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Ice House Cabin

A bittersweet return to beautiful memories

Marcyn Del Clements



ISLIP MY GOLDEN AGE PASSPORT ONTO THE DASH, POP OPEN THE tailgate of my new blue Honda Fit, and sit down to lace up my boots. Throwing my arms through the straps of my blue day pack, which holds my Camelbak (NO! Not cigarettes . . . a nifty hydration system consisting of a bag for water and a hose and nozzle with which to suck it in), I grab my trekking poles and start walking into Ice House Canyon to visit the site of our cousin's cabin.

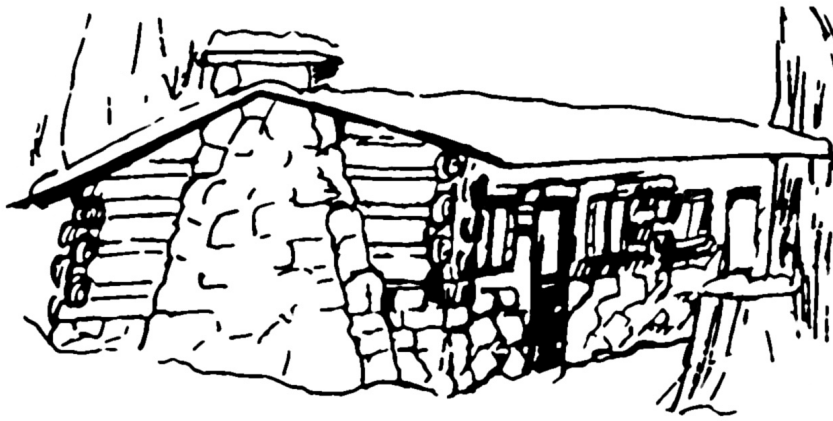
I am slower these days. But it's a bright, lovely day in the mountains and there's no hurry. I take a long pull from my Camel, walking off the blacktop onto the dirt access road.

There are fewer butterflies now that the season's advanced, but I do see the admiral floating up around the oak limbs at the trailhead. I hear a woodpecker and follow the call around and around a copse of small oaks before I see him, the fiery head and striped back of the Nuttall's.

Farther up the path, I find the wallflowers mostly shot, but a sturdy stand of penstemon waves its scarlet faces in a slight breeze. A tiger swallowtail floats slowly above me; I only see its shadow on the ground. Before I know it, I've reached the cutoff trail that takes off straight down to the creek and the cabin site beyond. It's been more than 30 years since I took my girls here one summer, but starting down this thin trail brings back memories:

The girls are 10 and 12 this year. They can carry their own backpacks, sleeping bags, and jammies. They also have a leash in hand with Molly and Eby, who are behaving fairly well for two rambunctious black labs. Molly is Ebenezer's mother, and he always stays close to her. He's been her constant companion since we sold all the other puppies and kept him. He was the odd one, with a missing bone in one toe, and a bump on his head. The girls named him Ebenezer Scrooge, or Eby for short, as the litter was born in December. He is a purebred as is his champion mother, Molly's Black Gold. But right now they act like two hybrid ratters and the sounds and smells of the woods excite them. At the cutoff trail, the girls take the dogs off their leashes and they springbok down the cut to the streambed. By the time we reach them, Molly is standing in the middle of the stream, biting the water plume as it rooster tails off the rocks, and Eby is lying belly down in the pool drinking.

Rock foundation walls and the chimney are the only parts of the beloved Ice House Cabin that still stand. Ice House Creek is just behind it. MARCYN DEL CLEMENTS



The cabin as it looked in 1973, sketched by the author's cousin. ALISON FULLER

I'M GLAD I BROUGHT THE TREKKING POLES. THEY HELP EASE THE stress on my knees as I descend the cutoff trail. At the stream, I balance myself with the poles over the log crossing. On the other side, there is no longer a stone stairway, but the cabin ruins are through the trees. I stand on the cement platform that had been the patio and look around. The rock walls, as well as the rock chimney, still stand on what had been the cabin's foundation. All else has vanished. The Thunder Mountain Fire in 1980 destroyed most of the cabins in Ice House. There is blue graffiti scrawled across the boulders and trash everywhere. I put down my pack, pull out a plastic bag and start to fill it: broken bottles, plastic containers, pop tops, a perfectly good T-shirt tie-died by the sun, Styrofoam cups, Trojan wrappers, soup packets, empty tuna cans. Plastic water bottles litter the duff, one half full. I empty the water on a sapling cedar and crush the bottle with my boot. Many cedars survived the fire, which is good for the Nelson's hairstreak, a diminutive butterfly associated with them. Some glass pieces are flat, and thinking they may have been from the windows, I leave them, tucked under old pine needles.

There is a fire ring inside the foundation, where the kitchen had been. My gorge rises. Putting the trash bag aside, I snatch blackened branches out of the pit and fling them in every direction into the woods. Then, one by one, bending my knees to protect my back, I haul out the rocks of the fire pit that had been taken from the cabin walls. Carefully, I place them back. Soon they ring the waist-high walls, which are now one rock higher. There is a red rock, heart-shaped; I place it on the side of the chimney, where the mantle would have been. My hands are black so I squeeze a little water from my Camelbak

over them to rinse as a young Anna's hummer buzzes up to me and checks out my flowered shorts before deciding the rest of me is not nectar-able.

The girls and I splash through the stream in our zorries, and squish on up the stone steps to the cabin. Putting down our packs, I fish out the key to the door. Our cousins had brought us an extra key when we moved into our new house in the foothills and asked us if we would please go up as often as we could and stay at their cabin as long as we could. Vandals plagued them, and our presence might deter that activity. They had even installed a steel entry door to discourage vandalism.

When the dogs realize we abandoned them, they run up the path to find us, shaking a waterfall all over our packs and us.

It is the summer of ladybugs, I remember. They are everywhere along the streambed, clumped on ash leaves and columbine, crowded onto willow branches and ferns. When the girls and I get home, we tell Dad, and he goes back with us to see it, too. We take a jar with us and collect some for our roses.

Now there is a straggling columbine leaning over the creek, and the only bugs are the pesky gnats that hover in front of my face and try to get into my



*At the base of an ancient cedar tree, a seedling sprouts. Many of these huge incense cedars (*Calocedrus decurrens*) survived the fire that destroyed the cabins.* MARCYN DEL CLEMENTS

eyes, ears, or mouth. I swish them away and blot the sweat on my forehead. It is time to go back.

Tying the trash bags to the bottom of my day pack, I shimmy into the straps and take another long pull of water, grateful that I remembered to put ice cubes into the bag before I left the house this morning. I do miss not being able to drink the cold water right from the creek. In the 1970s, we never had to worry about drinking untreated water. Not anywhere in the Transverse Range, certainly not in the High Sierras where my husband and I backpacked early in our marriage. We would clip a Sierra cup to our belts and when we climbed past one of those deliciously cold springs that cascaded down the mountain and splashed across the trail, we could just dip our cups into the rill and drink all we wanted.

Snapping the hip strap of my small pack, I cross the stream a little lower down from the logs, across a couple of dry boulders, watching to avoid the nettles and poison oak. Up canyon, the dipper calls. They have done well this year, nesting under a waterfall in June. With the bulging trash bags flapping me in the butt, I climb back up to the main trail.

When their daughter was young, our cousins had gone to France for a year. They brought us back a small blue and white pitcher from the Alsace-Lorraine region where they had lived. But they also brought back something else, leaving it in the cabin for summer days like this. After we go to the creek to get water for dinner, after we watch the dipper drop into the pool and “swim” underwater, we climb back up the slate steps and, inside the cabin now, the girls reach into the cubby beside the fireplace and bring out Monopoly, in French. They set out the game pieces and parcel out the francs, and we settle down to play as the light filters through the windows on this pine-scented lazy afternoon. The game goes on for hours, and this day seems never to end.

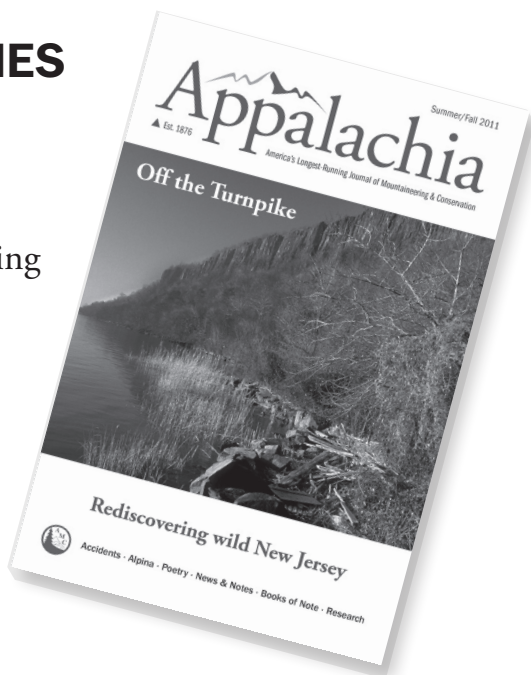
MARCYN DEL CLEMENTS lives in Claremont, California, with her husband, Richard. Sometimes, she hikes up into Ice House Canyon and sleeps at the cabin site, remembering. She is a frequent contributor to *Appalachia*.

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