

# Robert Marek: Trailbuilder, Philosopher

By Teresa Haugh, Editor

This summer I was fortunate to be able to join John Neary, Wilderness Field Manager, Admiralty Island National Monument and Juneau Ranger District, on a field trip to visit the Southeast Alaska Guidance Association (SAGA) crew at Mole Harbor. This location on Admiralty Island is famous as the homestead of Alan Hasselborg, the original “bear man of Admiralty” and the subject of a biography written by John Howe.

The crew was funded through an Economic Recovery Act grant to rebuild sections of the cross-Admiralty canoe route, which is a National Historic Register-listed series of trails and shelters that stretches all the way from Mole Harbor to Angoon. The SAGA crew’s work began a few hundred yards beyond the shelter in the photo on the right.

As I hiked up the trail, following the sounds of hammers and saws, I was stopped by a stream and a small pool that intersected the trail. There, I met Forest Service employee Robert Marek. He was building a set of stairs across the stream and up the bank on the other side to provide safe portage for hikers and their canoes. He was busy swinging an ax, notching logs, taking measurements, and philosophizing about the wilderness, the trail system, and working for the U.S. Forest Service.

I soon learned that Marek was overseeing not one, but three SAGA crews, as well as one Forest Service crew working on trails and cabins on Admiralty. With two months still to go before the summer was over, Marek had already made 52 float plane trips from Juneau, to and around the island. “It’s a tremendous work load,” Marek said, “because the logistics are just mindboggling. I can schedule flights, but the weather dethrones them.”



Robert Marek decides where to place a notch.

Like the rest of the crews in the wilderness, Marek was working without the aid of power tools. “I’m spiking these runners to the sill logs,” he said. “You have to Lincoln-log it, but you still want to use spikes. I pre-drill it (with a hand tool) so it’s not so difficult. I use 12-inch galvanized spikes in lieu of pieces of rebar, which has burrs on the end.”



Shelter at Mole Harbor

I admired Marek’s work while he talked his career. He didn’t slow down—he would soon be off to his next location. “I don’t like to wear gloves when I work,” he said. “I like to feel the product I’m working with. Since these stairs have a 30% slope in a short span, I’m making nine-inch steps.”

He described his résumé as “all over the map.” In his first volunteer job with the Forest Service in 1988, he worked on the Mill Creek Fish Ladder at Virginia Lake in Wrangell. He came back as a paid assistant the next summer and continued building fish ladders through the early ‘90s. He eventually got a permanent job with the National Park Service to construct trails. In all, he has spent 20 years doing this type of work.

In Tucson, Arizona, Marek did more stonework than woodwork. He was proud of the masonry work he did in Yosemite National Park, which is world-renowned not only for its natural beauty but for the rock work that’s done there. He said he felt privileged to leave his thumbprint among all the other masons who have worked at Yosemite over the years. He prefers stones for trails because of their longevity, and lamented that most of the woodwork in Southeast Alaska has a lifespan of about a dozen years. He said, “I can look at stonework built eons ago and know who built it. Craftsmen develop trademarks on their work. I’m sure

it's the same with totem carvers. It's a human trait that we all have to want to take ownership in what we do. We want to be able to say, 'that is my style.' And I capitalize on that when I'm working with a crew. It's what motivates us to do a good job. When someone is just working for a paycheck, their work is sloppy."

Trail building seems to be an unusual career for someone who graduated with a finance and accounting degree. But like the young adults he now supervises, Marek joined an SCA program right out of college, working with the Park Service as a wildland firefighter. He said the work is much more satisfying than sitting in front of a computer.

Working on the Tongass National Forest presents its own challenges, Marek said. "You don't have a soil type here that is like anything in the Lower 48. You have to be cognizant of what you are using for materials. Down south, rocks and gravel are a lot more attainable. You don't have to be as concerned about the root mat and hanging on to what you've got and not digging too deep. The Tongass is one of the most difficult places to build a trail. The environment doesn't lend itself very well to the normal trail building standards that most people are familiar with down south."

Marek stopped, took some measurements, muttered under his breath, then continued his narrative. "The rain is a huge problem," he said. "You are building on top of sponge. You have to think about how deep you have to go. It's not always wise to build a drain because you can tear up the root mat.



*Robert Marek uses trail building techniques honed over two decades.*

You have to adapt your trail building skills to the particular use the trail is going to receive. Is the trail going to get a lot of use? You have to weigh it out. Learning along the way never gets old for me."

Marek swung his hatchet, praising it for its long handle that allows for a solid, firm swinging stroke. He vowed to get similar hatchets for the other Forest Service trail crews. He talked about wilderness values, saying,



*Robert Marek finishes his stairs on the cross-Admiralty canoe route.*

"Some people frown on our work. They think even minor trail improvements don't belong in the wilderness. I thought everyone would be pleased we are building a trail. There is so much discussion."

Holding his breath, Marek turned his log over to see if the notches are the right depth. "Some users like rustic," he continued. "They like cabins

the way they were. They don't want the oil stoves, they want the old wood stoves. Everything is a hot button issue."

I nodded in agreement, yes, the topics are controversial.

We paused as John Neary and SAGA Director Joe Parrish arrived to check out the progress.

"Don't stand there too long," Marek told them. "You'll grow roots. And don't tell the SAGA crew it's less buggy here at the stream."

Marek positioned his log. "What? Perfect! Everything lines up. That's a real purty notch."

Yes, it was a beautiful notch, we agreed.

"I need that bit driver that someone walked off with," Marek said to no one in particular. "Boom, boom and I'm outta here. I'm off to North Young on Monday. Wednesday I'm off to Hasselborg Lake. It's a killer pace this year, and it's the crux of the season."

We left him to meet his deadline, and moved on toward the beach.

John Neary summed it up well when he said, "Robert's love for his work is evident not only in the quality of his work, but also the enthusiasm he exudes. He has found his niche and makes the most of it every day."