



Photo by Carl J. Skalak Jr. (2003)

Carl Skalak Jr. photographed the frozen Alder Bed Flow before his first rescue.

Army saves man in wilds—twice

■ *DEC arrests Carl Skalak after he sets off emergency beacon second time, but he insists both evacuations were legitimate.*

By PHIL BROWN
EXPLORER STAFF

When Carl Skalak Jr. canoed into the Five Ponds Wilderness in mid-November, he got caught in a blizzard. And then the river froze. He made history of sorts by activating a personal locator beacon (PLB) that sent a signal to the Air Force via a satellite.

On Nov. 14, he was flown out of the wilds by a Huey helicopter dispatched from Fort Drum, an Army base near Watertown. Skalak, 55, of Cleveland, thus became the first person in the continental United States to be rescued after setting off a PLB. The devices were approved for use in the Lower 48 just last summer, after a trial run in Alaska.

"The system worked like a gem," said Lt. Daniel Karlson of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which operates the satellites that relay PLB signals.

On Dec. 3, three weeks later, the system got its second test. Again, a Huey flew to the rescue. The person in distress: Carl Skalak Jr.

This time, not all of the authorities were pleased. The next day, the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) charged Skalak with two counts of falsely reporting an incident, a misdemeanor. He spent a night in jail before posting \$10,000 bail.

DEC spokesman Steve Litwhiler said the agency believes that Skalak didn't need to be rescued either time. The charges allege that Skalak "was found in a healthy condition, not in apparent need of emergency evacuation, and with no imminent or occurring catastrophic or emergency condition present."

Skalak begs to differ. In the first instance, he said, "the need of an emergency evacuation was pretty clear.

With the river frozen up, there was no other way out." The second time, he said, he would have risked frostbite or worse if he tried to hike out of the woods on his own. "It's not like I went in there and rang their bell because I just had a blister or something."

When Skalak first entered the wilderness, on Tuesday, Nov. 11, he planned to relax, take photographs and read a book by Sigurd Olsen, a conservationist who often wrote about the spiritual value of nature. Skalak drove his truck to a remote put-in on the Middle Branch of the Oswegatchie River in the western Adirondacks. He then paddled his solo canoe for more than two hours to Alder Bed Flow, a still stretch of the river in the Five Ponds Wilderness, and set up camp.

It started to rain Tuesday night. Sometime Wednesday afternoon, the rain changed to snow, and it continued to snow on Thursday. "When I woke up Friday morning there was like four feet of snow on the ground," Skalak said. "More importantly, the river froze."

Skalak said the weather forecasts had not warned of a snowstorm. Now he wasn't sure what weather to expect. And he didn't know how long it would take the river to thaw. Eventually, he decided to activate the beacon, which he had bought for \$600 only days before his trip. He reasoned that if he waited and the weather turned worse or if he ran out of food and became debilitated, he would make things harder on himself and his rescuers.

The Air Force Rescue and Coordination Center received the distress signal at 10:45 a.m. and notified the Herkimer County Sheriff's Department. DEC started a search but never

reached Skalak. In the end, officials asked Fort Drum to send in a helicopter, which picked up Skalak at about 5 p.m.

At the time, no charges were filed. In fact, Lt. Col. Scott P. Morgan, commander of the Air Force rescue center, said Skalak made the right decision. "He did exactly what he should," Morgan told the *L.A. Daily News*, "because he didn't wait until he went beyond his capacity. . . . We weren't going in and trying to find someone that was in extreme distress."

A few weeks later, Skalak returned alone to the Adirondacks to retrieve his canoe and other gear. On Friday, Nov. 28, he hiked from the put-in, starting up an

"With the river frozen up, there was no other way out."

— Carl Skalak
RESCUED OUTDOORSMAN



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End of acid rain?

In December, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ordered cuts in utility pollution that the Adirondack Council says could halt further environmental damage from acid rain by 2011.

"This is the best news we've seen on acid rain since the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990," said Brian Houseal, the council's executive director, shortly after the EPA's announcement.

Other environmental groups also lauded the move, but they said the cuts should go deeper, and they expressed wariness that the proposed rules would be enacted. The also lambasted EPA for another proposal, revealed the same week, that critics see as too lax in reining in utilities' mercury pollution.

Under EPA's proposal, utilities would have to reduce their emissions of sulfur dioxide by 70% and nitrogen oxide by 50%, in two phases, before the end of 2015. John Sheehan, a council spokesman said the first phase of cuts would be sufficient to stop acid-rain damage by 2010 or 2011. The second phase, he said, would enable the environment to slowly recover.

Acid rain has taken a heavy toll on many of the 3,000 lakes and ponds in the Adirondacks. EPA estimates that 21% of the waterbodies are "chronically acidic"—meaning they cannot support certain fish—and 43% are "episodically acidic."

EPA expects that the rules will take effect in 2005 if they survive a lengthy hearing process.

Manslaughter dismissed

Manslaughter, drunken-driving and other charges have been dismissed against a man accused of causing a car accident that killed Olympian speedskater Jack Shea, a Lake Placid legend, two years ago.

Shea, 91, died of internal bleeding at Adirondack Medical Center the morning after the accident, which occurred a few weeks before his grandson, Jimmy Shea, won a gold medal in the skeleton race in Salt Lake City. (Jack Shea won a gold in the 1932 Olympics held in Lake Placid.)

Herbert Reynolds of Saranac Lake had been indicted charges of vehicular manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide and driving while intoxicated. Police said his van slid out of control, crossed the center line and crashed into Shea's car in Lake Placid on Jan. 21, 2002.

An appellate court ruled last year that a blood sample taken from Reynolds by an emergency medical technician could not be used as evidence. The court said the sample—which showed Reynolds had an elevated blood-alcohol count—was not authorized by a physician, as required by law. Prosecutors concluded they could not try Reynolds without that evidence.

Museum hires director

The Adirondack Museum has hired David Pamperin as its new director, replacing native Adirondacker John Collins, who had served as interim director for the past three years.

Pamperin, the museum's sixth director, will take over in February. For the past 12 years, he has overseen historic sites owned by the Wisconsin Historical Society. He was hired after a nationwide search.

Located in Blue Mountain Lake, the Adirondack Museum, one of the nation's foremost regional museums, is open from Memorial Day through mid-October. Pamperin told North Country Public Radio that he would look at the feasibility of keeping the museum open year-round.