

Wilderness Castle

by Chuck Rose

The bright red roof was visible for miles against the green forest backdrop as we paddled north on White Otter Lake. It was a bright day with not a ripple on the water's surface. Slowly, the huge logs of Jimmy McQuat's Castle in the wilderness came into focus. The crew from Texas seemed in awe. Even though I knew what to expect, the site is still a wonder. The main building is 24 by 28 feet; an attached kitchen is 14 by 20 feet. The roof of the main building is 29 feet tall while the four-story tower soars to 41 feet. Inside was stripped bare except for a stair to the remains of a second floor. The castle is located about 50 trail miles north of the Donald Rogert Canoe Base, the Northern Tier's "satellite base" east of Atikokan, Ontario.

Jimmy McQuat (pronounced ma-koo-it), was born in Scotland in 1878 and came to Canada in the late 1890s. He tried and failed at both farming and prospecting. In 1903, he "put up his face" for traps and a grub-stake in northern Ontario. Here he remained for the rest of his life, acquiring the nickname "Hermit of White Otter Lake". At about 5'7" and 145 lbs., Jimmy seemed an unlikely candidate for hoisting one foot diameter, 35 foot long, green pine logs. Yet, up they went, as many as 43 logs stacked on top of each other, each corner dovetailed. Nearly all the logs were cut within sight of the building and hauled around with a homemade winch. Jimmy also used levers, scaffolding, and certainly ingenuity to craft his dream house. Lots of people have wondered exactly how he did it.



Why would someone, a back country trapper, spend 17 years building a castle 30 miles and 17 portages from the nearest town? An often repeated story I have seen in print and heard while working at the Atikokan Canoe Base in 1984 is that he built it for a woman back in Scotland who never came to him. It is a romantic story, based on some fact (he once inquired about a mail order bride), but false.

Here, in Jimmy's own words, is the true story as recorded by C.L. Hodson in 1914:

"Oh, just to fill time you know -- just to fill time. No, it isn't true there is something else... Years ago -- Yes, it's a long time now -- we were just boys, y'know -- I had a chum -- one of those jolly chaps -- always playing some prank. One day he threw an ear of corn at another man. It hit him on the ear -- an' he was a bad tempered chap. My -- how he swore! He didn't know who threw it -- no -- but he thought it was me. An' he cursed me -- said I'd die in a shack! Jimmy McQuat -- he says -- Ye'll never do any good -- Ye'll die in a shack. I couldn't tell him my chum done it, so he thought it was me-- said I'd die in a shack. I never forgot it. All the time I lived in a shack I kept thinking -- I must build me a house. An' so I have. Ye couldn't call it a shack, could ye? No, ye couldn't call it a shack... an' I built it all myself."

Jimmy McQuat died by accidental drowning in 1920, though his body wasn't discovered until 1921. His grave is next to his home in the beautiful wilderness. Volunteer and government help have maintained the castle over the years, where it is becoming more popular as a tourist attraction. In the Atikokan area, Old Jimmy is remembered as a wilderness character akin to Dorothy Molter or Benny Ambrose.

A 1965 brochure by George Wice was used to prepare this article.