

# ***Bound by a Common Thread***

Memoirs of people living in the backwoods of Maine

by **Charlie Reitze**



Newport, Maine

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The obsession Wes remarked about has at long last led to this book. In the pages that follow, I welcome you to my world of the people who live in the backwoods of Maine.

# Prolog

The title of this book came to me while I was returning home from visiting one of the protagonists who appear within its pages. While driving down Interstate 95, deep in thought about what the title should be, I distinctly remember hearing the words *Bound By A Common Thread* come to my mind. They came with such clarity that I immediately pulled over so that I could write what I heard. Even the conclusion which until now had been so elusive was revealed to me.

Now that may sound crazy to some but at the same time it will ring true to many others. As Tom Brown once said, "There is a spirit that moves in all things." On at least two occasions that same spirit saved my life in Vietnam. And I will always believe that it was guiding my footsteps throughout this book. One of my professors called it serendipity.

"**What?**" I asked out loud as I pulled over. I grabbed my pen and a small note book off of the dashboard and immediately started writing; I didn't want to miss anything that came to my mind. If you ignore those kinds of promptings, inner thoughts, you are left feeling that you forgot an important dream that you wished you had written down when you first woke up.

"Yes," I thought, as I sat there frantically writing, not wanting to miss any thoughts that were flooding my mind. "Each of these people has a common thread or lifestyle that links them together. They have found peace in living close to the earth, and each, in his (or her) own way, has shared that peace with me."



# Dedication

I dedicate this book to all those who have so richly blessed my life and helped me heal from the wounds of Vietnam, specifically:

To the “Spirit that moves in all things,” the same Spirit who continues to guide me;

To my sweet, gentle, kind, loving, huggable, teddy-bear, wife, Judy Barton, who is my sweetheart, my eternal companion, who always comforts and consoles me when my heart is heavy;

To those who choose to live off the blacktop, off the grid, who live where they have to paddle eighteen miles, or walk two miles through mosquito-infested swale, to get to their homes – and who, through their gracious and gentle living helped me find my life;

To my father, Raymond E. Reitze, Sr., who was captured during World War II by Rommel at Kasserine Pass in North Africa, and who spent twenty-six months as a POW in German Stalags;

To my sweet mother, Mary J. Reitze, who served on the home-front by welding ships at the shipyard at Portland, Maine;

To my brother, Raymond E. Reitze Jr., who served in Vietnam the year before I did;

To my nephew, Scott McKinley, who served in Iraq;

To all the soldiers who have served their country with honor, who are now serving, and who will yet serve;

To these great men, women, their families all across America, and to all those who gave their all, I dedicate this book.

May God bless each of you.



# Introduction

“There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot,” Aldo Leopold wrote in his foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*.

I – am someone who cannot. I find peace and contentment away from the flashing lights – away from the backbiting, picketing, radio-blarney, left and right wing pandemonium of twentieth and twenty-first century America. Beyond all this confusion, there is a way of life in the woods of Maine that is as relaxing and unwinding as the people who live in it.

Growing up in Buxton, Maine, about fifteen miles west of Portland, I always dreamed of living in the backwoods away from towns and cities. At my dad’s camp in Eustis, I dreamed about being a forest ranger, trapper, hunter, camper, fisherman, and mountain man. I thought I was alone in those dreams. As I grew older, I discovered that most, if not all, kids at one time or another have their own youthful dreams.

Yet my dreams went much deeper than most; I lived my dreams. While my eighth grade class went to a museum in Boston, I went with my parents to their log camp in Eustis, Maine. While other boys and girls were dating, I was hunting rabbits, partridge, deer, and bear. In the summer time and during high school vacations when I wasn’t milking cows, haying, and feeding chickens, I jumped in my ‘61 Comet and took off to Eustis. On scheduled dates, my parents would meet me at their camp on Dead River. I’d prepare a trout feed for them, and then be off to Snow Mountain Pond, the Chain of Ponds, Jim Pond, Bugeye

Charlie Reitze

Pond, or some other body of water to catch some more. From Eustis to Rangeley, to North New Portland, to Coburn Gore, to Jackman, to the northern village of Allagash, I knew the geography of northern and western Maine. There wasn't much of it that I hadn't traveled. In my wanderings, I made friends with many people who sought out the same solitude, who lived in the backcountry — and many still do.



(Charlie in uniform at Fort Leonard Wood Missouri.)

In 1967 after graduating from Bonny Eagle High School in Standish, Maine, I joined the Army. In September of

1968, my life turned upside down. I found myself in the hellish, blood-stained soils of Vietnam. No longer could I go to camp. No longer could I go fishing. No longer could I do the things that I so much loved. Instead of camping in a tent on some remote pond, I now lived in shoebox-like tin barracks and sandbag bunkers. Instead of carrying a fishing pole, I carried an M-16. And even though I was thousands of miles from home as opposed to hundreds of miles, in my yearning for the woods I loved so much, I'd often hum the song – quite pensively, *“five hundred miles, five hundred miles, five hundred miles away from home, oh, I'm five hundred miles away from home. Away from home, away from home, I'm . . . five . . . ‘Thousand’ . . . miles . . . away from . . . home.”*

I spent the most terror-filled, horrifying, life-altering year of my life in that war-torn nation. I didn't know it then, but when my physical self returned home, my jovial self never would. War forever scars a man. He is never the same; nor will he ever be. Somewhere, buried in the blood-stained soils of every war-torn battle field, every soldier leaves part of himself forever behind. He returns distant, detached, and aloof. His friends don't know him, because he won't let himself get close to them. His family longs for the son or sibling who used to be – and so does he.

Just before I went to Vietnam, my company went to Germany from Fort Dix, New Jersey. I ended up in the army hospital at Fort Dix with back issues. When I was released from the hospital, I had orders for Vietnam. I was an engineer trained at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri as a crane and shovel operator. When I arrived at the 62<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Battalion in Long Bien, Vietnam, they didn't have a crane, so they put me in a supply room and taught me to be a weapons expert.



(Charlie with an M-60 by the Supply Room)

Their weapons specialist had gone home and they needed another – so they trained me. Once I had learned how to repair, and in some cases rebuild, various weapons, from M-60 machine guns, M-79 grenade launchers, M-16 and M-14 rifles, they taught me how to drive a ten-ton tractor trailer and sent me out on convoys. When we returned from convoys, I repaired weapons. I even built my own M-16 from spare parts. In order to do it, I had to steal the serial-numbered item from the weapons dump, only to have a new CO, Captain Peters, come in and take it away from me. Captain Peters didn't believe I had built it and told me when he found out where I got it, he was going to send me to LBJ, that is, Long Bien Jail. Needless to say, I never went to jail.

We drove all-wheel-drive ten-ton trucks with flatbed trailers and hauled jungle-mauling bulldozers with Rome Plows and various types of ammo. Some times we drove with our tractor roofs down and the windshields lying on the hoods so we'd have a better field of fire. On some convoys, in hot areas, we were escorted by tanks, apc's (armored personal carriers), and the infantry. When we got to where we were going, we'd offload the dozers and clear large areas of jungle. When we left an area, the infantry, or some other outfit, would take over, and we'd be off on another mission. When a dozer hit a mine, it would blow the track right off of it. When a truck hit a mine, it blew shrapnel right up through the floor boards. Injured dozer operators and drivers were medevaced out by choppers.



(Ten-Ton Tractor Blown Up by a Land Mine)

Most nights in the dry season, the safest place to sleep was on the ground under our flatbed trailers. In the monsoon season, we slept in our cabs.

During the '68/'69 Tet Offensive, we were overrun at

Long Bien; 122mm rockets rained death from the sky. One sergeant and two other soldiers in our company were killed that night. Another soldier was reduced to nothing more than a vegetable. During the attack as I ran for a bunker, I found myself lying on my face in the dirt. My mind was all fuzzy; I had no idea what happened. I was rattled and shaken. As I recall, when the cobwebs cleared, I knew that a rocket had landed far enough away so that it didn't kill me, but close enough to blow me off my feet. I didn't seem to have any strength and my knees were gashed and bleeding, not so much from shrapnel as I later determined, but from the fall. Nowhere was it safe. All anyone could do was pray and hope that a rocket didn't land any closer than the concussion from the one that had already taken me down. Some men were hiding under the mattresses in their shoebox-like tin-can barracks, while others were running for the safety of bunkers. There were both screams of fist-pounding, murderous rage as three men fell, and yet, somehow, there was a terror-filled, eerie silence that seemed to penetrate the night. It was a gut wrenching fear. This was hell on earth. It was real. It was war.

The rioting, picketing, spitting, pot-smoking, non-inhaling hippies back home could call it anything they wanted. But to us, to the soldiers in Vietnam – to those who were man enough to fight for their country, it was a blood-curdling nightmare. The worst part was that we had two wars to fight – the one in Vietnam and the one back home against those protesting, pot-smoking hippies, hippies that had no idea where their freedom came from, much less care. We did. We were fighting Communism. We were fighting so the South Vietnamese could enjoy the same freedom that allowed the thoughtless, mindless protesters back home to

scream and holler, and picket.

During the Tet Offensive, as I laid with my face pressed into the blood-stained soil, many things passed through my mind. I believed that, at the young age of nineteen, my life was over. My throbbing head and bloodied, aching knees told me that I was still alive. But I didn't seem to have any strength. My limbs were like rubber. I had fallen hard, and wondered how a rocket could land so close without killing me. My whole life passed like a movie through my mind – “The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly. [That's a Clint Eastwood movie.]

I still remember looking heavenward and praying. It was the first time I had ever uttered a heartfelt prayer. “Heavenly Father,” I prayed, “if you let me live through this night, let me survive Vietnam, I'll go to church the rest of my life.” Though at the time, I didn't understand the depth of my promise, a loving Heavenly Father did. And when I came home, he set me on a path that would allow me to fulfill it.

“I'll go to church the rest of my life,” I repeated. “Let me see my girl friend one more time, my mother, my father, my brother one more time. Let me see my sisters one more time. Let me see my friends one more time.” As I laid there praying, somehow, I could feel my strength slowly returning.

I wept and rose to a crouching position and wondered how badly I was hurt. I hobbled to the closest bunker. For the next three days, I couldn't eat or drink. Nothing would stay down. My nerves were completely rattled. But in times like that as difficult as it is, you have to keep your wits about you. You can't panic or you'll be useless to yourself and dangerous to those around you. Every soldier depends on every other to stay alive. So we all did what we had to do. But, the Vietcong had overrun our perimeters. In spite of

our own efforts, we never would have made it through that night if it hadn't been for the Hueys, (attack helicopters). They rained their own death from the sky. Tracer rounds lit up the sky. It looked like 100 Fourth of July's all wrapped up in one. For those of us on the ground, it was a life-saving sight. We all felt a great relief. You could almost feel the tension ease; actually – you could.



(Gunships like this saved our lives during the Tet Offensive.)

•••••

When I processed out of the Army in 1970, I went to camp. I went to Snow Mountain Pond. I went to all of my old places. I camped, tented, and fished. Often I went alone. I found places where I could cry if I wanted to cry, places where the reawakened fantasies of my childhood began to salve the wounds of Vietnam. I'd camp for a week or two at a time. I needed to be clean and free. I'd strip naked and swim in the lakes, streams, and ponds – and so felt cleansed

from the blood of a corrupted soil and free to establish my life once again. Physically, I was home; psychologically, part of me would always be in Vietnam. And though I didn't know it then, later I realized that none of us who served in war, any war, would ever be the same. Personalities change forever.

Finally, on one hot summer day as I paddled carefree in my cedar strip canoe on the calm waters of Baker Pond, up by Eustis, things seemed to change. I lived a dream deeper than any I had ever known. I felt as if I were in my childhood once more, reborn in the country I had loved ever since I could remember. My thoughts drifted back to Southeast Asia. Somehow I finally understood that it was possible to let go of the baggage I carried from Vietnam, at least a lot of it. I knew that until I did let it go, I would never be free. The only battles that faced me now were the ones within me. At that moment, I paddled my way from the past into the future.

My thoughts also drifted back to various people I had met in the woods over the years, people who lived the life that I was seeking. Thinking about how relaxed and happy they always were, I wondered if writing about them might help me find peace as well.

I decided to pursue a degree in writing at the University of Maine at Farmington, a college that borders the western mountains of Maine. My principal writing subject became the people who lived in the woods. For the next three years, I traveled the state looking for them, taping conversations and furiously taking notes. I spent my time between classes transcribing, writing, rewriting – thinking through my fingertips.

I established certain criteria for the people I would interview.

- They had to live off the grid.
- They had to understand what it meant to be alone, what it meant to be close to the earth.
- Instead of electricity, they had to rely on kerosene, gas, candles, or a generator.
- They couldn't have running water.
- They had to use a hand pump, a bucket, and an outhouse.
- They had to walk, ride horseback, snowshoe, canoe, or snowmobile to their houses.
- In the absence of a nearby hospital, they had to rely on home remedies, midwives, or Dad's nervous fingers on a slippery new baby.

I wanted people who understood what it meant to live "*THE GOOD LIFE*."

To meet these people, I lived out of "Festus," my Toyota truck, and a leaky tent. I roamed the state of Maine three times. I snowshoed across Grand Lake Matagamon. I rode a snowmobile along the mountainous roads of Coburn Gore. I canoed eighteen miles up Chesuncook Lake. I hiked the mountains of Monson. I was backed up to one man's front door by a vicious dog in Waldoboro. I walked two miles through mosquito-infested swale in Roque Bluffs. I slept on a roofed picnic table during a violent thunderstorm at Chemquasabamticook Lake (Ross Lake).



(Tenting on a Picnic Table on the way to Oak Mountain)

I found the people I was looking for – and found myself in the process.

Charlie Reitze



(Charlie Searching)

# **Chapter One**

## *On Holeb Pond*

### The Last of a Breed

The clothesline rope twisted and tightened. Allan Szarka, my ruddy-faced, scruffy-bearded college friend from Jackman, pulled the rope over his canoe, wrapped it around a hook on the passenger side of Festus, my Toyota pickup truck, and tugged on it as we tied the canoe down.

“I think Aime Lecours is just the kind of guy you’re looking for,” Allan hollered, as he tugged on a second rope that I had tossed over the canoe. “Aime lives alone on an island at Holeb Pond. The man’s an old trapper and logger from way back. He only comes out of the woods twice a year — once at freeze up and once at spring thaw.”

After securing the canoe, Allan walked over to his old Ford, leaned through the open window, and grabbed *The Maine Atlas*. He laid it across the hood of his truck and pointed out the winding roads that led to Aime’s.

“You may be making a wasted trip,” Allan said. “I don’t know if Aime will even talk to you. He’s refused to talk to anyone else who wanted to write about him. If you do get him talking, though, be prepared for a long sit. Once he starts talking, he never stops.”

A few miles north of Allan’s place in Jackman, I started down a dirt road toward Holeb Pond, a small body of water in Holeb Township only a few miles from the Canadian border and about fifteen miles from Jackman. The road threaded its way around sharp bends and over camel-hump

hills. Festus bounced through mud puddles, wheel ruts and potholes, reminding me of the times I drove a ten-ton tractor on backcountry dirt roads in Vietnam. The roads were so rough that the stock on my M-14 rifle broke in half when it fell from the hook I had improvised to hang it on.

During the ride, I kept looking over my shoulder. I was jittery. My mind kept racing back in time. No matter how hard I tried to forget, the horrors of Southeast Asia persisted in invading my life. I was sweating and bouncing down this narrow, tree-lined, dirt memory. Fifteen miles and forty-five minutes later, I sat on the sandy shores of Holeb Pond, mentally exhausted with my head buried in my hands. I was shaking, trembling and wondering how many years it would take before I could live a normal life—or if...

Like many young Vietnam Veterans drinking was my way of life. I just kept trying to forget. But, the protesters kept protesting. The picketers kept picketing. The Tet Offensive was like watching a horror movie over and over. I drank so much Canadian Club and chased it with so much Budweiser that sometimes I wasn't worth a bucket of stove-wood ashes. I was lonely, longing for the Charlie that used to be. I longed to look down a dirt road and not see dead Vietcong piled in four-foot high rows with their blank hollow eyes staring back at me. Their black silky clothing, stained with dried blood, stank.

My mother kept at me to quit drinking. She pleaded, sometimes with tears in her eyes, "Charlie, when are you going to quit drinking?". She hurt to see me in such a state.

But it wasn't until 1972 when a loving Heavenly Father stepped into my life that I was able to quit my alcohol habit. I had forgotten my promise to Him in Vietnam to go to church the rest of my life, but Heavenly Father hadn't

forgotten. Through a series of events, He reminded me of my promise. He brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ right to my doorstep. When my first wife investigated The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I wasn't interested and refused to listen to the missionaries. Later, when she was having difficulties with the birth of our first child (he was two weeks overdue), I got on my knees for the first time since I left Vietnam. During that prayer, I promised Heavenly Father that if the child would be born healthy – and would be a boy – that I would finally listen to the missionaries. Within two hours after that prayer, she was in the hospital. After she came home from the hospital – with a healthy boy – she asked me if I would listen to the missionaries *NOW*. I told her, “I don't dare not to. I promised Heavenly Father that I would if the baby was born healthy.” She called Bishop Garner in Portland and asked him to send the missionaries to visit us. After offering beers to the missionaries during dinner, I looked at them and asked, “So, if I am going to join your church I have to give up drinking, is that right?”

“Yes, that's right,” said Elder Baker, a missionary from Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

“Then I'll quit,” I said. “I believe the church is true.”

“Do you want me to help you get rid of it?” Elder Baker, asked.

“No,” I said, “If I'm going to do this, I have to do it myself.”

Without another word, I went to the cupboard, grabbed three bottles of Canadian Club, went to the fridge and grabbed two six-packs of Budweiser, went to the bathroom to get three more six-packs, and then I went to the sink and turned out every last drop. That was the end of my drinking.

I went cold turkey that night.

And so, here I was standing on the sandy shores of this small pond with a half-mile of angry, windswept water between me and Birch Island. Then my thoughts turned to the island and getting there safely.

Backing the truck down the sandy beach, I remembered something Allan had said: “Aime is happily married, but has lived alone on the island for seven years. His wife Angelina lives in Jackman.” As I stared across the choppy water, I kept trying to change my mind-set by imagining a man who was “happily married,” care-taking cabins on a remote island while his wife lived in town — especially a man who was ninety years old. But according to Allan, this had been Aime’s way-of-life since some game-warden friends told him that the people who owned the island would pay him a hundred dollars a week to look after their cabins.

I was excited but apprehensive about meeting Aime. I had no idea what kind of reception I’d get. I had no idea where exactly his camp was, or even if he was home. Kneeling in Allan’s sixteen-foot Old Town canoe, I drove the paddle into the sandy shoreline, gave a giant heave, and shoved off toward the American flag flapping in the wind — tree-top high over the distant camps that lined the island’s west end.

A little more than halfway across, black clouds rolled in bringing a stronger wind and churning up white, biting breakers that slammed into my canoe. It was too late to go back; the island was closer than the mainland shore. The west end, my destination, was now far to my right, and the nearest shore was quickly disappearing as the wind forced me to the east faster than I could compensate. I turned the canoe into the wind, trying to not overshoot the island’s east

end and trying to avoid getting swamped. At times the wind forced me backward more than I could paddle forward. After more than an hour of bucking, rolling, and frantic paddling, I dragged the canoe across the shoreline and collapsed on the beach.

After a short rest, I began searching the immediate camps. In quite a pleasant mood by now, singing Johnny Cash's song about a "dirty old egg-sucking dog," I jumped back in the canoe, and ducked in and out of coves checking each camp as I circled the island. An hour later, having worn out the song, I paddled the canoe up to the backside of the island and tied it to a rusty bedspring sticking out of a clump of alders. I climbed some ledges to check the last few cabins hoping I hadn't made a wasted trip.

Suddenly, I heard an unfamiliar French tune. It could only be coming from Aime Lecours. I spotted him through the trees with his back to me, hoeing in one of four newly planted gardens. He hung his hoe in a rack of moose antlers spiked to a tree and walked to the woodpile, grabbing a shiny double-bitted axe. Soon he was splitting a twelve-inch piece of hardwood with one hit – like a man in his twenties.

"Hello," I hollered, drawing into shouting range.

Aime turned fully around and walked toward me, carrying the axe in his right hand — an axe he knew how to use.

"Who are you?" he asked. I stared at that large axe, hoping he was friendly.

"I'm doing some writing in college and thought you might be able to give me some information I could use. Allan Szarka at Bishop's Store in Jackman told me how to find you," I said.

With one hand, Aime buried the knife-edge of his axe

two inches deep in a block of hardwood. "I can still keep up with you young fellers," he said, smiling. You say you're going to college? Well, I don't always talk to folks that want information, but it don't much matter anymore. Come on in the house an' set a spell. I don't get many visitors up in this country. Have any trouble gettin' to the island?"

"You bet I did," I replied. "The wind was blowing so hard, I came within ten feet of missing the island."

"The wind's most always blowin' hard out yonder," Aime said, as we stepped into the house. We sat in wooden-doweled chairs that were pulled up to a rectangular table stacked high with tools and paperwork. Aime's eyes were hidden behind a pair of black glasses, which I later learned were prescribed after a recent cataract operation. Aime ran a little to flab, his skin sagged down under his biceps where larger muscles used to be. He was about five-foot-seven or -eight inches tall, with sleek gray hair.

"Had a feller one night blown clean ta' the other end of the pond," Aime said as soon as we settled. "His motor conked out. I saw him flashin' his flashlight. Time I got to him, his boat was ruined. The wind smashed it to smithereens up again' the rocks."

Apart from the cluttered table, Aime kept his home quite neat for an old man living alone. His couch-bed was made and turned partway down, ready to climb into. The kitchen sink was empty, the counter clean, and the floors swept. But the small windows didn't allow much light in the cabin and when I asked if we could turn on a light, he said, "The mantles in my lights are broke."

"Well," I replied, "if you give me some mantles, I'll fix 'em for ya."

Chuckling, he said, "How do you s'pose I'm gonna find

any mantles in this heap? ‘Sides that, I go to bed when the lights up yonder go out, or I’d fixed ‘em myself.”

He slid his chair back away from the table and walked to a kitchen sink that was made of black slate. He cupped his hands, scooped cold water out of a bucket, and then dipped his face into his hands. “I been washin’ like this for years. It wakes a man up,” he said through a chuckle.

Sitting back at the table, Aime began telling me his life story. He was born in Canada during tough economic times. The way he put it: “I was born very young, ya know, I think I was just nine months old.”

Seeking a better life, his family moved to Richmond, Maine from Lac Megantic, Quebec in 1911. Aime was only eight years old. He was the eighth of what was to be twenty-two children. His father worked at a cotton mill in Richmond and later at a railroad car shop in Brunswick. On January 1, 1914, the family moved to Jackman. Later that month, Aime turned twelve.

His father and a brother both died at ninety-five. “I expect to live a spell yet,” said the ninety-one-year-old Aime.

“Back when we were kids, we ate venison and baked taters year-round. We had no butter, no nothin’. Mother just fixed ‘em different ways. We didn’t have shoes, neither. We went barefoot all summer, and Mother made us moccasins out of burlap bags in the winter. It made us tough.”

Getting up from the kitchen table, he motioned toward the door. We stepped off the front steps and into the garden. He leaned on his hoe and pointed out rows of recently planted potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, and other vegetables.

Aime explained that he hoes everything, using mostly compost from garbage, ashes, leaves, pine needles, and anything else he can find for fertilizer. “That’s all I’ve ever

needed,” he said.

Bending over, picking up a handful of dirt and letting it sift through his fingers, Aime kept right on talking. “Look at that. Ain’t it nice, rich soil? That’s why I’ve got four gardens. I plant tomatoes in one, taters in another, and vegetables in the other two. Then, the folks on the island give me all kinds of food every time they leave camp to go home.”

“I learned to work young. At age twelve, I worked at a sawmill in Jackman with my father. I worked so darn hard I stayed short,” he said, laughing again at his own humor. He slapped his knee for emphasis.

“There wasn’t anything on me very big. At age sixteen, I was only four feet tall. At age seventeen, I was the strongest man in Jackman. Work’s good for people, but a lot don’t believe it,” Aime said. “I only weighed a hundred forty-eight pounds back in those days. But I had to give up sawmill work. The state passed a new law, and the mill let me go because I was too young to work. My father told them if I was too young, then he was too old. He quit.”

Aime’s personality had become readily apparent — he had a quick wit and an incessant need to talk. Every time I tried to speak, he held up his right index finger, motioning me to remain quiet. He spoke with pride about his gardens, the upkeep of the cabins, and his ability to live alone on an island despite days when the temperatures plunged to forty below. He was a man who was strong, independent, and, at the same time, terribly lonesome. I sat on an ancient stump by the edge of the garden and listened while he leaned on his hoe and continued telling his life story.

“Father always hooked moose and horses up together to haul wood,” he said. “I can tell ya, it was quite a sight. But it was back when father quit the mill that I moved to Skinner. I

lived where the south and west branches of Moose River meet, and I rented a camp for four dollars a month. The camp was a fifteen- to twenty-mile paddle west from here on Moose River. I had to take the train in there, too. I trapped to survive.”

He pointed to some of his old traps hanging on the woodshed. He choked up a little, thinking of the old days. “There wasn’t any work to be had. But the Farmington zoo was paying twenty-five dollars for young bear. I had one bear that was so friendly I led him around on a collar. I trapped bear and shipped them to the zoo, until a bear killed a tourist and the state put a stop to it.”

“Ya know, I really like living like this. I don’t smoke and I don’t drink, so I don’t need much money. There’s no pressure and I’m mighty comfortable. It’s just the way I choose to live,” he said, rubbing his growling belly. “I useta smoke; I started smokin’ a pipe in 1908, when I was six. I’d smoke in front of the fireplace, where Father couldn’t smell it. When I was twelve, he gave me permission. Years later, I started spittin’ black, and hearin’ humming noises. I quit in 1937. I’m glad I did. It’s a bad habit.”

Aime doesn’t trap bear anymore, but he still traps beaver, fox, and muskrat. He has also taken care of places like Boundary Pond Camps, Parlin Pond Camps, and he helped build Rock Pond Camps. When he wasn’t working on the camps, he worked in the woods while his wife, Angelina, waitressed at some of the camps.

Aime lived alone in his rented camp until the 1920s when he married at the age of twenty-four. At thirty-four, he bought the camp for one hundred dollars. He and Angelina lived there for twenty-seven years.

In the 1980s, he moved to the island and Angelina

moved to Jackman. Aime was just 83.

Hanging the hoe he'd been leaning on for the last half-hour back in the fork of the antlers, Aime motioned for me to follow him. "Come with me," he said, "and I'll show ya around the island."



(Aviation Fuel Tank for Water Storage on Birch Island)

At one side of the garden, Aime hopped over a three-foot ledge like an agile young boy, talking as he went. "Years ago, the island was all white birch trees. As you can see, they've mostly all died. Now these spruce and fir cover most of it."

Aime kicked some dead pine limbs out of our way, broke off a couple of low-hanging branches for me, and then pointed through the trees. "There's the old cold-water storage tank. It's a seventeen-hundred-gallon aviation fuel tank. Water was pumped up from the pond by a generator. Afterward, it gravity-fed to a hotel and some of the other buildings. There's the old water line."

"Back before the crash in '29," he said, walking out of

the wooded area into the open, where the other buildings edge the pond, “a group of wealthy business people from Boston owned and ran the island’s eighteen-room hotel. They had a separate dining hall, icehouse, and washhouse. All the buildings ran on electricity supplied by the generator.”



(Old Birch Island Hotel)

Aime also showed me the old hotel, icehouse, and dining hall. A Bendix dryer, Lazy-Boy washing machine, and steam press were piled under a mountain of discarded junk inside the wash house. Looking at the press, I hollered to Aime as he stepped out the back door, “This must have been some operation.”

“Yup, the early owners named the island Little Boston and called the hotel the Boston Ranch. During the crash they lost all their money and the island was later sold for a dollar.” Aime put his right index finger to his head, as if aiming a gun, then clicked his tongue, saying, “Many of ‘em shot themselves. Ain’t that somethin’, that money can mean all that?”

We walked over to the edge of the pond, where I had tied Allan's canoe, Aime pointed across the water. "That long flat area you see over there is the railroad bed. Back in the twenties there were no roads to Holeb. Everyone rode the passenger trains, then boated or canoed the half-mile to the island."

"Time for lunch," I interrupted, worn out from listening and following, and hungry from the long paddle.

Aime didn't hear. He couldn't stop talking.

He sat down on some ledges that overlooked the pond, crossed his legs like an old Indian, and grabbed a piece of grass to chew on between breaths. "The day trains were numbered thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, and forty-two. The night trains were numbered seventeen and eighteen. There was a train every three-quarters of an hour. Them trains ran from Brownville Junction to Montreal, and clean to St. John, New Brunswick. It was a busy place back then."

Aime pointed off to the west across the pond. "If I ever quit taking care of this island, I'm going back to Skinner. It's beautiful there. I always fed the chickadees when they landed on me while I was skinnin' beaver, and I had great fun talkin' to all the Gorby birds (Canadian Jays). You should hear them birds talk. I tell ya, it was comical. Back then I'd catch five-pound salmon, too. I don't fish anymore. The doctor told me not to lift anything over ten pounds. I hate to keep cutting my line, so I quit fishing."

He chuckled and shook his head.

The first summer Aime worked at Birch Island, he still lived in Skinner. Every day he walked a mile from his camp to the river, then paddled his ten-foot pram (a lightweight, flat-bottom boat) to the island. "I enjoyed the trip," Aime said, looking out across the pond, "comin' and goin'. I

always saw lots of moose and deer. Most folks can only tell ya' what a river looks like goin' downstream. I can tell ya what it looks like goin' in either direction."

Wood smoke billowed out of the chimney as we walked back toward the cabin. Aime both cooked and heated with a Shenandoah woodstove. He burned fifteen cords of wood a year. Some of his wood came from the dead trees on the island, but most of it he dragged from the mainland across the ice using his pickup truck.

"Cuttin' wood is good exercise," he said and then excused himself to go to the outhouse. He kept right on talking once he got inside. "So's lugging my drinking water. I get it from a spring at Turner Pond. I haul my bath water up from this pond and heat it on the stove."

"Ouch!" I heard a loud slap. "Ya know, I freeze my butt off in this outhouse in the winter and the bugs chew it off in the summer. But at least my toilet don't plug up."



(Aime's Outhouse.)

He continued, "Turner Pond is just a few miles up the road. I take my pram over to the mainland and drive my truck to the spring. It ain't such a much. In the summer, ya know, I only lug drinking water. I take my baths in the pond even if it's cold. It don't bother me none. Hell, they ain't nothin' on me that gets hard anymore anyway."

We went back to his cabin, where he finally began to talk about his wife. "We're plenty close," Aime smiled. "She just doesn't want to stay out here. She comes in and cleans the cabin about once a year, I don't know what for. I keep it as clean as I want. Besides, the roof leaks by the chimney, and it just gets dirty again. Last time she was in, ya know, I told her if she lost any more weight, I was going to have to marry another woman. She only tips the scales at eighty-five pounds."

I laughed to myself listening to Aime joke about Angelina, recognizing that his kind of kidding comes only from couples who have made a good life together. I wondered if Angelina talked as much as he did. It would be interesting to hear her chew his ear off for not keeping the cabin cleaner. And it would be just as interesting to observe Aime's facial expressions as he sat there listening.

It was now six o'clock. Aime and I had been talking since noon. I had been trying to break away for an hour. I wanted to get off the pond and dirt roads before dark.

"Listen," I told him, rising from the table, "I have got to get going. That pond is still rough, and I need to get off it before dark."

"Right you are. Once you get my talkin' machine a-goin', I can't stop it." Aime followed me out the door.

"If you try to cut diagonally across the pond, you'll miss your

take-out,” Aime said. He untied the bow of my canoe and pushed me off, talking right to the end. “The wind will blow you right by it. Paddle straight to the mainland, then follow the shoreline around to your truck.”

It had been a long day.

Sitting in the canoe and leaning into my paddle, I chewed on a peanut-butter sandwich. Across the state from this mountain pond, the early morning sun first touches America. During the late afternoon, red shimmering rays from sunsets filter through the trees and cast long shadows on its waters. As I drifted away from shore and began to paddle, I thought how the island’s solitude reminded me of the loneliness of being away from home during the hellish year I spent in Vietnam.

Looking back at Aime, walking back toward his cabin, head bowed, I thought of his loneliness and his parting words:

“Come back sometime when ya can set and jaw a spell. I don’t get much company up this way.”

Aime’s words brought a moist film to my eyes. They reminded me of Dad’s parting words as I left home on my way to Vietnam. He said, “Son, if I could I’d go in your place.” Then he turned, head bowed, and walked to the car. It was time for me to go.

Aime died on the island in 1993, before I got back to visit him. He was almost 92.

Charlie Reitze



(Beach at Englishman Bay)

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# About the Author



**Charlie Reitze**, a native Mainer, graduated from Bonny Eagle High School in Standish, Maine, in May of 1967. In July of 1967, he joined the Army and served a three-year stint. He served in the 62<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Battalion in Vietnam from September of 1968 to September of 1969. After being honorably discharged in 1970, he worked in the construction field for most of his work-a-day life.

In 1990 Charlie started a course of study at The University of Maine at Farmington. He graduated in 1994 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in creative writing. He also is a graduate of Tom Brown's Wilderness Survival School, and Solo Wilderness First Aid and CPR. He wrote a survival column for *The Northwoods Sporting Journal* from 1993 to 2016. He has also hiked several portions of the Appalachian Trail and was an AT volunteer maintainer.

Today he is retired and loves to spend time relaxing and fishing at the family camp in Eustis and several other fishing spots. And he loves to tell stories!