

An  
Otter Creek  
Winter

VOLUME II



as told by  
Dennis L. Smith



Hauling logs for pulpwood and ice fishing with homemade tip-ups—life in the village of Otter Creek has changed some since Dennis Smith’s childhood. Some things remain the same, however. Family ties and a sense of place are as strong today as they were then.

Take a short visit to the Otter Creek of the 1950s, in winter.

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# An Otter Creek Winter

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as told by Dennis L. Smith  
and written by  
Karen O. Zimmermann

Illustrated by  
Karen O. Zimmermann

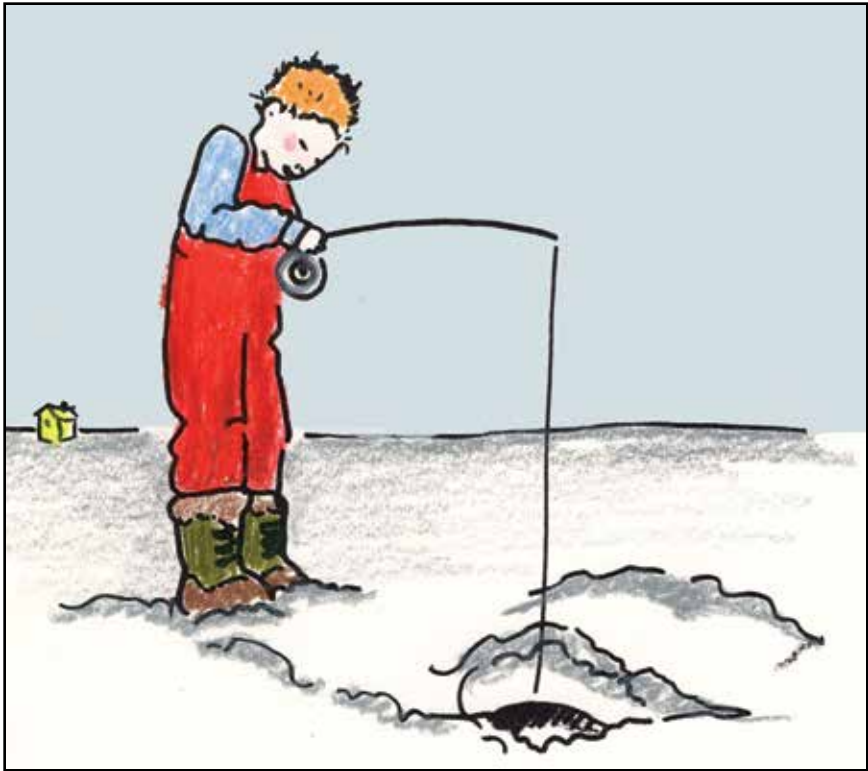
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Otter Creek, Maine  
Capital of the World and Center of the Universe

For all those who were born in  
Otter Creek, raised here, lived here,  
died here, still live here, or have  
some connection to the  
village of Otter Creek.

This means you.



## -Ice Fishing-

“There was ice beneath me, and it was clear as glass. I could see all the way to the bottom of Jordan Pond.” Dennis Smith is talking about a day when he was twelve years old.

“Twelve?” I ask. “How did you get to Jordan Pond from Otter Creek?” He said he had hitch-hiked, and was looking for Donald Bryant who lived in a nearby village. Dennis had heard Donald was fishing and wanted to talk to him. When he got to Jordan he walked across the black ice hoping to find out how the fishing had been.





“That’s why I know what I know about fishing,” Dennis says, “I am always interested in hearing people’s stories about fishing.” He did not get Donald’s story that day, however.

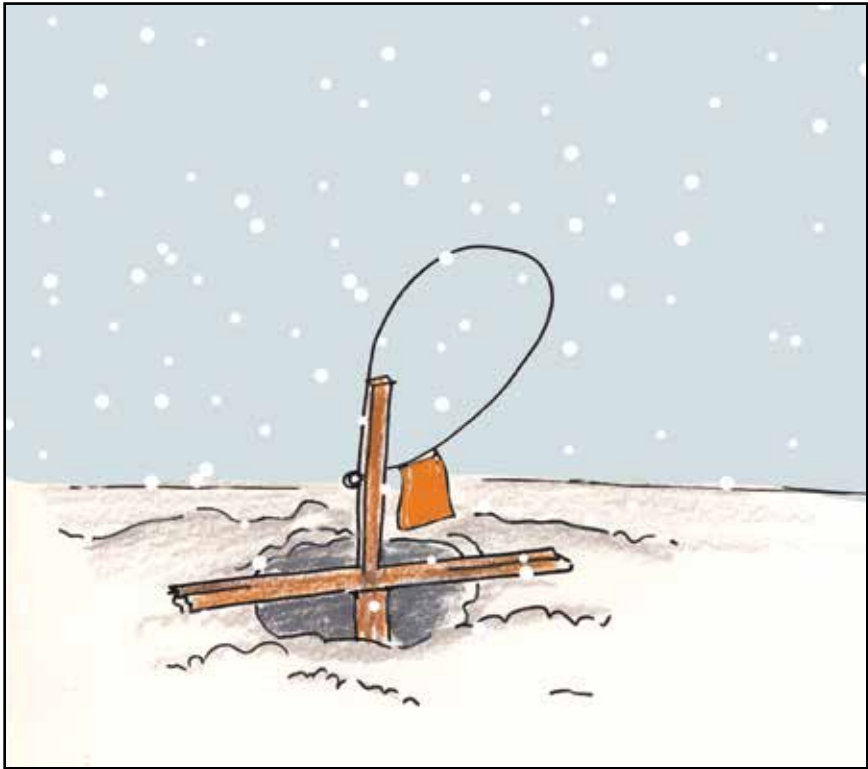
“I knew the ice was safe, there must have been a foot and a half of it, but it was invisible. It was scary. I could see the bottom, and I felt like I was walking on glass.” He kept on going though, and step by reluctant step he headed up the pond to the cove. When he got there, there was no sign of Donald. It was a cold, sunny day, and less than twenty degrees out, but a wind from the north made it too bitter for Donald to be fishing. Not too bitter for a young boy



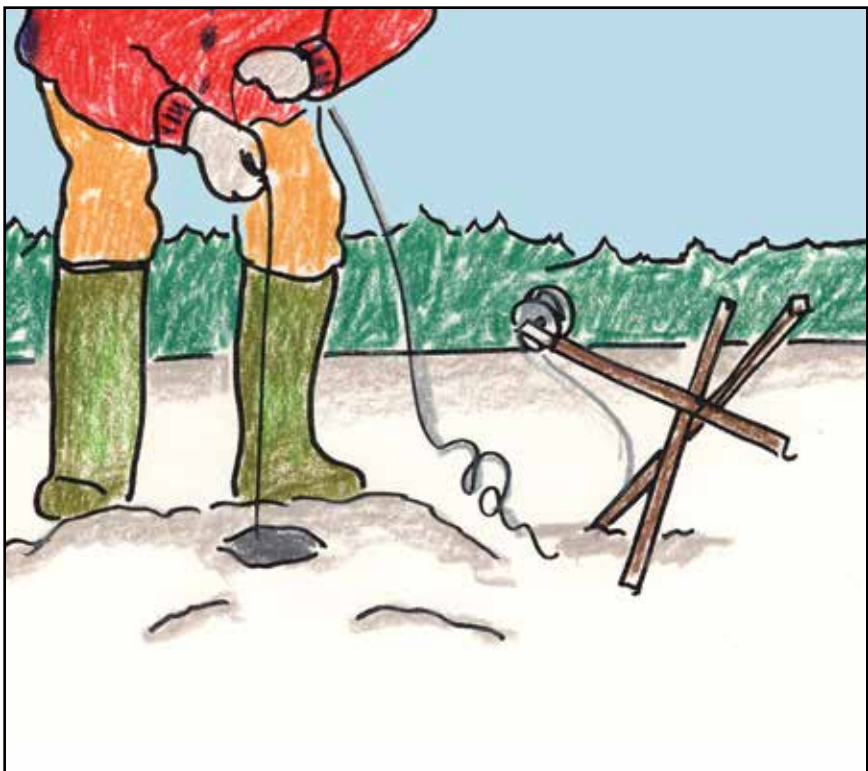
who had already developed a life-long interest in fishing, though. It was an interest that went beyond just catching fish. He wanted to understand fish populations, the impact of stocking and weather, and why the fish would bite under some circumstances and not under others.

Dennis Smith, life-long resident of Otter Creek, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, still walks on the ice and asks every fisherman he sees for information. He has introduced his children and grandchildren to ice fishing, and every year there is a new ice fishing story.

These stories span the years and go back to when he and



his brother Stephen would spend every day of February vacation ice fishing. Their father would drop them off at 7AM before he went to work, and they stayed there until he picked them up again. “It was a social thing, just as it is now,” Dennis says. “We never really got much in the way of fish.” They chose Nick’s Cove on Eagle Lake to fish, as did Ans Davis, also from Otter Creek. Ans called Steve “Pee-wee,” and he called Artie Young, another boy on February break, “Burnt Valve,” because he had a stutter. Nicknames were common when Dennis was growing up, and one of his was “Denise,” which his sister Liz still calls him.



“We never caught any fish on Eagle Lake,” Dennis says, “but we still thought we were pretty good. We were persistent and consistent, that’s about it.”

Another year Dennis and his brother were fishing at Beech Hill Pond. There was a fishing derby that day, and Steve got a flag. Getting a flag is when a fish grabs the bait attached to the tip-up, releasing a catch which sends a bright orange-red flag bobbing into the air. Steve pulled his line in, and they saw a big togue through the hole in the ice. The togue swam off, pulling out more line. Seventy-five yards away it swam around another fisherman’s line, setting off his tip-up. That fisherman pulled in his line, grabbed





Steve's line, and hauled up the fish. The fisherman was not from the area, and no one knew who he was. He got a really nice togue, but did not make any friends, and wisely never came back to fish again.

Dennis ice fished every winter. His grandfather made home-made tip-ups for him, and he used an ash pack basket his dad had. Pack baskets are a traditional way to haul an ice fisherman's gear—tip-ups, an ax, and a snack—and he longed for one of his own. He was a teenager before he finally got one. His dad told him the pack he had been using was borrowed from a cousin, and had to be given back. Dennis saved money selling pulpwood and bought his



first ash backpack at Jellison's Five and Ten in Bar Harbor. It lasted close to twenty years. He coated his next pack with epoxy resin, protecting it from breaking. He still uses that second pack, over forty years later.

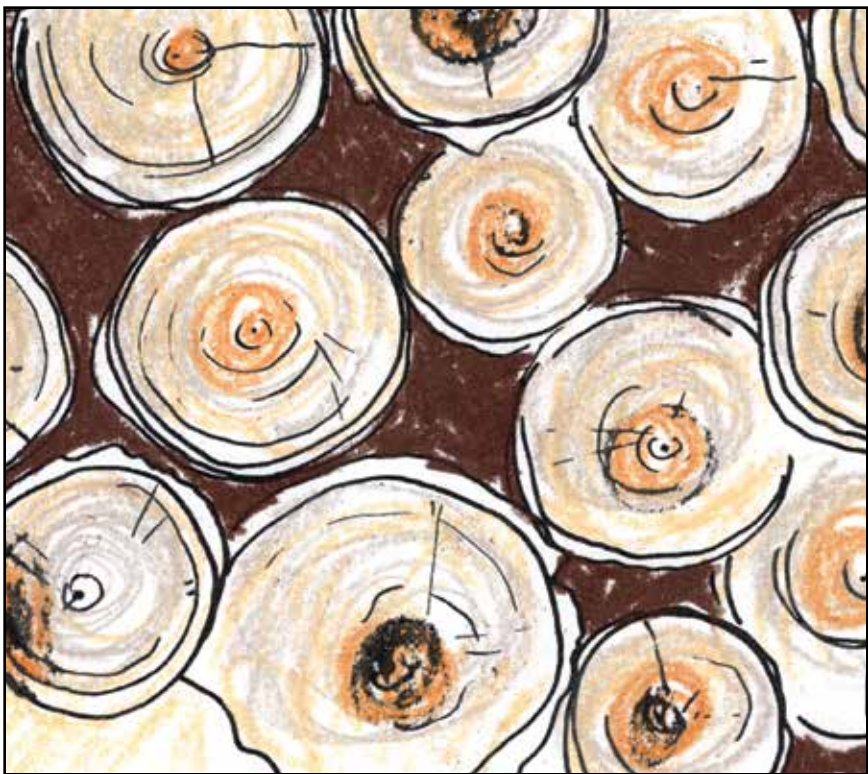
Dennis was jigging in front of the family camp on Toddy Pond one winter. Jigging is using a short handheld rod with a lure. Every fisherman has his own technique, but it is usually a jerky up and down motion, with a short rest in between. Dennis likes to share this description of fishing, "It is a jerk on one end of a line waiting for a jerk on the other." He had been jigging for a while and was getting cold when Billy Carey, his aunt's boyfriend, came out to say hi.



Billy was not a fisherman and had never ice fished.

Dennis said “Bill, I am going in to go get warm, will you take the jig pole for a few minutes?” Dennis had not gone five feet before Billy pulled in an eighteen-inch salmon. Billy ice fished every year after that.

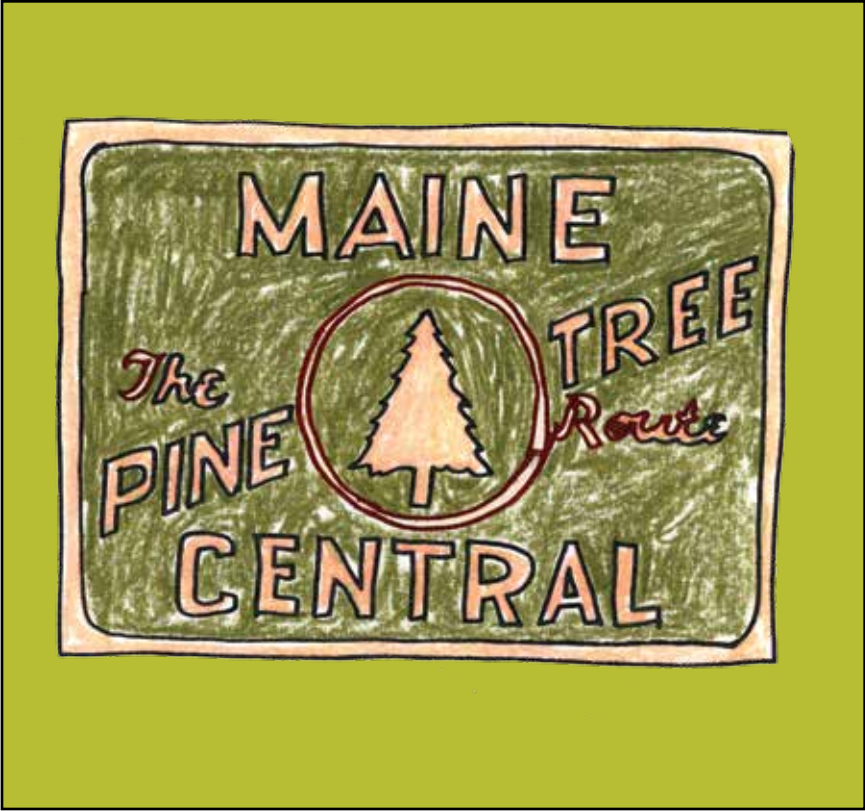
It wouldn't be winter without ice fishing, and Dennis still heads into camp for a warm-up. Last time he did this I pulled up a twenty-five-inch togue. If you go fishing with Dennis, you just might want to suggest he go inside and get warm.



-Pulpwood-

“Ash, red maple, quaking aspen,” he names each tree we pass. It is a cold winter day, and we are hiking a snowy woods road. The leaves are long gone, and it is the bark that tells him what tree it is.

I have just finished a year-long program to be a Maine Master Naturalist and tree identification was part of the course, but he still gets more than I. “How do you know them all?” I ask. “Who taught you?”





Dennis Smith, sixth generation Otter Creeker, replies, “We had to know them. We burned wood for heat, and that meant knowing what wood burns best.”

Dennis’ grandfather Lawrence, “Gramp,” cut wood for the family’s heat, and Dennis went with him whenever he could. “Ash burns hot and long. Spruce is sparky and makes a great bonfire, but burns too fast to be used for heat or cooking,” Dennis tells me.

Dennis also needed to know wood because he sold pulpwood to the St. Regis Paper Company. St. Regis was a papermill in Bucksport, and they had trains that would collect wood from

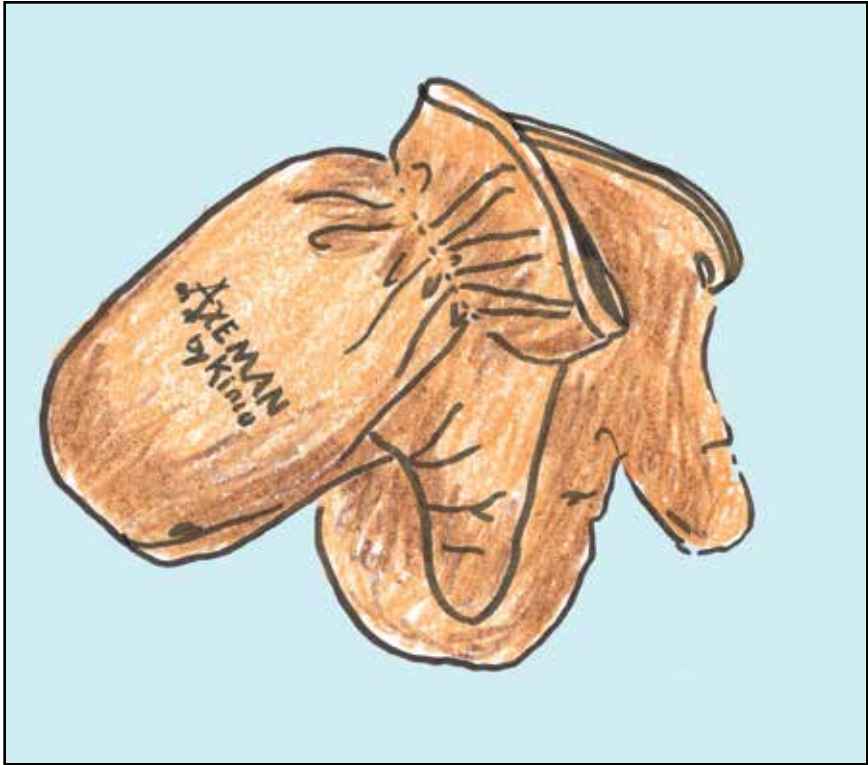
throughout the state. The wood they bought was converted to pulp to make paper. One train came through Ellsworth, and Dennis would call the St. Regis rep to meet him when he had a full truckload of wood.

There were several locations in Otter Creek with a lot of deadwood—The Meadow, which is the firepond by the driveway to his daughter Penny’s house, and a tract behind the Trenholm property, what is now the Brown Family Farm. Neighbors would also tell them about blowdowns they could have. “Working the Trenholm property was the hardest,” Dennis recalls. “We worked our butts off. We had to haul the logs a long way. But, there were a lot. Someone had logged it

and left the smaller tops behind.” Whoever had cut the logs got word to Dennis’ father, who told Dennis he could have the tops if he wanted.

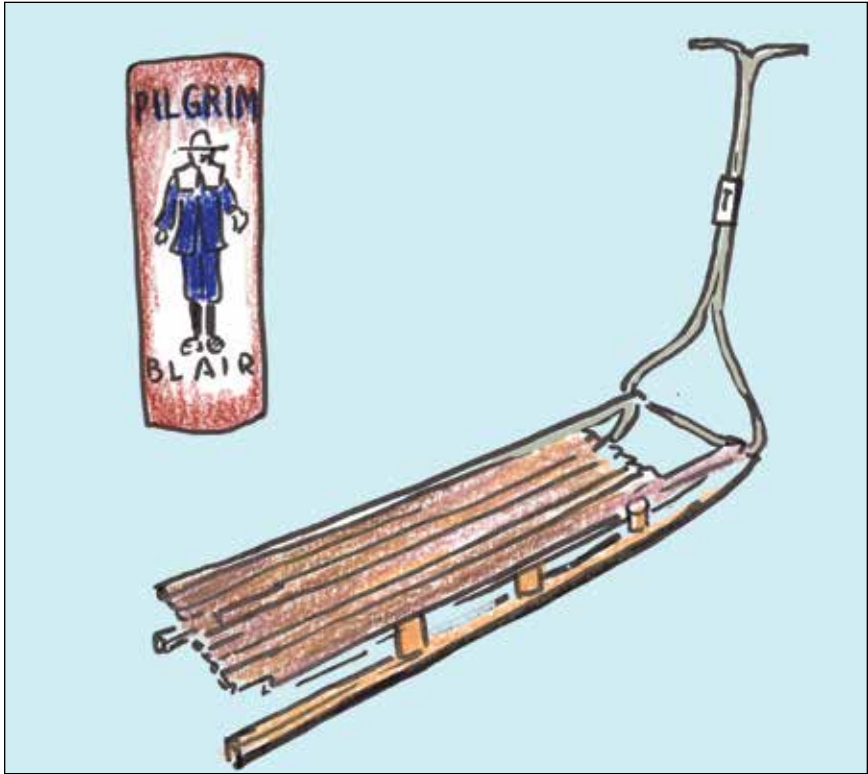
Dennis’ brother Stephen helped haul the logs out. At first they used a handsaw, but one afternoon their grandfather handed Dennis his chainsaw and said “Go for it.” Dennis was twelve, his brother was eight. No eye protectors, ear plugs, or safety guards. Things were different then.

St. Regis wanted red spruce for pulpwood. They wanted pieces 50” long. Dennis would cut the logs up, and his brother would drag them out of the woods. Sometimes the two of them carried the logs out on their shoulders. It was



slow work to get enough to fill a truck, and it took them about two weeks of constant effort before and after school and on weekends. Their grandfather would scout the woods and tell them where there were fallen trees for them to harvest. When they had about a cord and a half, Gramp would borrow a truck from the estate he worked for. “Gramp worked for the Dunhams in Seal Harbor,” Dennis said. “This was winter, so they probably never even knew we used the truck.”

Dennis would call the St. Regis rep to arrange a time to meet, and his grandfather would drive them to the railroad tracks in Ellsworth. There the wood was measured, and they were



handed cash, as simple as that. Their wood was dumped into a train car that held thirty to forty cords, so there were other woodsmen with truckloads of pulpwood at the tracks, too. Dennis and Stephen were paid \$25.00 a truckload, and they split it fifty-fifty. They spent long hours in the woods, and after many days and weekends of hauling logs, there was some wear and tear showing on Gramps' sled.

Dennis' grandfather had been following their efforts and known this would happen. He built a brand new, steel-handled hauling sled with steel runners. He never mentioned he was working on it until it was ready, and then he presented it to Dennis. "It was a nice sled," Dennis says with his typical

understatement. He is a man who never saves anything, but he has that sled to this day.

When Dennis was working in the woods, he wore loose green woolen pants tied tightly with a leather belt. Waffle patterned long johns were his bottom layer in those years, a big improvement over the newspaper linings that had kept him warm when he was younger. He had big leather mittens which he calls “chopper mittens.” A life time later, Dennis still wears chopper mittens, though not the same pair.

Wood is still a big part of his life, and he has led tree ID walks near his home. There is a one-mile stretch with over twenty



different species. He only does this when there are no leaves, and he likes to recite bits of an old poem about firewood.

“Did you know this poem when you were a kid?” I ask. He did not, but it struck a chord. If you are eating breakfast with Dennis, be sure to ask him about the bread. His usual response is “Delicious, must have been baked with hawthorn.”



## The Firewood Poem

Beechwood fires are bright and clear  
If the logs are kept a year,  
Chestnut's only good they say,  
If for logs 'tis laid away.  
Make a fire of elder tree,  
Death within your house will be;  
But ash new or ash old,  
Is fit for a queen with crown of gold.

Birch and fir logs burn too fast  
Blaze up bright and do not last,  
it is by the Irish said  
Hawthorn bakes the sweetest bread.  
Elm wood burns like churchyard mould,  
E'en the very flames are cold  
But ash green or ash brown  
Is fit for a queen with golden crown.

Poplar gives a bitter smoke,  
Fills your eyes and makes you choke,  
Apple wood will scent your room  
Pear wood smells like flowers in bloom  
Oaken logs, if dry and old  
keep away the winter's cold  
But ash wet or ash dry  
a king shall warm his slippers by.

Traditional, revised and popularized by Celia Congreve in 1930



Dennis Smith with the log sled his grandfather made for him. Dennis still sells wood, but these days it is to campers, and he no longer hauls it out of the woods.

# The Story of Otter Creek

For six thousand years things were pretty predictable in Otter Creek. Every summer ancestors of the Wabanaki tribe would hunt, fish, gather berries, harvest shellfish along the waterfront, and drink from the springs of fresh water.

In 1604 Samuel Champlain brought his boat into the creek for repairs, and Otter Creek entered written history. Both the French and English claimed the land, and while they disputed, smugglers used the cove. In 1794 the land was divided between Eden (now Bar Harbor) and Mount Desert.

The early settlers—families named Walls, Bracy, Davis, Richardson, and Smith—are the ancestors of many of today's residents. Fish houses were built, and the waterfront was a place of work and gathering.

In 1910, Otter Creek had ninety-seven residents, most of them from these families.

From 1871 to 1881 Cyrus Hall quarried here, and remains of his granite wharves still exist.

Grover Avenue (formerly Old County Road) was once the main street, and a wooden bridge connected the east and west sides of Otter Creek. There were two wooden bridges before Acadia National Park built the current causeway, which effectively blocked use of the inner creek.

Fishing, quarrying, and farming are replaced with other trades, but ask any native and you'll find they still gather mussels, go smelting, or have a residential lobster license and a spot for vegetables, keeping the connection to their ancestors alive.

# Dennis L. Smith and Karen O. Zimmermann

Dennis Smith was born in Otter Creek and had the misfortune to leave while attending school. He came back in his early twenties and has helped all his children to acquire homes here, too. He still owns the house his father Larry renovated and the barn his great-great grandparents Julius and Martha Smith built.

Karen Zimmermann has lived in Otter Creek for decades and cannot imagine living anywhere else.





An Otter Creek Winter  
Ice Fishing and Cutting Wood



as told by Dennis L. Smith  
and written by  
Karen O. Zimmermann

These reminiscences of winters  
past by Dennis Smith reveal a less  
technological time and a sense  
of village life in the 1950s.

Otter Creek, Maine