Steele Creek Community Structure A Rehabilitation, 2006

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Location: Steele Creek Community (EAG-00144), Fortymile National Wild and Scenic River corridor.
Participants: Robin Mills (BLM-FDO Archaeologist), Collin Cogley (BLM-FDO Outdoor Recreation Planner), Alaska Fire Service North Star Firefighters
Dates: August 13-20, 2006

The Undertaking:

The historic Steele Creek Community (EAG-00144), founded in 1898, is situated at the confluence of Steele Creek and the Fortymile River. It is presently found inside of the Fortymile National Wild and Scenic River corridor, managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The site lies approximately six miles downstream from the Fortymile Bridge located at MP 112.7 of the Taylor Highway (Figure 1). The Steele Creek Roadhouse (EAG-00019) and associated community served vital transportation needs along the chief overland trail between the historic towns of Eagle and Chicken in the Fortymile River drainage, providing services for many traders, freighters, and other travelers throughout the first half of the 20th century. In addition, the roadhouse provided social needs to the local area by serving as the location for holiday festivities on the Fortymile. The construction of the Taylor Highway in 1951 signaled the final demise of the functioning roadhouse and what was left of the community.

In addition to the roadhouse building, two other historic log buildings are still present at the site: "Structure A", a single room log cabin that shows up in the earliest photos of the site (and known locally as "the store" or "general store"), and "Structure B", a two room log cabin of unknown time depth.

During the summer of 2002, Dr. Harrison Goodall, a preservation specialist of 19th century historic log architecture, was contracted by the BLM to produce a detailed Condition Assessment Report and Stabilization Plans for the roadhouse and the other two standing buildings at the town site. A copy of Dr. Goodall's report was submitted to the Alaska State Historic Preservation Office in 2003, when we consulted with the Alaska SHPO about other emergency stabilization work at the site.

Along with numerous other points, Goodall's Condition Assessment report emphasized the extreme deteriorated state of the sill logs of all three structures found at the site. Based upon his recommendation, and after consultation with the Alaska SHPO, the BLM in the summer of 2006 replaced the rotten sill logs and lower courses of logs associated with Structure A at the site.

The project was successfully concluded from August 13-20, 2006. BLM personnel and a team of BLM-Alaska Fire Service Type 2 firefighters (the North Star crew) provided the field labor for the project. The white spruce trees for this project were harvested locally;

the earthen berms around the structure were dug out; the buildings were elevated with hydraulic jacks and supported temporarily with wooden cribbing; the rotten logs were replaced with treated logs on top of a pavement of creek cobbles; the buildings were lowered; earth was spread around the based of the walls to “hide” the cobbles and lower logs.

Figures 2 to 18, below, document the various stages of the project.

Appendix A outlines the scheduling, logistics, and rehabilitation plans for this project. Appendix B is the safety plan submitted for this project. Appendix C is a copy of the BLM-FDO’s Categorical Exclusion (CX) paperwork required for this project by the National Environmental Policy Act (1969, as amended). Appendix D is a copy of the cultural literature review performed by the BLM to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (1966, as amended). Appendix E is a copy of the paperwork produced by the BLM to comply with Section 810(a) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (1980). Appendix F is a copy of the paperwork produced by the BLM to comply with the Endangered Species Act (1973). Appendix G is a copy of the letter written by the BLM-FDO to the Alaska SHPO consulting about this project. Appendix H is a copy of the letter the Alaska SHPO wrote back to the BLM-FDO agreeing to the work and advising the BLM about the project.

FIGURE 2. Local river guide Larry Taylor transported the field project members to the Steele Creek site by boat. Field members consisted of BLM personnel and 11 AFS North Star Firefighters.

FIGURE 3. Steele Creek Community's "Structure A", a single room historic log cabin about 100 years old, and the focus of the 2006 lower courses of rotten logs rehabilitation project. Note "Structure B" in the background.

FIGURE 4. The first thing that needed to be done was to dig out the earthen insulation berm that covered over the lower courses of logs on three sides of the log cabin.

FIGURE 5. Digging out the earthen insulation berm that covered over the lower courses of logs on three sides of the log cabin.

FIGURE 6. Work continues on digging out the earthen insulation berms that covered over the lower courses of logs on three sides of the log cabin, but now also includes elevating the cabin in preparation for new logs.

FIGURE 7. Work continues on digging out the earthen insulation berms removing the rotten logs, and elevating the cabin in advance of log replacement. Note the piles of creek cobbles brought to the cabin site, used to underlie the new sill logs for better drainage.

FIGURE 8. White spruce trees were harvested locally, dragged to the site by means of four-wheelers and sleds, and had their bark removed by means of draw knives. Local spruce trees were used in the original cabin construction.

FIGURE 9. After bark removal, spruce trees were then carried to the cabin.

FIGURE 10. A peeled spruce log being put in place under the elevated cabin.

FIGURE 11. Peeled spruce logs being placed under the elevated cabin.

FIGURE 12. Peeled spruce logs being placed under the elevated cabin. Note the creek cobbles underlying the lower-most sill log.

FIGURE 13. Peeled spruce logs being placed under the elevated cabin.

FIGURE 14. Peeled spruce logs being placed under the elevated cabin. Note the creek cobbles underlying the lower-most sill log.

FIGURE 15. Peeled spruce logs placed under the cabin. Note the creek cobbles underlying the lower-most sill logs.

FIGURE 16. Two walls completed. Note the creek cobbles underlying the lower-most sill logs.

FIGURE 17. After painting the replaced logs with a preservative, spoil was placed back over the lower portions of the work (cobbles; lower logs).

FIGURE 18. Steele Creek Community's Structure A after the completion of the project.