible) and the bow of a wooden boat that was used by Walls (sitting on the ground a short distance to the south of the fish house). Details of these features of the site are shown in Figures 3 and 4 of this report, respectively.

Austin Walls maintained a modest boat launching slip, essentially a narrow intertidal path cleared of rocks, on the shore immediately below the house site. This slip sits a short distance south of the former quarry wharf known locally as "Jimmy's Wharf," where stone wharf retaining structures persist and quarry bore holes can be seen in the waterfront bedrock. Smith and his family have continued to maintain the boat launching slip into the present day, so that a



Figure 2: The interior of the inner cove fish house, seen through the doorway, with woodstove, in November 2009. Especially in foul weather, the interior of this structure is used as a base of operations for fishing and lobstering activities by the Smith family, while during good weather the area just outside the door is used for these purposes. Most of the materials seen here are salvaged from buildings elsewhere on Mt. Desert Island.

narrow pathway, cleared of rocks, can be seen extending from the fish house into the intertidal zone. A footpath, leading to the fish house along what appears to be a pathway historically associated with the Hall quarry, has been kept clear of downed trees and branches by the Smith family. The Smith family has also selectively pruned a few trees - one cedar in particular - to improve natural sunlight to the structure, but in a manner that intentionally retains a visual buffer between the fish house and the causeway and Ocean Drive. For this reason, the fish house remains largely invisible when seen from Otter Cove. Historically, of course, fish houses were built with unimpeded views of the water and this concealment of the inner cove fish house was reported to represent a response to the viewshed concerns of Acadia National Park.

Mr. Smith and his daughter Caroline indicate that they use the inner cove fish house seasonally as a base of operations for intermittent lobstering and fishing from Otter Cove. While lobstering may provide a minor source of personal income on occasion, much of the fishing and lobstering appears to be for personal use. When engaging in this activity, they first launch their boat from the Otter Creek community boat launch, a short distance north of the fish house. This boat is then propelled to the fish house slip, where gear is loaded and unloaded as necessary to the fish house. The fish house is used as a base of operations for general maintenance of all the gear used by the family, as well as baiting and other tasks associated with particular lobstering and fishing trips.

Perhaps more than serving as a fish house, however, the shack also serves as a base for other, less utilitarian activities on the waterfront by some Otter Creek residents. Interviewees Denis Smith and Karen Zimmerman (Steve Smith's brother and sister-in-law) report visiting the fish house, and even staying the night there, intermittently, to enjoy the waterfront, to read, and to write. They sometimes walk there for recreational purposes, and Karen reports that she and other members of her family go there sometimes to do morning yoga roughly every three weeks. The frequency of these non-fishing uses of the fish house is difficult to ascertain, but unlike the seasonal use of the structure for fishing and lobstering these other uses occur throughout the year, but are more intermittent. A journal of sorts is kept in the fish house, to which visitors add entries when staying there. Karen Zimmerman made references to other uses of this fish house by "maybe a dozen to twenty" other Otter Creek residents, including members of families unrelated to the Smiths. These individuals are said to use the structure "to do stuff by the waterfront" such as picnics.

As reported in your report entitled, *Traditional Uses of Fish Houses in Otter Cove*, the construction of fish houses on land not owned by the fish house user appears to be a tradition of considerable time depth in this community and in other

portions of the Maine coast. The Smith family alludes to a time prior to J.D. Rockefeller's acquisition of the Otter Creek waterfront in the 1930s when similar arrangements, such as the provision of fish, created long-term connections between fish house owner and landowner at Otter Cove, but little specific information could be recalled regarding these relationships. Such arrangements do not seem to have been the norm here, as your own work suggests, with deeded lands being associated with the documented fish houses on the cove, but there is a perception by some individuals (including but not limited to the Smith family) that this practice occurred here.



Figure 3: One of Austin Walls' lobster buoys, with his license number – 9006 – on one side, hanging from the roofline of the inner cove fish house.



Figure 4: The bow of a boat reported to have been owned and used by Austin Walls, sitting a short distance south of the inner cove fish house.

Broader community values and opinions relating to this structure, and the waterfront generally, are worth noting here. A majority of the interviewees consulted to date for this project express interest in the outcomes of NPS decision-making regarding this inner cove fish house. While I did encounter occasional cynicism regarding Steve Smith's actions, which are seen by some as being politically motivated, I did not encounter a single individual hailing from this community in the course of my interviews who expressed support for the outright removal of the inner cove structure. Some interviewees, unrelated to the Smith family, expressed strong support for the retention of the structure and a desire to maintain continued access to the inner cove fish house for some of the recreational purposes described here. I suspect that the origins of these sentiments may be traced to other, only indirectly related aspects of the community's history. For some, the desire to see the structure persist seems to reflect a desire to see historical practices associated with lobstering and fishing continue, or minimally be commemorated, within the community in light of the decline of these industries and their associated lifeways. Some of these individuals note that they would like to see broader interpretation of small-scale commercial fishing and lobstering traditions within the park. For others, the retention of the fish house appears to have symbolic dimensions and seems to

reflect a desire to resist some of the influence of J.D. Rockefeller and the National Park Service – an effort spearheaded in no small part by Steve Smith.

Almost all Otter Creek residents consulted in the course of the ongoing study do seem to share a sense of concern regarding what is perceived as declining community ties to the waterfront. Some suggest that the community, with its strong lobstering and fishing heritage, is somewhat unique in being functionally landlocked by the park. A number of individuals noted that the forest succession on former Otter Cove farmlands, now managed by the NPS, has visually separated the community from the waterfront within their memory. A small number mentioned that the absence of water views has undermined property values and options for development relative to other portions of Mt. Desert Island. The establishment of the community boat slip has provided easy boat access to certain Otter Creek residents, but a large proportion of those individuals that I contacted from the community still express a desire for greater visual and functional connections between the community and the waterfront. The relationship between residents' sentiment regarding the inner cove structure and such issues as viewshed management may seem tangential, but it is my tentative conclusion that there are connections between these themes due to the relatively unique history of this cove.

Note: This report was prepared in January, 2010, and was subsequently revised after receiving comments from the NER Ethnography Program Manager in March, 2010, prior to submission to the park.