

# GIVE ME SHELTER

## WINTER CAMPING IN ADIRONDACK LEAN-TOS

BY JIM MULLER

***It was our biggest group ever***—ten winter campers! We had chosen Puffer Pond, near Indian Lake, for our overnight destination. It was an easy two-mile snowshoe that terminated at two closely positioned lean-tos which could easily accommodate our group.

As we got closer to Puffer Pond, the younger campers raced ahead to secure the “perfect” lean-to for themselves. But their land-grab backfired as the wind kicked up during the evening and blew snow off the frozen pond and into their exposed shelter. Those of us in the lean-to back from the water’s edge were somewhat shielded by trees and doubly protected by

### **Log lean-tos have long been a part of the Adirondack backcountry camping experience.**

the tarp we hung across the open side of the structure.

Despite the land-grab, harmony reigned as the group shared a single fire after dinner. Under a full-moon night sky, we continued the time-honored tradition of reading the lean-to registration book; a must for lean-to users

as described in *No Place I’d Rather Be: Wit and Wisdom from Adirondack Lean-to Journals* by Stuart Mesinger. Most entries either complained about the bad weather, bothersome bugs and poor fishing, or conversely heralded the great weather, abundant wildlife and beautiful scenery. Not surprisingly, there were very few entries from the winter months.

While spending a cold winter night camping in the woods may not be many people’s idea of fun, for us it’s incredibly exhilarating. And using a lean-to makes it even more enjoyable. For one thing, you don’t have to carry your shelter with you. Also, most lean-tos are spacious, typically having enough room for five

campers. In addition, a lean-to provides a level, dry platform for changing clothes, setting up a stove, mixing food, or just plain sitting.

But lean-tos also have their “challenges.” For instance, lean-tos aren’t particularly warm in cold weather—even if you close off the open side with a tarp as we did. (Of course, what unheated structure wouldn’t be cold in the winter?) Also, lean-tos can house rodents, which can make for an interesting night.

If you do plan on camping at lean-tos, keep in mind that these structures are usually situated in high-use areas, and availability is on a first-come, first-served basis. That means you could hike in only to find the lean-to already occupied. Of course, this is truer of the other three seasons, as winter campers are fewer in

number. In fact, in the 14 years I've been winter camping, I've only once encountered a lean-to in use by other campers. It was on one of my very first winter camping trips—an intrepid Boy Scout troop preceded us into the popular John Pond lean-to in the Siamese Ponds Wilderness Area. So, rather than try to share the lean-to with the whole troop, we retrieved a tent from our vehicle and camped on the other side of the pond.

Fortunately for us, on this trip to Puffer Pond the lean-tos were unoccupied—by both humans and rodents—and they kept us warm enough during our stay. Everyone enjoyed the extra room the lean-tos provided, as well as being able to sleep off the frozen ground.

Anyone who has ever spent time hiking in the North Country knows that a lean-to provides a comforting sight at the end of a long expedition. A lean-to



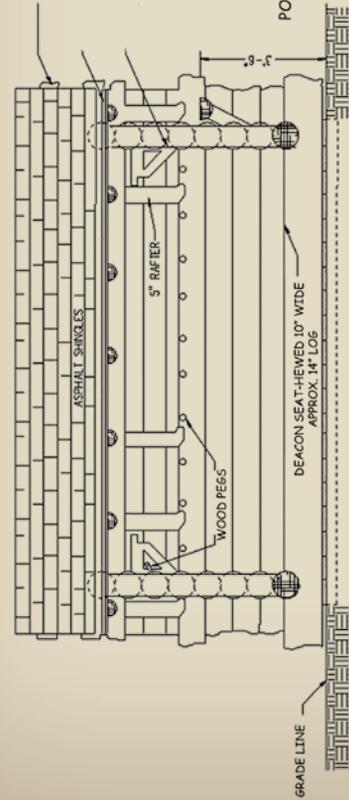
Spacious and dry, lean-tos provide a home-away-from-home for hikers and campers looking for shelter and a place to rest.

Jim Muller

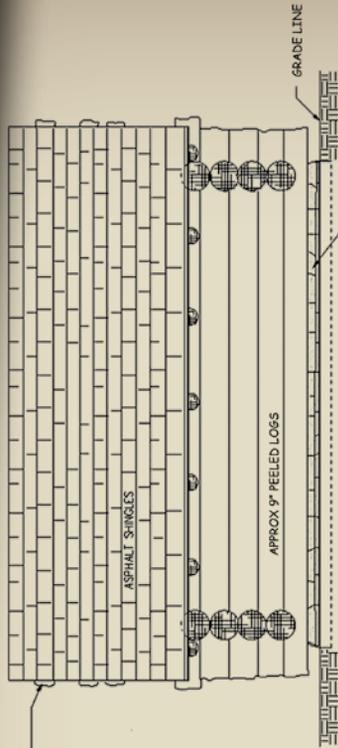


After arriving at the lean-tos, the author took this photo of his winter camping group.

# BUILD AN ADIRONDACK LEAN-TO



FRONT ELEVATION

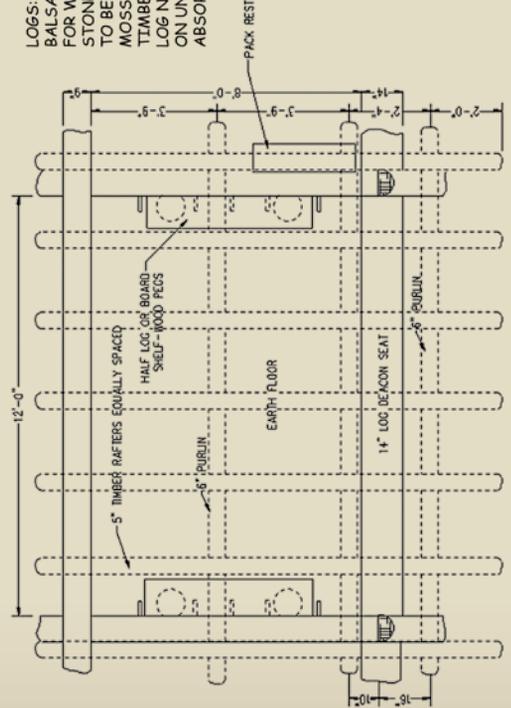


REAR ELEVATION

6" PURLIN  
 ROOF BOARDS-7/8" X 8"  
 SHIP LAP  
 SIDE SHELVES-HALF LOGS  
 OR BOARDS, BRACKETS,  
 LOG BLOCKS AS DETAILED.  
 PACK REST:  
 PLACE ON SIDE OF  
 MAIN APPROACH, WHERE  
 POSITION OF TRAIL WARRANTS  
 IT, PLACE ON BOTH SIDES.

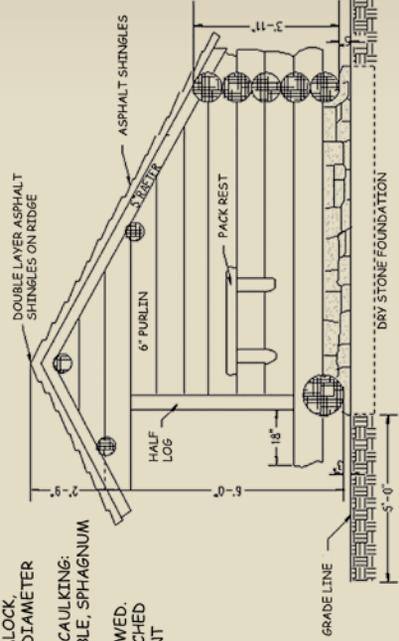
ON A CLOSED FOUNDATION, SCREENED  
 OR METAL LATH SHOULD BE PROVIDED FOR  
 VENTILATION.

WHERE STONE FOUNDATION EXTENDS  
 ABOVE GRADE, BANK WITH DIRT FOR  
 WIND STOP.



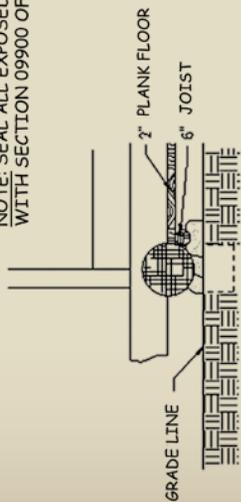
SIDE ELEVATION

LOGS: TO BE OF CEDAR, PINE, HEMLOCK,  
 BALSAM, OR SPRUCE. - MINIMUM DIAMETER  
 FOR WALL LOGS - 8".  
 STONE FOUNDATION: OPTIONAL CAULKING;  
 TO BE OAKUM OR WHERE AVAILABLE, SPHAGNUM  
 MOSS, WELL TAMPED IN PLACE.  
 TIMBER ENDS: SAWED OR AXE HEWED.  
 LOG NOTCHING: LOGS TO BE NOTCHED  
 ON UNDER SIDE SO AS TO PREVENT  
 ABSORPTION OF MOISTURE



NOTE: ALL LOGS SHALL BE FROM THE SAME MANUFACTURER

NOTE: SEAL ALL EXPOSED WOOD SURFACES IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 09900 OF THE PROJECT MANUAL.



FLOOR JOIST:  
4" X 6" SAWED TIMBERS MAY BE USED WHERE ACCESSIBILITY OF SITE MAKES USE PRACTICAL.

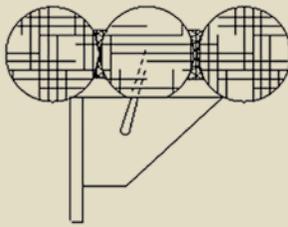
SECTION A-A

**SCHEDULE OF MATERIALS**

- 2 1/2 SQUARES ASPHALT SHINGLES
- 280 BOARD FT. 7/8" X 6" OR 8" Y.P. OR FIR SHITPLAP
- 5 LOGS - DIA. 9" X 16'
- 10 LOGS - DIA. 9" X 10'
- 3 LOGS - DIA. 6" X 16'
- 10 LOGS - DIA. 9" X 12'
- 1 LOG - DIA. 14" X 16'
- 7 LOGS - DIA. 5" X 16'

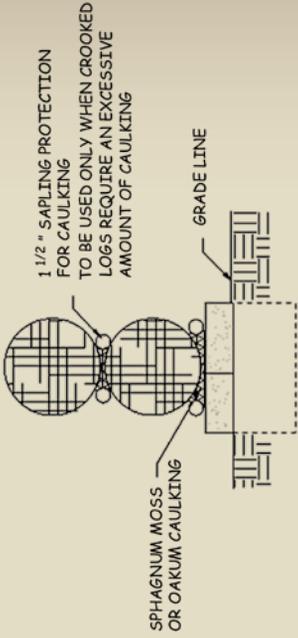
- 50 LBS - OAKUM
- 100 LBS - 10" SPIKES
- 8 LBS - 40D SPIKES
- 10 LBS - 8D NAILS
- 8 LBS - 60D SPIKES
- 10 LBS - 20D NAILS (FLOORING)
- 10 LBS - 3D ZINC COATED ROOFING NAILS

IF FLOOR IS REQUIRED - 4 LOGS DIA. 6" X 12'  
200 BOARD FT. 2" Y.P. OR SPRUCE PLANKING X 8'



20 - 3/4" DIA. X 6" HARDWOOD PEGS 5 EACH SIDE BELOW SHELF. 10 EQUALLY SPACED ALONG BACK TOP LOG.

SHELF DETAIL



1 1/2" SAPLING PROTECTION FOR CAULKING TO BE USED ONLY WHEN CROOKED LOGS REQUIRE AN EXCESSIVE AMOUNT OF CAULKING

SPHAGNUM MOSS OR OAKUM CAULKING

GRADE LINE

12'-0"

6" TIMBER JOIST

ROUGH SAWED 2" PLANK FLOOR

ALTERNATE PLAN

WOOD FLOOR TO BE PROVIDED WHEN INADEQUATE DRAINAGE NECESSITATES



can be a refuge, a retreat, a shelter, a lunch spot, an inspiration point, and a temporary home-away-from-home. New York State maintains a number of lean-tos throughout backcountry areas of the Adirondack Park. These shelters are open to any and all campers, up to the marked capacity of the shelter. However, if you plan on staying for more than three consecutive nights, you must first obtain a free DEC permit.

Log lean-tos have long been a part of the Adirondack back-country camping experience. These open-faced shelters are built mostly by hand using chainsaws and chisels. Whole logs are assembled into the generally twelve- by eight-foot structures using a scribe notching technique that results in a tight fit to protect occupants from the elements. DEC first published the basic plans (reproduced here) for building a lean-to in March 1957. Today, these same plans provide the basis for most lean-to construction in the state.

Not all lean-tos occur in the back-country. John Dillon Park is a wilderness facility comprised of a number of wheelchair-accessible lean-tos equipped with ramps and fold-down wooden sleeping platforms. The park was created through a partnership among International Paper, Paul Smith's College and the State of New York, and is specifically aimed at making the natural landscape of the Adirondacks available to everyone, including people with disabilities. The park is not open during the winter months, but interested individuals can check out [www.johndillonpark.org](http://www.johndillonpark.org) to learn more, and to see about availability.

For us, the lean-tos at Puffer Pond added a nice dimension to our trip, providing much needed shelter from a cold winter's night. And in the morning, we enjoyed the protection afforded us, leisurely cooking a hearty breakfast over a small fire. The meal tasted delicious, enhanced no doubt by the beautiful, frosty, blue-sky winter morning. Using the spacious lean-tos to repack our gear for the hike out, we all agreed that this trip was well worth the effort.



Though it may not have all the comforts of home, a lean-to provides a welcome shelter to sleep, change clothes and prepare food.

### Everyone enjoyed the extra room the lean-tos provided, as well as being able to sleep off the frozen ground.

Before departing, we made our own entry into the log book—keeping the tradition going by recording the weather conditions and the origins of our group. We wondered who would be the next visitors; other winter campers like ourselves? Or would the lean-tos remain empty until spring?

**Jim Muller** is a Leave No Trace master educator. He enjoys canoeing during warm months and camping in the winter. Check out [www.WinterCampers.com](http://www.WinterCampers.com) to view pictures from his winter adventures.

International Paper/Broudy Donohue Photography



Lean-tos at John Dillon Park are wheelchair-accessible and equipped with ramps and fold-down wooden sleeping platforms.



# HELP OUR LEAN-TOS

Log lean-tos have been a part of New York's wilderness landscape for many years. Today, there are nearly 300 of these open-faced structures open to the public in the Adirondack and Catskill preserves. Most are in good condition, but some are in need of repairs, as time and the elements have taken their toll.

You can help preserve these shelters by volunteering through either of two organizations: Adopt a Lean-to or Lean2Rescue.

Adirondack Mountain Club's Adopt a Lean-to program began in 1985 with eight lean-tos. By 2009, the program had grown to include 150 lean-tos. Participants volunteer their time and/or money to maintaining the identified lean-tos and the grounds around the structures. Adopters generally visit "their" lean-to at least twice a year to perform basic maintenance and clean-up, as well as maintain registers and note major repairs needed. Many adopters also choose to assist DEC staff in completing more intensive projects, such as roof

replacement and structural work. Check out [www.adk.org/trails/BC\\_Stewardship.aspx](http://www.adk.org/trails/BC_Stewardship.aspx) for more information.

Lean2Rescue is a group of campers, hikers, hunters, skiers, paddlers, and other outdoor enthusiasts who have restored, rehabilitated and rescued more than 30 lean-tos to date. Started in 2004 by Paul DeLucia of Baldwinsville, NY, the all-volunteer group works closely with DEC to identify and complete lean-to restoration, primarily in St. Lawrence, Herkimer and Hamilton Counties. Work includes anything from roof repairs to building entirely new structures, and most of the work is done using non-motorized tools and vehicles. Lean2Rescue operates year-round, including through Adirondack winters. For further information, check out [www.lean2rescue.org](http://www.lean2rescue.org).

Contact your local DEC office ([www.dec.ny.gov/about/50230.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/about/50230.html)) to find out more about New York's lean-tos (including locations and rules for using).