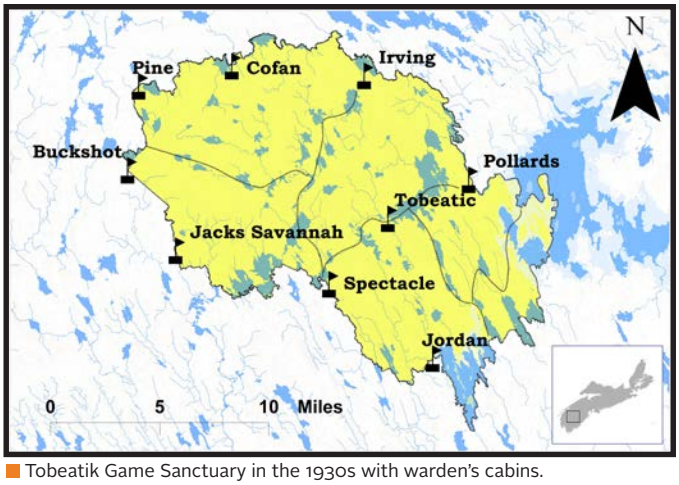
Restoring Cofan Cabin

Securing a cultural link to a past worth preserving

Mist rises around paddlers on the Shelburne River, en route to Cofan Cabin.

RICK MCMAHON (C)

By **Brian Braganza**



ALAIN BELLIVEAU

Tobeatik Game Sanctuary in the 1930s with warden's cabins.

Shelburne River, Tobeatic Wilderness Area, Nova Scotia:
Our morning commute is a 20-minute paddle across Sand Beach Lake from our camp on the pine esker overlooking the Shelburne River's Jim Charles Meadow. It's early September and we paddle through a shrouded lake as cool air meets warmer waters. The rising sun breaks up the mist and then the lake is glass as we paddle across a mirrored universe reflecting sky, sun, and pines. It's a remarkable experience, available to those who make the effort, almost anywhere in these Atlantic Provinces.

We arrive, welcomed by the little log cabin, known to some simply as Cofan, tucked into a stand of red and white pine along the Shelburne River, a designated heritage river in southwest Nova Scotia.

Once visible from the water, the clear vantage down the Shelburne and across the surrounding bog was perfect for the wardens stationed here, but now pines have grown tall hiding the cabin. Cofan was one of approximately nine cabins built between 1927 and the early 1930s, along the perimeter of the newly designated Tobeatik Game Sanctuary. Camps were located approximately 12 miles apart, or a day's travel. Game wardens had been hired to patrol the boundary keeping a watch for poachers illegally hunting moose or trapping beaver. Though they played a critical role maintaining wildlife inventories and protecting land and animals in the Tobeatic and the three other game sanctuaries in the province at that time, there is little written about these wardens. It is easy to

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imagine that they were men drawn to a solitary life with an intimate knowledge and relationship with this land.

The Tobeatik Game Sanctuary was established in 1927 when wardens officially started patrolling the boundaries. It was re-designated as the Tobeatic Wildlife Management Area in 1968. Parts of this management area later became the Tobeatic Wilderness Area in 1998. Nova Scotia continues to protect natural areas, and by 2015, had reached its goal of having more than 12 per cent of the province legally protected. The Tobeatic Wilderness Area and Kejimkujik National Park are in the heart of the Mi'kmaq district of *Kespukwitk*.

Cofan is one of two warden's cabins in the Tobeatic still standing and in usable condition. The others have been swallowed back into the wilderness, having over the passing of the years been penetrated by weather, mauled by bears, and overrun by mice, bats, and decay.

The intention of Nova Scotia's protected areas network is to maintain them as wild places without amenities, so there has been minimal upkeep of these cabins since the 1960s. Cofan has been periodically maintained over the past 50 years, and in 1987 a group of volunteers from the (former) Nova Scotia Department of Lands and Forest and the Bowater Mersey Paper Company did a considerable reconstruction, adding vital years to its life; large sections of the cabin had a make-over with new logs replacing many rotted ones, a new asphalt roof was added and the window on the south side was closed in with logs.

Paddlers through the years have done minor repairs where possible, and yet Cofan, which had continued to decay and slowly sink into the bog, has now been granted a reprieve. We're on a rehabilitation expedition; a sort of revival to raise and restore this tired yet treasured old cabin.

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Top: Cofan before the rehab began. Above: Cofan in 1933.

I first travelled down the Shelburne River, stopping at Cofan, in 1996. I was canoeing with Hinterland Adventures, scouting a 13-day trip across the province. We paddled from the Sissiboo system to the Shelburne River, from there into the Roseway system and the Jordan River, pulling out at Jordan Falls. In 13 days of travel through the Tobeatic, we did not see one other person until our last day.

After a cold damp day on the Shelburne, Cofan appeared through the pines. We hung damp socks and jackets from nails in the low rafters as the fire licked through the cracked shell of the ancient Premier step-stove. While the others lay down on old metal bunks in the steamy cabin, I was not impressed with the dingy quarters, smelling of bat guano and mouse feces, so I pitched a tent. The next day, with the sun filtering through red and white pines, we sat on a bench

COLIN GRAY

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JIM FOSTER

RICK MCMAHON

■ Top: Rotted log removed, new sills and shims. Middle: Rick McMahon, Myles Fawson and Mike McMahon installing bottom log. Above: David Young and Dusan Soudek chink logs, Rick McMahon looks on as Brian Braganza and Harold Killam test the new door.

■ Rebuilding the floor with volunteers Elizabeth Kyte, Brian Braganza, Myles Fawson.

beneath the south eaves while basket-maker Murray Moores showed us how to weave pliable witherod (wild raisin, a species of viburnum) whips into baskets. As my hands worked, I listened while the men shared stories of their many trips into the Tobeatic, a country as wild as you'll find anywhere in North America. This land is so integral to the Mi'kmaq people that their culture and this landscape weave together, shaping each other. With the sun on my face, the men's voices, and a wind-song in the pines, the subtle awe of the Tobeatic and the rustic charm of Cofan took hold.

The Province's Wilderness Areas protect representative (typical) examples of Nova Scotia's natural landscapes, native biological diversity, and outstanding natural features. They are used for scientific research, education and a variety of recreation and nature-tourism related activities such as hiking, canoeing, sea kayaking, sport fishing and hunting.

In 2010, the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute (MTRI), and Nova Scotia Environment—Protected Areas and Ecosystems Branch (NSE), gathered interested groups and individuals at the Maitland Bridge community hall, just outside Kejimkujik National Park. Anonymous donors had come forward with $10,000 to put towards the rehabilitation of the cabin. However, if no one committed to revive Cofan, it would need to be torn down as the cabin had become unsafe for use.

A small group of volunteers emerged and created a management agreement between MTRI, the non-profit lead organization, and NSE. Colin Gray, an MTRI volunteer, sustained this process for four years until work actually began on the cabin. In 2009 Colin and I were in a party that paddled the entire length of the Shelburne River, and it was another damp evening when we stopped at Cofan. As we hung our socks once more from the rafters, flames licked through cracks in the old step-stove now patched with tin foil, and Colin shared that a

distant relative of his, Chester Gray, was one of the wardens who had patrolled the Tobeatic in the 1930s. It was fitting that Colin would lead the charge to revive Cofan cabin.

The management agreement resulted in a unique collaboration from all levels of government, non-profits, business and citizens. MTRI took leadership and responsibility for organizing volunteers, supplies and logistics; NSE supplied oversight, logistics and safety, while Natural Resources helped with transport of materials. Parks Canada supported access and ground transportation of volunteers. Individuals donated funds and time, businesses donated materials, and local municipal governments loaned tools. This high level of collaboration from many sectors and individuals demonstrated a commitment not only to Cofan Cabin, but also to the importance of protected wilderness areas.

In September of 2014, a group of eight volunteers began work on the structure. Heading up this crew was log-builder Rick McMahon of Maritime Log House Restoration. As the bog had absorbed Cofan by more than two feet on the southeast corner, it took two days to excavate and gently lift the building out of the land's hold. Logs were squared on two sides while the interior floor was removed along with many decades of dust and refuse. A pressure treated six-by-six sill was installed, the bottom two rounds of logs were replaced, and the floor rebuilt. The cabin was lowered and stabilized onto the end cuts of pine logs, and boarded in for the winter. The intention was for another party to return the next spring to finish the job.

Due to the snow and ice that kept lakes frozen well into May following the winter of 2015, the next work party didn't return until September of that year. This trip completed the log replacements, installed new windows, set the building down on granite rocks and pressure treated posts, chinked the exterior, treated all the logs to resist rot, and built a door to match the original.

The final reconstruction trip to Cofan occurred in October of 2015. This group strengthened the roof with new rafters, installed a metal roof, and new wood stove and chimney. They also built bunks from some of the remaining red pine logs and completed the chinking of the exterior.

The rehabilitation of Cofan added a fire egress and a CSA-approved wood stove. Replacing the old step-stove was not without controversy; many who had travelled the Tobeatic since the 1970s had warmed up around the old stove, and felt it to be the heart of Cofan.

Cofan cabin is a half-day's paddle from Kejimkujik National Park's perimeter. Due to the Tobeatic's true wilderness nature and relatively low-use, there is no requirement to book the cabin. If it's empty, you're in luck; if it's occupied, you may still be in luck as travelers through the Tobeatic are often more than willing to share. As you dry off around the wood stove, read the inscriptions carved in the walls or add your name to the logbook, consider all those who've paddled and walked this land before you, creating pathways for you to follow.

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Colin Gray and Jean-Pierre Belliveau resting around the new wood stove after installing new bunks and rafters.

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Complete North-east corner. With the rehab done, Cofan should be welcoming visitors for many more years.