Three Lakes Shelter's Historic Restoration

By Gina Esposito, Archaeologist, Tongass National Forest

This past fall Petersburg Ranger District employees and a Passport in Time volunteer helped archaeologists Jane Smith and Gina Esposito dismantle and rebuild the historic Three Lakes Shelter on Mitkof Island, 14 miles southeast of Petersburg. The Adirondack style shelter was originally built in 1938 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, a program created in 1933 as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal. It is accessible via the Three Lakes Loop Trail system and consists of a pole frame that is enclosed on three sides with cedar shakes. Because of its age and association with the CCC, the Three Lakes Shelter is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Three Lakes Shelter is rebuilt using both old and new components.

Even though the shelter was well built of sturdy Alaska yellow cedar, it had fallen into disrepair and was beginning to deteriorate after almost 70 years on the Tongass. Many of the rafters were rotting, and the large posts that made up the base of the structure were also rotting due to poor drainage of the ground below. The cedar shakes used for the roof and walls were also beginning to rot and some people were even starting to use them for firewood, not realizing the historic significance of the site.

We realized that to protect the site from any more damage, and to maintain its historic integrity, we needed to replace the deteriorated components with replica materials gathered from the site area just as the CCC had done during initial construction. Jane submitted the Three Lakes Shelter Restoration project to the Petersburg-Wrangell Resource Advisory Committee, which supports many local community projects, and they thankfully selected it and provided the funding. But two archaeologists could not rebuild the shelter alone. We also recruited the help of many other Petersburg District and forest supervisor's office employees, as well as a fellow archaeologist from the Chugach National Forest, the district's Youth Conservation Corps, and PIT volunteer Scott Leary, a firefighter who traveled all the way from New York to assist with the many tasks needed to accomplish this fun and complex project.

Dismantling was finished surprisingly fast, despite having to carefully label each component to make sure they ended up in their original location. A helicopter flew in 300 lbs. of gravel so that we could put in a pad which would help with drainage and keep the new components set onto the ground rot free. We got our share of Petersburg fall weather, too, with many days of rain, wind, and dropping temperatures. But in three weeks, the shelter came together. For the base of the structure, we used heavy cedar posts and beams cut from the surrounding forest and dragged them into place using log carrier tools. While some of us put the base together, others set out to select and bark-strip cedar saplings to be used as rafters and battens. We hammered and drilled, carved and sawed, and slowly built back up the shelter's frame in its replica form. The last phase included replacing the three walls and roof with beautiful red cedar shakes made from trees on Prince of Wales Island. As more and more shakes were added, we had a sturdy, covered place to get a break from the rain and eat our lunch during that last week.

This project was truly a group effort, and we couldn't have done it without the help of our fellow employees, our PIT volunteer, and the support of the Petersburg Ranger District. We learned a lot, helped preserve an historic site that the public can use for many more years to come, and we had a great time doing it!

The completed shelter, 2006. Photos by Gina Esposito.