

## Poets' Corner

### THE BALLAD OF THE CANTEEN BAR

One guy's name was Johnny,  
The other fellow, Speed.  
They were laughing there behind the bar,  
In a joint they called "Canteen."

It was on Christmas Eve  
Back there in forty-two,  
And I was sick with emptiness,  
Ashamed, unwanted, dead-broke, too.

The town was boarded up and black;  
There was no window light or glare —  
No colors, brightness up or down,  
Just cold and huddle everywhere.

So I pushed into a corner bar.  
Man, it was crimped and smoky rough,  
There were fishermen and trappers,  
And some mixed and native fluff.



John Campbell with a trophy set or rack of moose horns, also on the Kenai hunt.



Carl Durand, on left, John Campbell, center, Speed Miller, on right, enjoying their moose hunt on the Kenai — a respite from the "Canteen."

"Can I fix you up, my friend?"  
I shook my head and then looked down.  
But Speed slid drinks right in the C  
That was my fingers and my thumb.

And as I drank for holiday  
My heart shook off its sins.  
I saw a hundred hidden pains  
Beneath the dripping chins.

An Air Force kid came bouncing in.  
"Well, Norm, how are things out on Attu?"  
"And where are Gallager and Shay?"  
Norman licked his lips with glue.

And there was silence pulsing  
And everybody knew.  
They stood double shots for Norman  
And drank prayers for the missing two.

These stubborn strong, unasking men,  
Drank fellowship that Christmas Eve.  
They bled their wounds and let them close  
For no man likes to show his grief.

The surface was all brag and swear;  
There were lispng stories quite obscene;  
Some fought with fists and some with dice  
But the inner man was not unclean.

That was twelve years ago tonight.  
Now I've got a wife and kids,  
A TV set and Buick car,  
Friends and business bids.



But if there's still a Canteen Bar  
On a corner of an Anchorage Street,  
I'd like to send you my regards.  
You gave me more than jigger treat.

You ministered to men that night  
As only men can understand.  
I found that there are many ways  
To worship God and serve one's fellow man.  
Margaret G. Mielke



**John Campbell (R) in front of the Canteen Bar. Just in from the Duck Flats across the Inlet. 1946.**