

Mike's Guiding Warmth

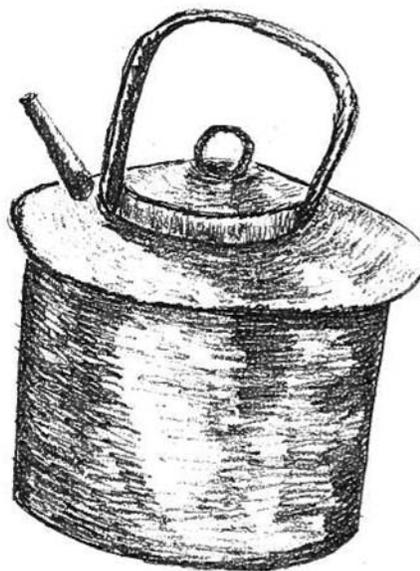
By Linda Leckie

I hear the chop of an axe a little way through the trees. We are going to boil up. The sweet oriental scent of tea and the feel of bread between my teeth sweeps over me like a dizziness. The fire leaps at the base of a big spruce and we whisk snow from our moccasins and leggings as we sink before it like worshippers. (Merrick, 1933, p. 159)

Mike Elrick knew how to stay warm. He loved to wrap himself from head to toe in wool; I picture Mike as a wool-clad moccasin-footed snow walker twisting into lampwick harnesses with his trail axe looped through his belt. Mike looked forward to winter and welcomed a drop in the mercury — the lower the better! He loved the physical work of life on the winter trail and never stopped moving long enough to get cold. If he felt chilled he would simply quicken his pace, add another layer of his beloved wool or stop for a “boil up.”

Mike was always ready for a hot drink; holding a tin cup full of tea or a large steaming mug of “good” coffee in his hands provided much bodily warmth. One cold February night as we stood by the water hole watching the stars come out, Mike looked up at the Big Dipper and quoted Bert Blake, the trapper in the book *True North*: “I wish’t she was full of tea” (Merrick, 1933, p. 11). The act of making and preparing the morning java or the afternoon “high tea” heated Mike’s heart and soul. I can hear the famous holler letting every sleepy head in camp know that the first of several pots of coffee was ready and I can see his special little teapot whistling on the wood stove.

Mike had a self-professed devotion to a wood fire and he shared his spiritual connection to wood openly with others. One of Mike’s favourite childhood memories was sitting on the ledge of an open fireplace after a bath on a cold winter’s evening. While the logs crackled Mike and his brothers would toast their pyjamas on the screen before bedtime. Mike said that what he loved most about the winter



tent was the ability to hang a clothesline and let the heat from the woodstove dry out damp garments. This was his way of reliving a fond childhood memory.

Mike also loved the physical act of working with wood. He once told me how moved he was reading the book, *Paddle My Own Canoe*, that shares the life story of Algonquin Park guide Esther Keyser. Like Esther’s husband Joe, Mike loved to saw, chop, split and stack wood. Tears welled up in both of our eyes as we remembered the passage where Joe, weakened with congestive heart disease, asks Esther to bring him his axe. Despite having to rest often to catch his breath, Joe needed to split kindling; it was his way of saying goodbye to his life in the woods.

In addition to keeping himself warm, Mike was passionate about creating and sharing that warmth with others. He provided a cozy loving home heated with wood for his family, he kindled all of his friendships with deep affection and anyone who met him would instantly feel the warmth radiating from his signature smile. He warmed the hearts and minds of educators with his published writings that shared his passion for teaching

outdoor and environmental education. His commitment to traditional camping principles and philosophies created an endearing glow in the memories of his students. Mike loved a campfire and the mysterious way it brought people together to circle around the dancing flames to share in the warmth and light.

On the first day of a six-day Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) winter snowshoe ramble through Algonquin Park, I overheard Mike telling his students about the virtues of wood as a heat source and how it would keep them warm on this trip in four ways. The obvious three ways, Mike told them, were that the fire would heat the tent, dry their clothing and enable them to have hot food and drinks. The fourth way was that the physical work required to collect, saw and split the wood would create an inner warmth. To Mike, the educational value of the traditional winter travel experience was first and foremost the physical; other dimensions of a participant's being would come out and be known to them as a result of the physical experience. This was Mike's story and now it could be the students' story too.

To Mike, making a home in the winter woods with the proper skills, equipment and frame of mind was a wonderful experience. Living in a wall tent enabled his students to socialize with their tent mates; Mike often called it the best and most effective "floating classroom" he ever taught in. The experience was about forming relationships and making connections to self, each other and the land. On the winter trip the students hauled their toboggans upstream. Along the way they learned the skills to be safe and comfortable. At the source they marvelled at the magic of the natural world. They returned with a renewed sense of purpose and self. Mike came to know himself in relation to a place and he shared that important way of knowing with his students.

Mike referred to himself as a "true dweller of place." He belonged in nature. He was not a visitor or a tourist and he did not tread lightly — he let the land touch him in return. He appreciated the fresh smell of a balsam

floor, the warming glow of the tent stove, and the superior qualities of moose and elk hide moccasins. These examples of relatedness demanded that he engage directly with the Algonquin landscape. When Mike got his new Egyptian cotton anorak he delighted in saying "I realize that I am fully biodegradable and if I died on the trail this would be my kind of no trace camping."

When Mike returned to his winter tent at sundown with a stick of dry tamarack, he saw this experience as being "of a spiritual nature." As a true dweller of place he was able to see the land with elements of sacredness. This is one of Mike's lasting legacies. He felt that not having a sacred place was the missing link in effective teaching for the environment. Mike shared his love for a place with others to inspire them to find their sacred place in nature. The fires of environmental education will burn brightly towards hopeful solutions and new beginnings when we teach and learn from the perspective of what we know about ourselves in relation to the places we love and call home.

Au Large! When I hear that word . . . I see the glow of firelight dancing through the woods and I smell the soothing odour of balsam-boughs piled deep for a woodland bed" (Van Dyke cited in Keyser, 2003, p. 236).

Au Large, Mike.

References

Keyser, Esther and John. (2003). *Paddle My Own Canoe*. Whitney, ON: Friends of Algonquin Park.

Merrick, Elliot. (1933). *True North*. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons.

Linda Leckie was one of Mike's many kindred spirits of the winter trail. Every time she looks up at the Big Dipper she wishes it was full of tea and that her friend was beside her at the water hole getting a few more miles out of that joke.