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Behold, the Cabin

Alumni love letters rescue a Colby shrine

By Robert Gillespie

Sell a piece of Colby history? The e-mail from students and alumni flooded into the president's office with one voice in the wake of an *Echo* story on April 20, 1998: the Outing Club cabin, which suffered some heavy hits during the ice storm of '98, might be on the block. Again and again the entreaty was the same: please don't sell it.

"It is as if someone proposed to fill in Johnson Pond," said Nishit Mehta '83 and David Silk '81. "There is history and memories and many more memories to be made," wrote Rebecca Crook Rogers '83, whose father, she said, used the cabin frequently in the late '50s. Even though everybody recognized that the structure was unusable after the ice storm, not one of the 65 people who e-mailed President Cotter believed the administration would unload the old place merely for money. "Why not keep the things that help people love Colby?" asked Christopher Cannon '96.

"Each of these messages is a small story about the college's past," Matt Kuchar '97 wrote of the camp that opened in 1942, six years after the formation of the Outing Club. Kuchar's story began with barbecues held at the cabin at the end of September before the fall turned cold. Others spoke of the friendships formed around campfires. They vividly remembered listening to the loons, watching a meteor shower from kayaks adrift in the inky waters of Great Pond, drinking morning coffee on the dock, reading and studying in the sun, enjoying a break from the sometimes



Colby has maintained a cabin on Great Pond since 1942 (above). The most recent structure was damaged by the ice storm last year, and an e-mail barrage resulted in a new cabin.

stressful pace of campus life. They recalled overnight COOT reunions at the cabin, camping on the front lawn, meetings and retreats of clubs, observing wildlife, canoeing and swimming the same pond celebrated in *On Golden Pond* and in E.B. White's essay "Once More to the Lake." Winter meant snowshoeing and skiing to the islands, and the cabin was a place to sip hot chocolate while waiting for ears and fingers to thaw out.

"Like the arboretum, the blue light on top of Miller Library and the old College gate between the quads, the Outing Club cabin is a unique part of the College's history," said Kuchar.

Orchestrated by Outing Club president Grigory Petrov '99, the barrage of e-mail to the College constituted a "wired" grass roots campaign by a special interest group, but it spoke for Colby students past, present and future. After only a day of collecting sig-

natures in Cotter Union, the club reported support from more than one third of the students. The presidents of eight other organizations backed the club up. (If the cabin were sold, the Fly Fishing Club would lose a major asset, declared the group's president.) The Presidents' Council put itself on record: keep the cabin. All these defenders of one of Colby's revered assets celebrated the Maine woods and waters so close at hand on Mayflower Hill.

"It would be a shame if the appreciation that we learn to feel for Maine on COOT were limited to a freshman experience," Mary Larios '00 wrote. Those who felt intimidated by backcountry trips thought the camp allowed beginners to be introduced gradually to the outdoors. "I felt the beauty of Maine," Kelly Hagen '97 said, "and the comfort of an environment that was safe."

These are not protest letters. They are love letters. To a place.

The things we behold will save us, the writers all intimated, and they all beheld the cabin at the lake—and it wasn't the cabin with the collapsing roof. Now *they* would save it.

Amy Lyons '98 described to President Cotter how she and Steve Higgs '98 met at the camp, "and a month ago he proposed to me in a canoe at the cabin." When it was announced that the administration was considering selling, said Lyons (who married Higgs last August), "tears came to my eyes. I love that place."

"Something this important to so many students must be saved," President Cotter wrote back. "There are no plans to sell the property."

Outing Club leaders met with the administration about costs of renovations and the future use of the property. Today—even better than a repaired cabin—a new 20-by-32-foot winterized log building, with a kitchen and bunk beds and a loft accommodating 10 people, holds the ground.

During the deliberations, President Cotter received an e-mail from an admitted student who said he chose Colby over Bowdoin, Bates and Middlebury: "the idea of a cabin is very appealing when prospective students begin their college search among the countless numbers of New England and Mid-Atlantic colleges," wrote Bill Roberts '02. "Colby's outdoorsyness (if there is such a term) was very influential in my choice."

The president e-mailed back, "Dear Bill, you have chosen the right college." ♦