

**“Snow Shelter Living.”**

**From *Short Stories of an Outdoor Enthusiast: “Never say I wish I had”.***

**by Stephen L. Priest**

How about waking up after a good night’s sleep in the middle of the mountains - and exiting from your snow shelter! The learning experience can be both exhilarating, and downright exhausting.

My friend John and I spent a three-day February weekend at an Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) seminar on snow shelter building and living. The course entailed instruction on snow shelters and winter camping, a four-hour hike into the White Mountain’s Gulf of the Slides, construction of a snow shelter, and finally, sleeping overnight in our newly prepared accommodations. A pre-registration requirement for the course stressed being in good physical condition.

The Friday evening class began with construction methodology for four types of shelters - igloo, trench, drift side and mound. Instructional aids such axes, shovels, graphs and pictures were used to demonstrate the various techniques used to build each type of shelter.

John and I were to build - and survive in - the mound shelter.

We assembled at 8 AM Saturday morning, filled with anxiety, but ready for our new quest. The terrain was mostly uphill, the ground was covered with four to six inches of snow which made much of the climb very slippery, and my backpack seemed to get heavier with each uphill step. My leg muscles burned during particularly steep areas. I had thought that my running training would have provided me with endurance, and it did as far as recovery when we took rest breaks, but my breathing was heavy and deep. I kept wondering if I would reach the area before dying!

It took nearly four hours to reach the Gulf of the Slides. Removing my backpack felt like I had lifted the weight of a thousand boulders from my shoulders. I was exhausted and my body sore, but I was elated to be relieved of the pack. We still had to build our overnight accommodations, but certainly this task could not be half the effort that was required to reach the site.

We selected a campsite near a hill and piled a chest-high mound of snow. Digging straight down next to the mound we reached the frozen ground. Then we dug under the mound and started excavating upward. It was actually like carving out a pumpkin, only upside down. The further we went into the mound, crawling on our bellies to dig, the harder it was to remove the snow which had to be pushed back behind us and outside our small tunnel. It was strenuous work, and we were sweating profusely, even though it was sub-freezing temperatures.

John did the initial digging to shape the inside of the hut. At first I was a bit hesitant about being inside the mound, as the small enclosure was only shoulder-wide and gave me an anxious and claustrophobic feeling due to the closeness of the snow all around me.

It took less than two hours to finish. We finally entered the shelter by crawling on our stomachs through the small tunnel, pushing our packs in front of us.

Our mound igloo was actually quite comfortable. The four-foot ceiling allowed us to kneel and sit comfortably. Once we had gotten settled for the night, our small thermometer showed the inside temperature at 30 degrees.

We ran out of water, and in the process of making our own by melting snow, I learned that snow burns! It actually smells like burnt toast as the snow disintegrates immediately upon reaching the bottom of the pan. We had to place a small amount of water in the pot before we added snow in order not to burn the snow. Our water was also very spruce tasting, no doubt because of the spruce trees around us.

I must confess that this was one of the most physically demanding challenges I have ever attempted, but guess what? John and I are already talking about another snow shelter adventure. However, this time we will not start it with a four hour hike. Some of our outdoorsy friends have expressed interest, and John and I have kidded each other that maybe we should take them on a weekend shelter class, and hike in a circle, ending up making the snow shelter within a few hundred meters of the car!



Figure 1 John and Steve showing off their winter snow hut headquarters at the Gulf of the Slides in the White Mountains

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Steve Priest resides in Bedford, New Hampshire. This is an excerpt from Steve's book, *Short Stories of an Outdoor Enthusiast*: "Never say *I wish I had.*" Additional pieces from the manuscript can be found at [www.outdoorsteve.com](http://www.outdoorsteve.com) (click **Seeking a Publisher**).