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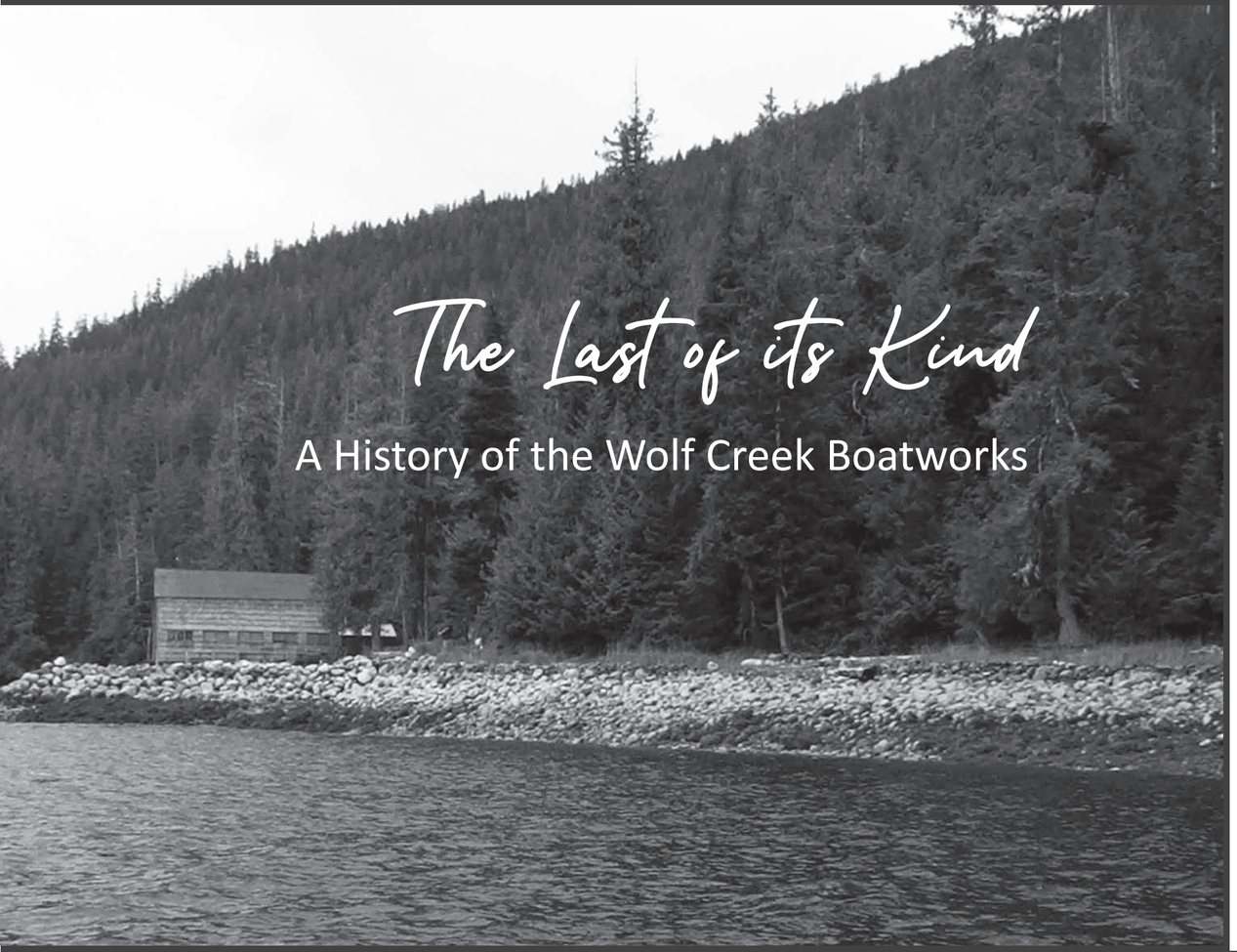

The Last of its Kind

A History of the Wolf Creek Boatworks

Front cover: A view of the Wolf Creek Boatworks from Twelvemile Arm.
Shona Pierce photograph, Tongass National Forest Collection,
United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service – Alaska Region, Ketchikan, AK.

Back cover: A view of the inside of the Wolf Creek Boatworks.
Doug Charles photograph, Wolf Creek Boatworks Collection,
Ketchikan Museums & Tongass Historical Society, Ketchikan, AK.

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Overhead view of the Wolf Creek Boatworks.[p-1]

The Last of its Kind

A History of the Wolf Creek Boatworks

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Israel Stevens, first owner of the Wolf Creek Boatworks, on a log and plank walkway to the *Stevie* (left), the *Ranger* (center), and the *Invader* (right), circa 1955.[p-2]

Acknowledgments

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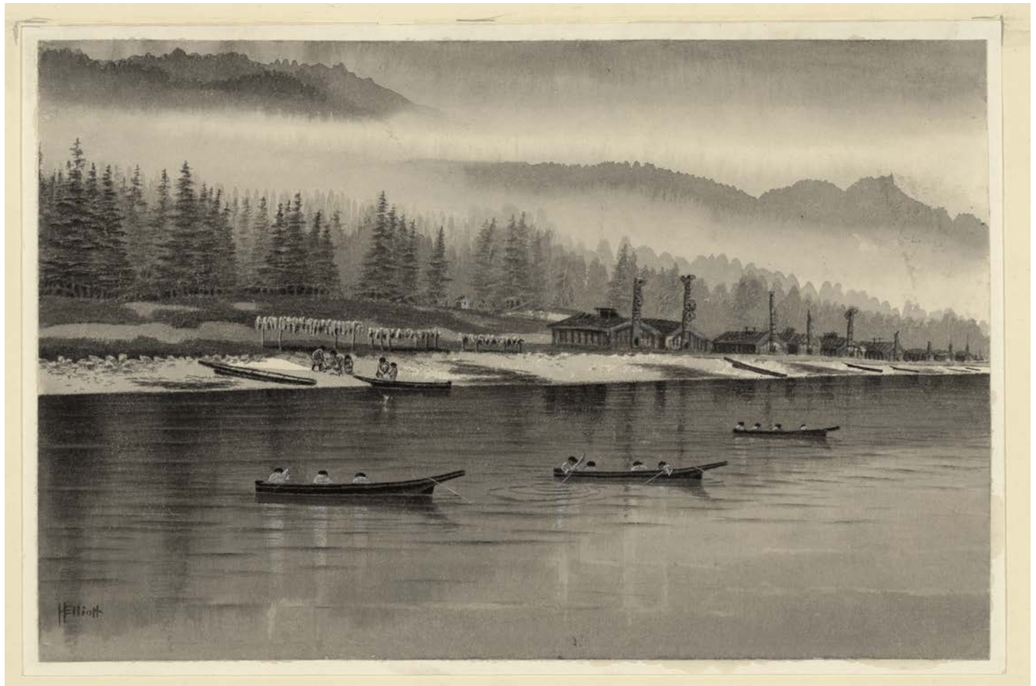
Winter at Wolf Creek with the water supply line for the Boatworks, 2007.[p-3]

Introduction—A Maritime Way of Life

The Wolf Creek Boatworks comprises a wooden building that houses a variety of equipment that skilled craftsmen utilized to build and repair boats over the last eighty-five years; it sits on a small, rocky stretch of beach on the east side of Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska. The shop, originally constructed during the winter of 1938/1939, remains part of the fabric of the region's maritime history and maintains deep ties to the nearby communities of Hollis and Kasaan. Multiple industries and generations of people relied on facilities like the one at Wolf Creek to service the vessels they depended upon to live and work in Southeast Alaska.

A catwalk near the Wolf Creek Boatworks.[p-4]

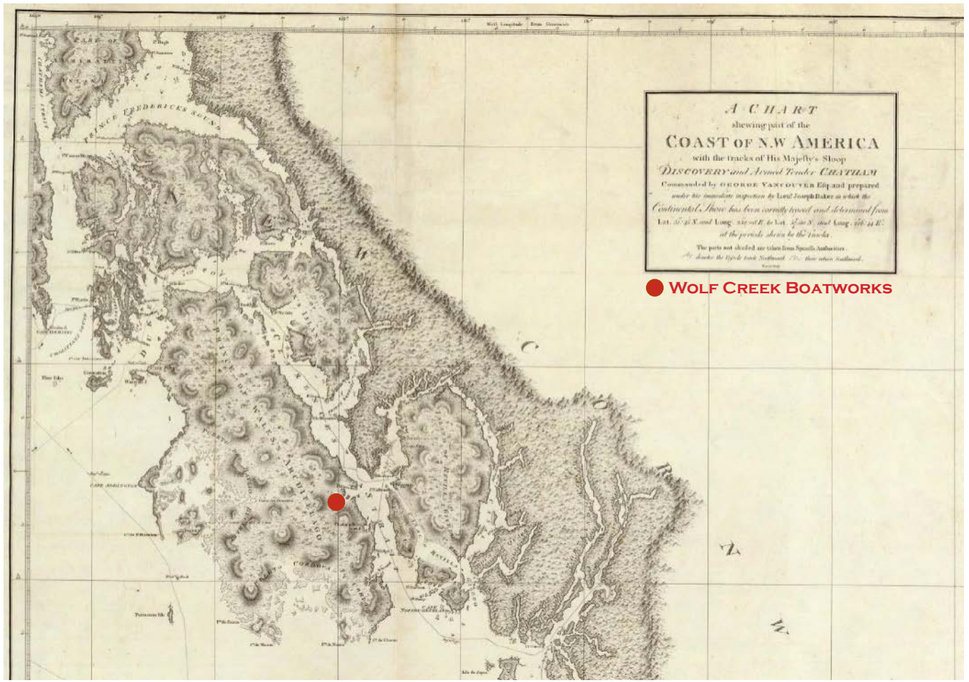


Alaska Natives, such as the Haida (shown here), Tlingit, and Tsimshian created dugout canoes to travel, hunt, and fish. The vessels carried up to sixty people at a time, and craftsmen carved them from felled trees with an adz before oiling them with seal oil. [p-5]

Southeast Alaska is defined by water; the region is home to numerous islands and thousands of miles of pristine creeks, rivers, and lakes. Glaciers carved rugged valleys and rounded mountains on Prince of Wales Island leading up to and after the last glacial maximum around 25,000 years ago; they dug out long narrow fjords that filled with seawater.[1] The island, within the "Alaska Panhandle," contains a coastal temperate rainforest that receives between 80 and 160 inches of precipitation annually.[2] The lush forest contains large stands of Coastal Western Hemlock and Sitka Spruce, which create habitat for black bears, wolves, Sitka black-tailed deer, marten, mink, otters, and beavers.[3] The waters of the nearby Twelvemile Arm support populations of salmon, trout, sea lions, porpoises, whales, and a variety of invertebrates, such as crabs, snails, and mussels.[4]

The region's maritime way of life stretches back since time immemorial. Alaska Natives have called Southeast Alaska (*Aani*) home for thousands of years. Archaeologists unearthed ancient fishing gear, shell middens, stone knives, and other cultural materials indicating that people lived on Prince of Wales Island for at least the last 10,000 years.[5] These maritime people, the ancestors of the modern-day Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian Nations, passed down oral traditions of navigating the nearby waters.[6] The Klawock (Tlingit), Stikine (Tlingit) and, later, the Kaigani (Haida) crossed the waters of the Island's bays and fjords in dugout canoes hewn from single logs.[7] The Haida established a village near the future site of the Boatworks in 1904, after moving the village from a location on Skowl Arm, and named it Kasaan; it took its name from the Tlingit term for "pretty place."[8]

Map of the State of Alaska with the Wolf Creek Boatworks, located on Prince of Wales Island.[p-6]



Captain George Vancouver drew the first known map of Prince of Wales Island in 1798 as he sailed through the area in his search of the Northwest Passage.[p-7]

Europeans and Americans, like Alaska Natives, depended on sturdy vessels to reach Southeast Alaska. Rich natural resources—particularly fur-bearing animals such as sea otters and seals—attracted fur traders after mariner Vitus Bering ferried pelts back to Russia that he collected during his voyage to North America in 1741.[9] By the middle of the century, trappers had nearly hunted sea otters to extinction, and Russia's defeat in the Crimean War encouraged Tsar Alexander II to sell the far-flung colony; U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward facilitated the purchase of the Alaska territory for an incredible $7.2 million in 1867, which earned the Alaska Purchase the nickname of "Seward's Folly." Critics quickly realized the folly sat on a literal gold mine—prospectors discovered gold in the nearby Canadian Yukon Territory, and over 100 steamships left Seattle for the Klondike during the first three months of 1898 alone.[10]

With this check, the United States purchased Alaska from Russia for $7.2 million on March 30, 1868.[p-8]

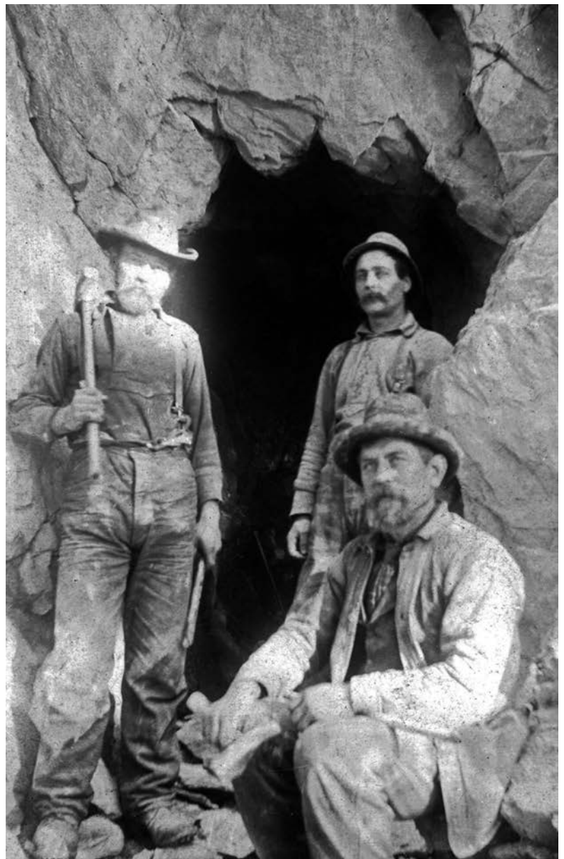
Miners bound for the Klondike gold fields: view from the bottom of Chilkoot pass, 1898.[p-9]

The fashion industry, particularly the desire for beaver-pelt hats, prompted trappers to harvest increasing numbers of animals.[p-10]

Women exhibited their status with expensive fur garments during the Edwardian era.[p-11]

Trapping satisfied basic human needs in Alaska since time immemorial—sustenance and protection against frigid winter temperatures. Alaska Natives harvested fur-bearing animals for meat and to create warm hats, mittens, parkas, and pants.[11] They also traded furs with other groups, including Europeans, who utilized them to fashion expensive garments that flaunted their wealth. Russian trappers first hunted sea otters in the Aleutian Islands, often with the local Islanders' forced labor. By 1847, Alaska Natives began trading furs with the Hudson's Bay Company for Western goods. While beaver pelts became increasingly valuable, especially for fashionable top hats, trappers continued to hunt sea otters to the brink of extinction by the early twentieth century.[12] Today, the federal government lists them as a threatened species in Alaska.[13]

Trapping remains a significant industry in Alaska—an estimated 2,500 to 3,500 trappers reside within the state.[14]



Three miners in the Newtown Mine Shaft near Ketchikan, circa 1900.[p-12]

The gold rush ended as quickly as it began, and major industries—namely mining, fishing, and logging—emerged in Southeast Alaska that depended on water transportation. Prospectors in the Ketchikan Mining District, which included land on Prince of Wales Island, extracted gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead, uranium, palladium, and tungsten as the nationwide demand for metals surged after World War I. Local miners working claims such as the Cracker Jack, Hyak, Puyallup, and Flagstaff mines often required watercraft to haul valuable ore to a crusher. Several prospectors and their families established the nearby town of Hollis at this time.[15] Many former stampeders searched for other metals until the country slid into a recession when the stock market collapsed in 1929.[16] Although President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's decision to increase the price of gold to $35 per ounce created a bump in Alaskan gold mining, its effect, much like the previous gold rush, only lasted a short while—large numbers of men joined the military during World War II, and their mines closed once again.[17]

Canneries, such as this one in Kasaan, operated throughout Southeast Alaska during the early twentieth century. Workers loaded ships, such as the one shown above, with cans of salmon.[p-13]

By the turn of the twentieth century, many settlers turned to other industries, particularly fishing, as the charge on the goldfields abated. Fish, as always, remained a critical staple in the local diet, and the fishing industry thrived with the advancement of salmon canning technology in the first decade of the twentieth century.[18] While an expert butcher, typically a Chinese immigrant, could process a large salmon in as little as eight strokes with a razor-sharp knife (which equated to dressing approximately 2,000 fish per person over the course of a ten-hour shift), the yearly salmon runs supplied more fish than the men could process.[19] A combination of two inventions revolutionized the canning industry—the Smith Butchering Machine (invented ca. 1903) processed ten times more fish per minute than a human butcher, and sanitary cans (invented ca. 1904) prevented spoilage and sped up manufacturing time.[20] Prince of Wales Island experienced the pressure that intensified harvesting created; fishermen caught greater numbers of salmon with the assistance of purse seines, pile-driven traps, and floating traps.[21] Seasonal communities, often divided by ethnicity and race, arose to process the massive harvests—Euro-American fishermen transported their catches to the canneries while Asian and Alaska Native crews fed them through butchering machines and packed them in sanitary cans.[22]

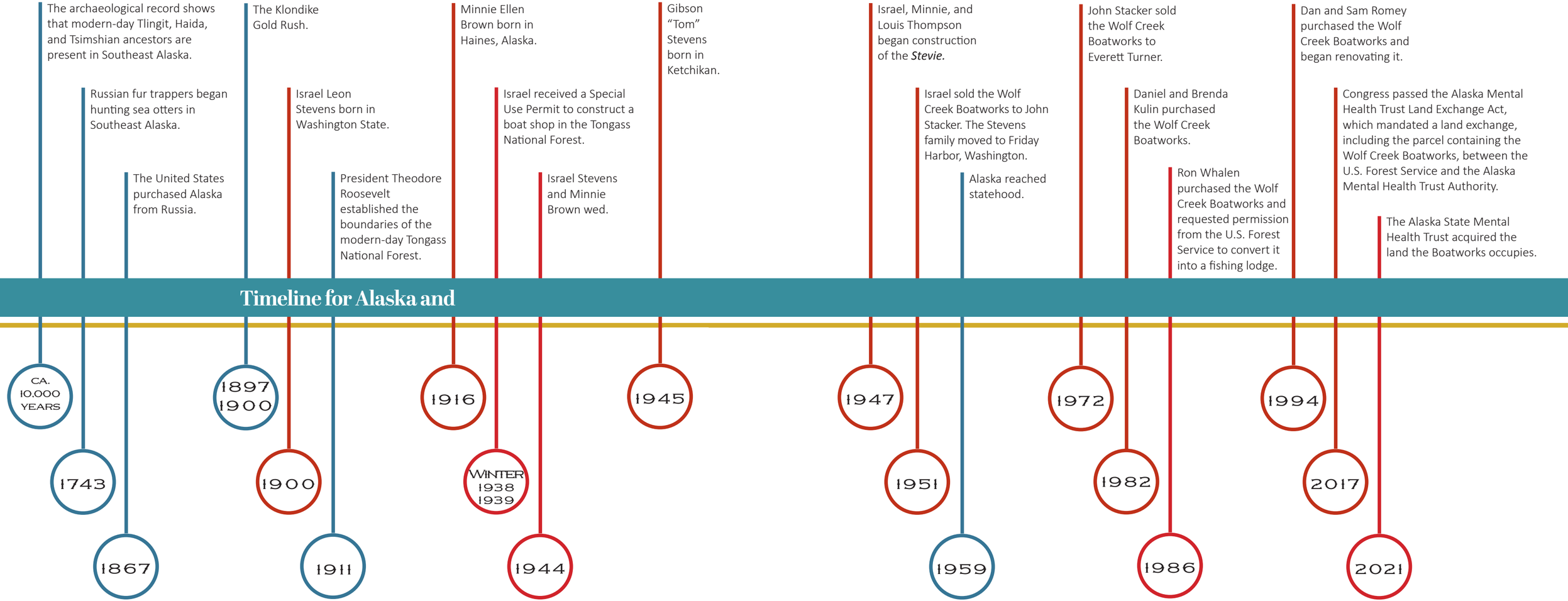
Logging served as an important industry in early twentieth-century Alaska.[p-14]

Logging also historically served as an essential industry in Southeast Alaska, and logging companies often towed their harvests to local sawmills on floats. The Tongass National Forest, where the Boatworks historically sat, arose from Theodore Roosevelt's union of the Alexander Archipelago Forest Reserve and Tongass National Forest in 1909; the U.S. Forest Service allowed logging in the 16.8 million-acre Forest from its inception.[23] However, logging in the vicinity of Prince of Wales Island failed to bring in sufficient profit to serve as an outside market until World War II, when aviation engineers needed lumber from spruce trees to construct airplanes.[24] After the war, the U.S. Forest Service began offering fifty-year timber sale contracts to those who erected pulp mills and, although only two companies took advantage of those agreements, the pulp industry grew after the midcentury.[25] The mining town of Hollis became a logging community.[26]

Tom Stevens Sr., shown here towing a dory, owned and operated the Flagstaff Mine above Karta Lake. He hauled ore down the mountainside on a tractor to the lake, then used a float to move the materials across the water to a crusher.[p-15]

Alaskans also used personal vessels for subsistence, as many relied on hunting and fishing to survive. No matter their industry, watercraft remained essential to those working and living on Prince of Wales Island. Locals recognized the impracticality of automobile travel from the beginning. Southeast Alaska's hundreds of islands, steep mountains, and deep fjords presented extreme obstacles for engineers seeking to build roads during the early twentieth century.[27] The territorial government focused road-building efforts on the most populated communities, such as Juneau and Ketchikan, and prior to the introduction of airplanes in the 1920s, watercraft provided the only quick method of transportation outside of the few communities with roads.[28] Shipwrights constructed dozens of boat shops to meet this need and historians estimate that at one time "boat yards with marine ways were located along the waterfront in Ketchikan… and likely in every community on the Prince of Wales Island and [Alexander] Archipelago."[29] Expert craftsmen assembled everything from small wooden rowboats to trollers more than 40 feet long. Israel Stevens, who established the Wolf Creek Boatworks, was one of those craftsmen.

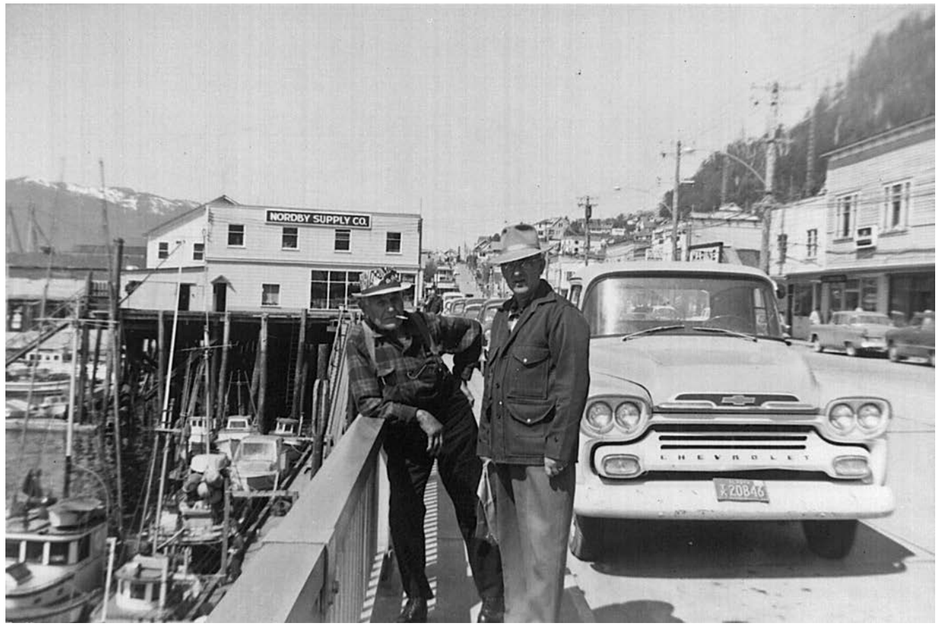
Timeline for Alaska and



A New Home on the Last Frontier

A winding path brought Israel Leon Stevens to a modest stretch of beach on Prince of Wales Island during the rainy winter of 1938/1939. Israel was among the first generation of his father's side of the family born in America.[30] His father, Thomas, was born in Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire, England, in 1861. He immigrated to the United States with his parents and three siblings in 1876.[31] Thomas' parents, Israel Sr. and Mary, left no clear explanation for why they brought their children to America and, ultimately, the Washington Territory, but the area's relatively less-strict laws regarding racial discrimination may indicate the reason—Mary was born in Africa. She undoubtedly faced judgment because of her marriage to Israel. Their nine children, whom recorders labeled "mulatto" on census records, likely also experienced prejudice. While many residents of the Washington Territory regarded non-white newcomers with hostility, the "…discriminatory conditions in the state were perhaps not as bad as those elsewhere."[32]

The Tongass National Forest encompasses nearly 90% (17 million acres) of Southeast Alaska.[p-16]



Louis Jones (left) and Israel Stevens (right) near the Ketchikan City Float, circa 1960.[p-17]

Thomas and his wife, Ida Bemus Stevens, were likely drawn to the Alaska Territory for this exact reason; mixed-race settlers could occasionally find places that treated them with more tolerance in this Last Frontier.[33] Or, Thomas may have decided to move north in the hopes of striking it rich; the Alaskan gold rush had only recently ended. Regardless of the reason, the family moved to Alaska in 1904. He listed his occupation as a "miner" on the 1910 Census record and operated the Flagstaff and Cascade Mines near Karta Lake.[34] Of note, Thomas and Ida, married in Sanpete, Utah, in 1894, had twelve children over their forty-plus years of marriage: Thomas (b. 1897), Israel (b. 1900), Ruby (b. 1902), Gladys (b. 1906), Ada (b. 1908), Frances (b. 1910), Mable (b. 1911), Percy (b. 1914), Weldon (b. 1915), Juanita (b. 1919), and Johnny (unknown).[35]

Few records survive that document Israel's early life; he received less than a second-grade-level education, and his nephew, Ellis Lundin, later described him as "pretty reserved."[36] He married Rose Hathaway Griffin, a young woman from Ketchikan, in 1927; the couple had at least one living son and another child who passed away prematurely in 1929 before they divorced in the 1930s.[37] Israel met Minnie Ellen Morgan, a schoolteacher and post office worker, while employed as a lumberjack during the winter of 1943/1944. The couple married in late November 1944, and she gave birth to their only child, Gibson Leon "Tom" Stevens, in 1945.[38]

Minnie Ellen Brown (***Yeikd'shee***) was born in Haines, Alaska, on August 3, 1916. She was the fourth of ten children born to her parents, Mary and James Brown. Her heritage included members of the Chilkat Tribe of Klukwan (***Jilkaat Kwáan***): the Killer Whale Dorsal Fin House (***Kéet Gooshi Hít***) of the ***Dakl'aweidí*** clan, and the Wolf House (***Gooch Hít***) of the ***Kaagwaantaan*** clan, both of the Wolf House. Minnie also descended from the ***Lukaax.ádi*** clan of the Raven House.[39] She learned the value of hard work early in life—her father insisted she learn to play the organ from a young age, and she played in the Presbyterian church throughout her childhood. As a teenager, she played the piano at the City Club for $5 per night during the height of the Great Depression and worked at the Government Hospital in the day. She married David Morgan in 1937, and the couple had five children together—David Jr., Alice, Albert, Jimmy, and Jeanette.[40]

David worked as a teacher for the Bureau of Indian Affairs when the couple married; they moved to Tatitlek for one of his assignments, but they requested a transfer after David Jr. passed away in 1942, likely from complications

Minnie Stevens, circa 1955.[p-18]

that arose from a case of strep throat.[41] The Bureau of Indian Affairs transferred them to the small schoolhouse in Kasaan, on Prince of Wales Island. The journey took longer than expected—the steamship company refused to allow them onboard because the Tlingit family would have had to share a cabin with white passengers.[42]

David passed away from a heart attack in January 1944, and Minnie took over his position at the school; she worked for a year after her husband's death while concurrently serving as the local postmaster.[43] She felt out of place in Kasaan because the Haida locals treated her with suspicion—she recalled that, while most would come into the post office to purchase stamps from her, many opted to hand their mail to the postman outside the building rather than give it to her. In time, her perception changed, and she felt accepted in the community because she believed they "saw how hard she had to work" to survive. She eventually felt more at home in the small village than in her home in Haines because so many people respected her in Kasaan.[44]

Minnie Stevens, circa 2005.[p-19]

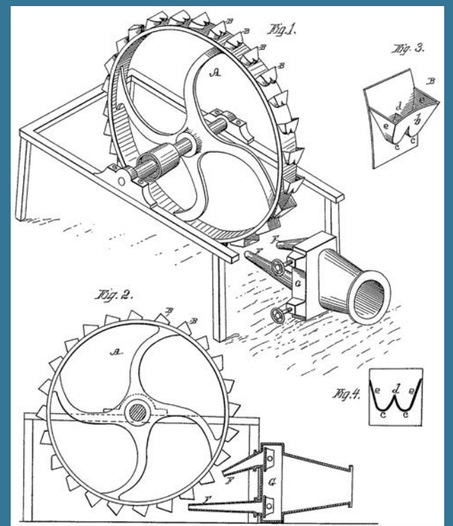
"He made things work that weren't even supposed to work"

Ellis Lundin

Israel received a Special Use Permit to construct a boat shop on land within the Tongass National Forest in the winter of 1938/1939, likely because he lacked sufficient funds to purchase land outside of the area for the facility. The boat shop's location, near the mouth of Wolf Creek, allowed him to use a Pelton wheel to generate hydroelectric power to run the machinery inside the shop. He built an enclosed workspace, roofed ways and works, and a log residence with the assistance of one of his brothers, all before he and Minnie wed in late November 1944.[45]

Israel salvaged and refurbished most of the equipment he used in the boat shop; he replaced the Pelton wheel with a water turbine and a generator he recovered from Smuggler Cove (near Metlakatla), acquired a 14-inch wooden waterline from Saltery Cove

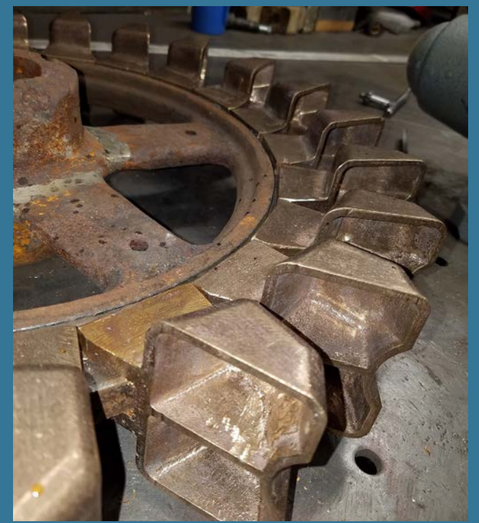
(in nearby Skowl Arm), and used discarded automobile wheels in the construction of his first bandsaw.[46] His nephew Ellis later recalled that Israel "…was a woodworking genius—made things work that weren't even supposed to work. He built his own cradle and steam box, and saw and stuff—he built all of that line shaft system. All that equipment was brought in from all over—it was antiquated already, and he made it work. There isn't anybody alive today that would use that stuff—head rigs and swing saws and all."[47] Over time, Israel completed his woodworking shop with the addition of a circular saw, bandsaw, planer, electric joiner, table saws, and a large water heater for steaming lumber.[48] He built a sizable wooden flume to channel water from Wolf Creek to a shed constructed to house the wheel and generator; his system provided both alternating current (AC) and direct current (DC). He also built the shop's marine rail and grid system.[49]



A sketch drawn by Lester Pelton and submitted with his patent application in 1880.[p-20]

People have used Pelton wheels, or Pelton turbines, for over 130 years. Named after inventor Lester Pelton, the device generates hydroelectricity because it uses water that creates an impulse to move the turbine. People mounted the wheels on a rotating shaft (or rotor) and placed a nozzle near the base; the pressurized water exited the nozzle and struck the center of the wheel's curved bucket, which forced the water to flow along the sides and leave in the opposite direction. This action generated the torque needed to make the wheel rotate, which in turn created electricity.[50]

Although the Pelton wheel generated up to 16.89 watts of electricity, and the wheel located at the Boatworks still does, Israel later incorporated a Francis turbine to generate more power with less head pressure. Inventor James B. Francis designed the first iteration of the turbine named after him in 1848. Others improved his design over the following decades, and by 1920 the Francis turbine, as it is known today, arrived on the market. The simple design—consisting of a flat, circular plate with curved blades attached to a rotating shaft—allows the turbines to achieve 95% efficiency in ideal circumstances, and, as such, engineers still frequently utilize these turbines in modern hydroelectric power plants. Like the Pelton wheel, the Francis turbines generate electricity by changing the direction of water as it flows into the blades, which forces the blades to spin and transfers the energy from the flowing water to the turbine.[51]



Refurbished equipment inside the Wolf Creek Boatworks.[p-21]

The refinished Tuttle water motor.[p-22]

"We didn't have any heaters or anything—We didn't have anything electrical—nothing. But we burned 200-watt globes all over the place. Everybody knew when the Stevens were home!"

Minnie Stevens

The *Glenda Jo* at the Ketchikan City Float, 1959.[p-23]

Locals initially referred to Israel's facility as the Twelvemile Arm Boat Shop and began calling it the Wolf Creek Boatworks at some point in the 1940s. His resourcefulness allowed him to construct dinghies and rowboats as a commercial business with limited equipment for over a decade. Minnie recalled him building many small vessels that could hold five adults and not take on water. Israel used molds to build skiffs and constructed several larger vessels. Tom Stevens later recalled that the ***Bounty***, the first large boat constructed at Wolf Creek, looked "funny," although "…it did the job."[52] Israel lacked the money and lumber necessary to build such a large vessel, so he planked the ***Bounty*** diagonally with shorter planks that he split and planed down; the ***Bounty*** also had a large "crown" in the roof and three portholes in the front of the cabin. He later built the ***Sonny Boy***, a 17-foot-long by 5-foot-wide boat with a small cabin.[53] He allowed other shipwrights to use the facility to construct and repair their vessels, too—David Peele, a family friend, moved the ***Glenda Jo*** from his shop in Kasaan to Israel's Boatworks to finish construction after a heavy snow load collapsed his roof in 1950.[54]

Boatbuilding, especially with limited resources, took copious time and manual labor. Louis Thompson Sr., a family friend, lived and worked on the property; he helped construct the boat shop and built small crafts while Israel left on trapping excursions.[55] Minnie also helped her husband assemble vessels, although she had no previous experience with it; like Israel, she found it necessary to learn new trades to survive in their remote home. She recalled that boat construction "…was not my line of work. I was not used to doing that. I was used to having the post office and teaching school, that was my line of work…. but when it comes to having to eat and live, you've got to learn to do something different."[56]

A view of the equipment Israel Stevens installed the Wolf Creek Boatworks, photo taken in 2007.[p-24]

Ellis Lundin, too, believed that his uncle learned boat-building “as a survival thing,” although it became one of his favorite hobbies, too.[57] Israel erected a modest sawmill in the mid-1940s to reduce the number of expensive trips to Ketchikan to have logs milled.[58]

"We never had any rest. We worked all the time."

Minnie Stevens

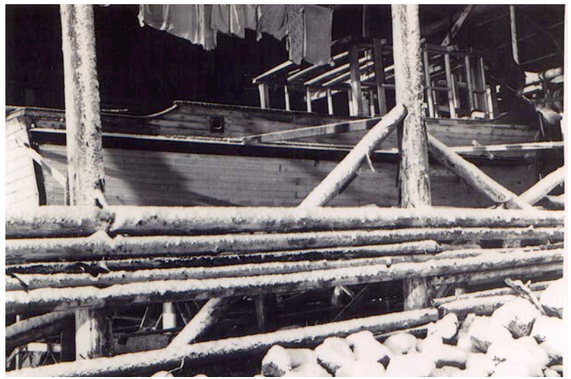
Boatbuilding failed to provide sufficient regular income for the family, so Israel supplemented their revenue by trapping mink and marten; Minnie skinned them and stretched the pelts on boards. The couple also worked together to market the smaller felled trees that nearby logging camps left behind. After one costly year, they made crab pots out of willow branches to generate enough profit to acquire metal crab pots.[59] The willow substitutes worked beautifully, and two short trips later, they had the capital to buy sturdier pots.

A view of the Wolf Creek Boatworks from the water, circa 1940.[p-25]

The Stevie

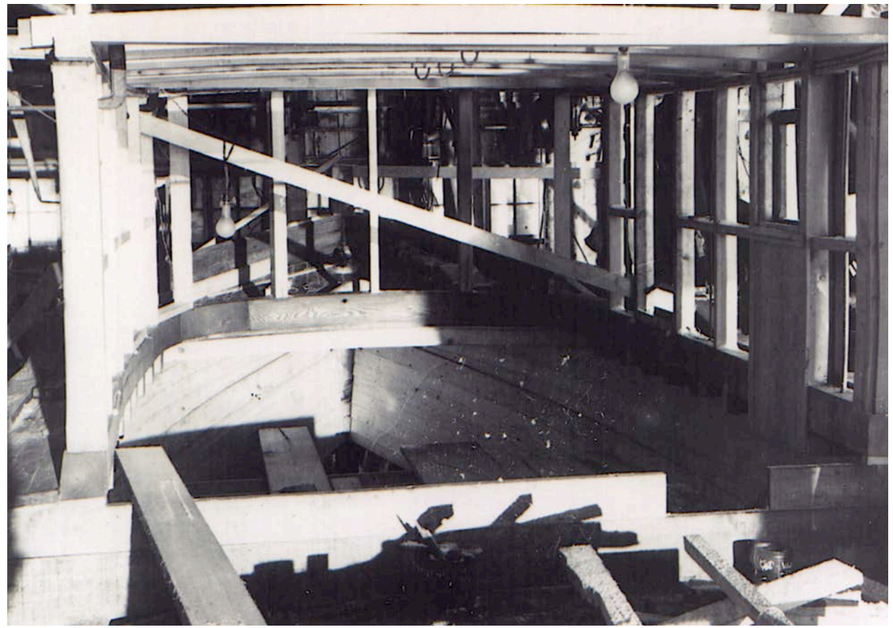
Israel and Minnie built a 36-foot boat during the winter of 1948/1949 after they noticed how much the isolation affected their social lives. Once, the couple received visitors who overstayed their welcome—Minnie recalled how she "…was wishing they'd go and they stayed on, and stayed on, and stayed on, and I thought, gee, there's something wrong—we're not used to being around people…"[60] After their guests left, Minnie discovered that Israel felt the same way. He decided to construct the family a boat to escape the seclusion of their home, the ***Stevie***.

Israel used spruce to construct the boat. While he trapped game on Prince of Wales Island, he hunted for "crooked" trees, which grew along the shore and contained natural 90-degree angles. He harvested these crooked trees because their natural curve allowed him to skip much of the labor required to steam and bend straight lumber.



The *Stevie* under construction, ca. 1948. The Stevenses used it as a recreational vessel, and also to haul logs off the beach to sell for a profit.[p-26]

Israel constructed a dingy like this one to aid with fishing trips on the *Stevie*.[p-27]



The *Stevie's* cabin under construction inside the Wolf Creek Boatworks, 1947/1948.[p-28]

He located a large, crooked tree for the bow stem and beachcombed for much of the planking; he made the interior paneling from long shake bolts that he had split and run through the planer in his shop. The windows came from an abandoned boat he found in Twelvemile Arm.[61] He and Tom later added four feet to its length by running it aground on the beach and working in between the tides.[62]

Launching the ***Stevie*** on May 29, 1949, required a combined effort from Israel, Minnie, and Louis, as well as assistance from Slim McAlpin and John Bufers. The group anchored greased logs to the beach with rocks so the boat could slide backward at high tide. Ultimately, Israel used a logging jack to lift the bow high enough to start the ***Stevie's*** retreat into the water.[63]

Israel incorporated a variety of designs into the ***Stevie***. His son, Tom, later noted that the boat "had a unique shape for its day."[64] Israel understood that hard-chined, or V-bottomed, boats provided better stability, while soft-chined, or U-bottomed vessels fared better in heavy weather because waves collided with a gently sloping surface. He also knew that dories made for excellent ocean-bound craft because the flared sides made them sturdy enough to carry heavy loads without capsizing. The ***Stevie*** contained elements of all three designs.[65]

The *Stevie* the morning after launching.[p-29]


Gibson "Tom" Stevens standing on the *Stevie*, circa 1950.[p-30]

Mutiny on the Stevie

Israel and Minnie Stevens named the boat after their son Tom, who called himself "Tommy Stevie" as a small child, and they almost lost the boat twice. In 1948/1949, after Israel left on a trapping excursion, surging tides attempted to carry the ***Stevie*** out of the shop. Minnie and Louis grabbed ahold of the boat with pike poles to save it.

The Stevenses nearly lost the ***Stevie*** shortly after they finished construction. Israel towed the vessel to Ketchikan while Minnie and Tom rode in the ***Stevie***, which she later remarked was the fastest ride she ever took on the boat, to purchase a used engine. They realized once they reached the town that they lacked the $300 needed to buy the motor; Israel refused to take out a

They eventually piloted the *Stevie* to Friday Harbor, Washington.[p-31]

loan with the bank and resolved to sell the ***Stevie*** until Minnie informed him that she would divorce him if he put her through the process of building another vessel. She recalled saying, "…if you wanna sell this boat, and then build another one, you're gonna get some other damn fool to do it for you, aren't ya? 'Cause I'm not gonna be here to help ya again."[66] She questioned why he had yet to ask his "cranky old sister" for the cash. He thought about it, and ultimately his older sister, Ruby, gave him the funds. They installed the engine shortly afterward and piloted the ***Stevie*** home.[67]

One of the structures at Wolf Creek, circa 1945.[p-32]

Secondhand Houses

Always resourceful, Israel salvaged his home and his shop—Minnie remembered numbered logs in their cabin walls. She believed that her husband had disassembled the structure and reassembled it at Wolf Creek.[68] The couple received an abandoned schoolhouse in nearby Salt Chuck and towed it to the property in 1944 to serve as the partner's cabin.[69] They experienced hardship and discomfort in their small home, particularly because of Israel's frugal nature and expectations for work. Minnie remembered an incident where she experienced false labor pains for a full day after working too hard to help him cut down a tree with a two-person crosscut saw. She remarked that "a woman's comfort was something that he didn't even relish, you know? Some people don't; some people are just naturally ignorant of life."[70]

The Boatworks Changes Hands

Israel developed a heart condition in 1946 that only worsened with time until he eventually had to sell the Boatworks to a close friend, John "Johnny" Stacker, in 1951 for $1,500. After the sale was finalized, the family moved to Friday Harbor, Washington. They took the ***Stevie*** with them and, in time, sold it to the Walla Walla College to use as a research vessel around Deception Pass. The College later sold it to Claus Edhammer, who used it to fish for sea urchins.[71]

Israel and Minnie divorced in 1968, and he passed away due to complications with his heart condition in 1977.[72] Minnie worked for the U.S. Post Office while she lived in Friday Harbor and later moved to Seattle, where she worked for the City Engineering Department for fifteen years before she retired in Skagway, Alaska in 1980. She became a shareholder in the Sealaska Corporation, the Kavilco Corporation, and Goldbelt Incorporated; in her spare time, she served as a delegate to the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indians. Minnie gained membership in the Alaska Regional Health Board and the Alaska Native Sisterhood before she passed away at the age of ninety-two on March 19, 2009.[73]

The exterior of the Wolf Creek Boatworks, 2007.[p.33]

Tom Stevens married Sandra “Sandy” Bond on October 6, 1969, in Snohomish, Washington.[74] He worked as a mechanic for GTE/Verizon for three decades before retiring in 2007; the couple enjoyed cruising, clamming, and abalone gathering in Northwest Washington State during their forty-nine-year marriage. Like his father, Tom enjoyed constructing vessels, although he chose to build model RC boats rather than seiners. He visited Wolf Creek several times and shared its history with current owner Sam Romey before he passed away at the age of seventy-four in 2019.[75]

Tom Stevens visited the Wolf Creek Boatworks and shared the history of the property with Sam Romey in 2018.[p-34]

A German Recluse— John Stacker, 1951–1972

John Stacker (left), Tom Stevens (center), and Sandy Stevens (right) and the Ballard Locks in Seattle, circa 1970.[p-35]

"He had a ten-ton BB winch and could move the world with it." — Tom Stevens

John "Johnny" Stacker, a bachelor immigrant from Germany, purchased the Wolf Creek Boatworks from Israel Stevens in 1951. He worked in the Ward Cove cannery for several years before he took over the boat shop. Minnie later recalled that Johnny and Israel shared a close friendship until they had an argument and refused to speak to each other afterward. When Johnny heard that the Boatworks was to come up for sale, he resolved to make up with Israel. The pair "became friends again on speaking terms."[76] He built a twenty-foot sailboat and several skiffs during his tenure at Wolf Creek.[77] He also fully enclosed the shop, constructed a second story on the frame house, and burned down the old log home. He likely resided in a small frame house the Stevens family constructed before they left Alaska.[78]

Several people later described Johnny as an honest, kind, hardworking man. Tom Stevens recounted that Johnny "…had a ten-ton BB winch and could move the world with it. He worked all the time. He'd work in the boatshop until he noticed Frank Ford at the Kasaan cannery, across the bay, turn the lights out at midnight."[79] Stacker plunged into his work so determinedly that "…one night he got really tired and couldn't figure out why, and it was because the cannery worked until 3:00 am that shift."[80]

Others remembered his reclusive nature given to eccentricities. Louis Thompson recalled that he maintained a spruce tree south of the cabin that he festooned with paraphernalia obtained through his beachcombing, such as empty lemon juice containers and other plastic items. He also hauled large boulders to the beach to build a breakwater, which also served as a place to load firewood, even though he heated his home with electricity.[81] Minnie Stevens, too, recalled his likable personality, although she noted that she wanted to re-arrange the tools he kept perfectly arranged in "immaculate" order to play a prank on him.[82]

Johnny developed a heart condition and sold the Boatworks to Everett Turner in 1972 to return to Germany before he passed away. He died in Seattle on his way home that same year and was buried in Ketchikan.[83]

Shipworms and Dynamite—Everett Turner, 1972–1982

Everett Turner purchased the Wolf Creek Boatworks from Johnny Stacker in 1972 and, in a break with tradition, chose to use the shop as a repair facility rather than maintain focus on construction. The facility proved vital to the nearby communities since, even in the early 1970s, only a handful of people on Prince of Wales Island owned cars. The island's seven vehicles could travel between Craig, Klawock, and Hollis on only two logging roads. Boats remained a travel necessity through the midcentury.[84]

Everett's son, Steve, lived with his father at Wolf Creek for nine winters after he left the U.S. Navy. Like many before him, Everett found creative ways to handle problems on the remote property. Steve recalled his attempt to rid a float of naval shipworms (teredo navalis) in 1978:

> He'd heard that a ¼ stick of dynamite hung off a string below the float would clean them out of the logs. So we got some primers and fuse and put it all in a plastic bag and lowered it over the side. We tested it first and it went perfect, but I think the fuse must have burned a hole in the bag and allowed most of the "Tovax" [Tovex] to leak out of it. Because the first actual attempt blew half the roof off the float, 40 feet into the air. My brother and I were watching. Dad decided the problem was the fuse, so we did another one and that time it pulled the drift pins 8 to 10 inches out of the decking. That float was never the same after that. I don't think my dad was, either. My brother and I still laugh about it.[85]

Everett remained on the property for several years after the incident and sold the property to Daniel and Brenda Kulin in 1982.

Three boats at Saltery Cove, the left-most boat is likely the *Bounty*.[p-36]

Dreams of Restoration—
The Kulins, 1982—1986

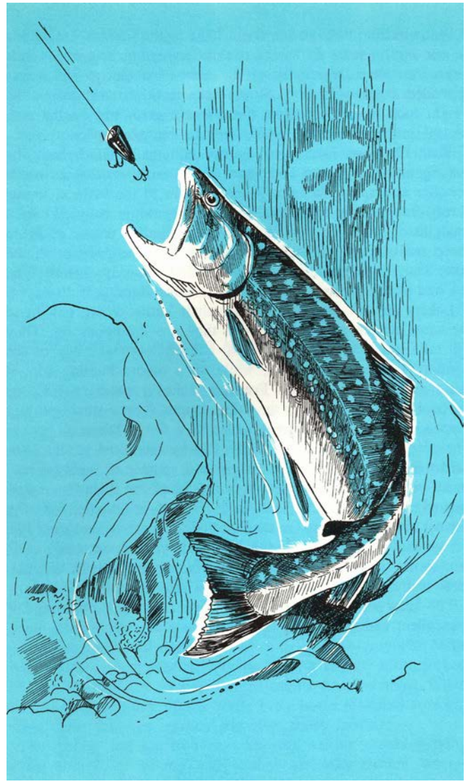
Daniel and Brenda Kulin purchased the property from Everett Turner in 1982. They spent four years rehabilitating the facility, including the shop, marine ways, wood breakwater, and home, hoping to re-establish the property as a commercial Boatworks. However, only a few records exist to document their work.[86] The Kulin's caretakers, who lived with them and helped homeschool their young daughter, partially rebuilt a cabin on the property. They may have also installed a steam donkey behind the shop to run the equipment inside before they sold the facility to Ron Whalen in 1986.[87]

Visions of a Fishing Resort—
Ron Whalen, 1986—1994

Ron Whalen purchased the Boatworks from the Kulins in 1986, intending to convert the property into a fishing resort. Whalen, then the chief engineer on the ***Aurora*** ferry, acquired a Special Use Permit the following year and submitted his plan to the U.S. Forest Service shortly after.[88] His request, which did not align with the provisions outlined in the Special Use Permit, required a transfer of the land from public to private ownership, and triggered two investigations into its history and potential eligibility for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Whalen assisted in piecing together the Boatworks' history, and the district archaeologist, John Autrey, determined that the facility met the National Register requirements for inclusion.[89]

Whalen's work responsibilities prevented him from living on the property full-time, but he completed some renovations, including repairing the Francis turbine. He drew on his experience as an engineer to fix the turbine and employed the help of his youngest son—the only person around small enough to fit inside the maintenance entrance—to clean debris out of the turbine. After he removed the materials clogging the turbine, Whalen opened the throttle gate valve; he realized too late that he had little control over the amount of energy generated—every lightbulb in the shop exploded from the electrical surge.[90]

Whalen also attempted to establish a small hydroelectric facility on Wolf Creek, and, although his design could qualify as a one-megawatt plant, the remote location rendered the operation unprofitable, although The Alaska Power & Telephone Company successfully built a hydroelectric dam nearby in the mid-1990s.[91] Whalen's inability to accomplish his goals prompted him to sell the property to Dan and Sam Romey in 1994.[92]



Sport and commercial fishing remain a significant industry in Southeast Alaska.[p-37]

Reviving the Wolf Creek Boatworks

Sam Romey purchased the Wolf Creek Boatworks from Ron Whalen in 1994. He, along with his father, Dan, wanted to restore the facility and establish a "…more permanent claim on the land" it resided upon, which proved no easy task.[93] Their first obstacle involved persuading the U.S. Forest Service to extend another Special Use Permit, as previous owners' inability to put in the time and sweat equity to revive the Boatworks made the Tongass National Forest administrators hesitant to award another permit. Sam and his father supplied resumes that listed their qualifications, a business plan, and an overview of their financial capabilities before receiving the U.S. Forest Service's approval. The father and son team certainly had the qualifications to repair the Boatworks; Dan, born in 1930, lived through the Great Depression in rural Oregon and learned how to repair mechanical equipment at an early age.

A 2020 view of the Wolf Creek Boatworks at high tide.[p-38]

Dan Romey in uniform, circa 1945.[p-39]

As a teenager, he worked for a logging company and joined the U.S. Army during WWII; he served in one of General Patton's Armored Divisions. After the war, he used the GI Bill to finish his GED and received a college degree in Fisheries Science, allowing him to work for the Department of Fish and Game for Oregon and Alaska for several decades. Sam recalled that his father had "a natural aptitude for engineering…his knowledge base was phenomenal, and his ability to use things that most people would overlook to solve a problem was pretty unique."[94] Sam also had the education and experience necessary to fix up a maritime facility; his resume listed unlimited engineering licenses for diesel, steam, and gas turbine engines, as well as work as a merchant mariner and scuba diving instructor.[95]

They had two short years to get the Boatworks running again, a simple directive with a long list of work they planned to accomplish, including repairing the wooden decking around the house, adding to the shoreline rock rip-rap, re-roofing the shop, clearing vegetation, fixing knob-and-tube electrical wiring inside the shop and house, patching holes in walls, redoing plumbing, installing new siding, repairing the bridge across Wolf Creek, fixing up the dock, and even clearing sand, gravel, and dead animals out of the Francis turbine.[96] Two of the most challenging tasks included replacing rotten pilings underneath the Boatworks because Israel Stevens incorporated them into the building's framing; the log pilings ran from the ground to the rafters, which made the repair work delicate and time-consuming. Another challenge involved installing a new high-density polyethylene pipeline to run water from Wolf Creek to the Francis turbine. Sam and Dan purchased a 12-inch-wide, 580-foot-long section on Etolin Island; the pair pulled it off a mountainside, towed it down the Clarence Straight to Kasaan Bay, winched it up the mountainside above the Boatworks, and installed it by themselves.[97]

The new waterline running towards the Wolf Creek Boatworks.[p-40]

Sam and Dan repaired the shop's 1895 Pelton-style Tuttle water motor, which required taking it apart, scouring off the rust, installing replacement parts, and creating twenty-two new cups for the wheel. Water and age had severely warped the original cups, so Sam and his son worked to create molds for them; they first carved them out of wood, then used a 3D printer. Ultimately, they worked with the Port Townsend Foundry in Washington. Sam cast the new cups in a bronze alloy before mounting them on the wheel and installing the renovated motor in the shop. The project took fifteen years from start to finish.[98] Dan assisted with most of the project, although he did not see it operate inside the shop; he passed away in 2021 at the age of ninety.

The Romey family also repaired the Francis turbine, which still provides

The repaired Tuttle water motor at Wolf Creek with newly-cast cups.[p-41]

Dan Romey repairing the Francis turbine, circa 2009.[p-42]

hydroelectric power to the shop. Like the Tuttle water motor, a combination of water, sand, debris, and neglect corroded the turbine. In addition, the turbine's Babbitt bearings had cut through the shaft over the course of a century, and Sam and Dan had to take the entire turbine apart to install a new shaft. The Romeys ultimately took "every nut, bolt, washer, and everything…" out of the machine, rebuilt it, and re-assembled it. Sam and Dan welded the cast iron with special nickel iron rods, a process that Sam called an "art form" because of its delicate nature.[99] They also poured a concrete foundation underneath the turbine since the original wooden one had rotted away. They changed the design slightly by adding a different type of bearings that prevent any damage to the shaft and should allow the turbine to continue working for another century.

To complicate the Herculean task, the Boatworks operated as it historically did—roadless. The Romeys transported every piece of construction material, equipment, food, etc., to Wolf Creek via boat or airplane, and, given its remote nature, such transportation required long-range planning. Sam commented during an interview:

> A place like this—if you want something, you plan for it. You don't go run down to the corner store to buy a quart of milk. You go once, maybe twice—once every two weeks, you go to town, and you have a list....So, you're going to be bringing it in by boat, and if it's bigger than your boat, you've got to bring it in on a barge or a float or something like that. You've got to work the tides…you know, sometimes it's in the middle of the night. If you're lucky, it's in the daytime. You hope the weather doesn't kick up. You've got six-foot, nine-foot breakers hitting the beach, and you're not going to do anything in sixty to seventy mile-per-hour winds whipping through here.[100]

Even something as straightforward as transporting a pallet of concrete mix to Wolf Creek required multiple additional steps: loading the bags into a pickup truck, driving to the dock, loading the bags into a boat, piloting the vessel to Wolf Creek, unloading the bags into the shop at high tide, and then finally moving them to the construction site to mix the concrete. Anything heavier than 300 pounds requires the use of a float or a barge. Sam commented that the backbreaking labor to "carve out an existence in this wilderness" had changed little since 1938.[101] Sam's description of the "non-stop" work to keep Wolf Creek running echoed Minnie's recollection of her time there— "We never had any rest. We worked all the time."[102]

A modern view of the historic Wolf Creek Boatworks interior; most of Israel Stevens' equipment remains in the shop.[p-43]

The Romeys' hard work paid off—they brought the shop back to life within two years and commenced producing aluminum skiffs. The family, including Sam's son and grandson, continued to make improvements to the facility, construct skiffs, and repair the local community's boats.[103] With so much time, labor, and materials poured into the Boatworks, none of which are eligible for reimbursement, many question why anyone would bother to revive the old shop. Sam Romey acknowledged that restoring the Boatworks "…was not something we took lightly" and that, ultimately, "…the love of old equipment and the history of the place is really what got us."[104]

The Last of Its Kind

For much of its history, the Wolf Creek Boatworks served as one of a network of facilities scattered across Southeast Alaska. Other shops in the neighborhood included Davis and Son, the McKay Marine ways, the Inman Boat House, the Gravina Island Marine Station, the Holmberg boat shop, and the Tongass Boatworks, as well as smaller operations that took their names from their owners—Gene Johnson, Louis Johnson, Neils Ludwigsen, Harry Ludwigsen, Louis Jones, Robert Jones, James Peele, James Esdenso, and Norman Olson. Over time, the demand for their services declined, particularly after the Japanese bombing of Dutch Harbor in 1942, which prompted greater road construction projects across the territory.[105] The post-war demand for pulp also encouraged the U.S. Forest Service to cut new roads, such as the Tongass Highway, across vast swaths of land in the National Forest; greater need brought increasing emigrant laborers, who, in turn, required improved roads.[106]

A view of the Wolf Creek Boatworks from the water, 2018.[p-44]

The power troller *Capella* in the marine grid at the Wolf Creek Boatworks, circa 1997.[p-45]

Nevertheless, despite the uptick in road projects across the territory after World War II, boats remained a crucial method to unite the communities in Southeast Alaska. After statehood in 1959, the State government established the Alaska Marine Highway System to ferry travelers across the region's waterways to connect the islands.[107] Small, personal vessels used for travel, hunting, and fishing remained commonplace as the highway systems passed the islands by, and residents needed boat shops to repair their vessels. Apart from a fourteen-year gap between the Kulins' tenure and the Romeys' revitalization of the shop, the Wolf Creek Boatworks served the needs of the local community for most of its history.

Sam Romey created this welded aluminum skiff inside the Wolf Creek Boatworks.[p-46]

Over the course of nearly three decades, the ***Glenda Jo***, ***Capela***, ***Puffin***, ***Party Doll***, and countless other vessels visited the shop for pressure washing, zinc additions, paint jobs, and more.[108] As increasing numbers of other shops closed, skippers traveled farther to reach Wolf Creek; today, they pilot their vessels from as far away as Thorne Bay to use the facility.[109] Ketchikan contains the second-nearest facility, which is more than forty miles away, for locals to repair their boats.[110] The Romey family continues the boatbuilding tradition, as Sam says "same M.O., just later years," and produces aluminum skiffs with many of the same tools that Israel Stevens installed during the 1940s.[111]

A historic drill press fitted with a new belt.[p-47]

A steam cylinder inside the shop.[p-48]

Much of the original electrical system inside the Wolf Creek Boatworks remains in service.[p-49]

Today, the Wolf Creek Boatworks operates as a residence, a commercial shop, a community facility, and a living history museum—the preserved equipment on site serves as a historical mosaic for the local community. Owner Sam Romey believes the property exists as "…an homage to everybody who was in the area. It really took from all the different industries here, and it's all put together here in one place."[112] The Boatworks incorporates artifacts from different eras of Southeast Alaska's history—the log framing is reminiscent of logging, the roof's shingles and some of the shop's equipment came from a nearby cannery, and miners used Pelton wheels and Tuttle water motors as they searched for gold during the turn of the century. The Boatworks provided essential services for those professions; the building is tied to the network of industries that played significant roles in Southeast Alaska's development and is firmly anchored in the region's history.

Sam Romey working on the Tuttle water motor, 2019.[p-50]

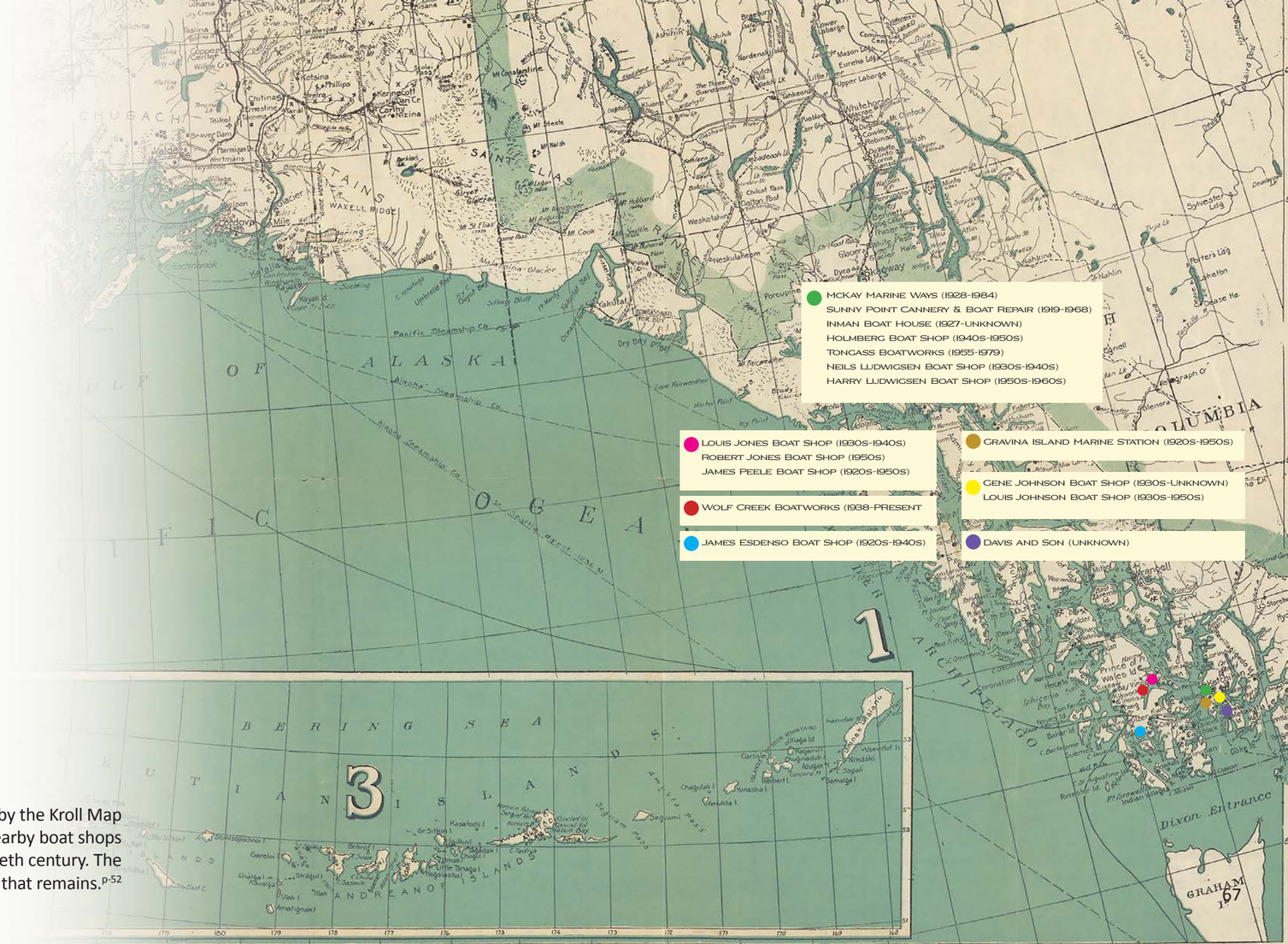
The Romey family kept the Boatworks as historically accurate as possible while they spent decades preserving the facility; Sam commented that "…when you stand inside of it, you really don't see much of 2020, let alone 1990, or 1970, or even 1960. It's still 1938 inside that shop."[113] Visitors step back in time as they watch the antique machinery fire up, listen to the water motor rotate, and smell the earthy sawdust as a craftsman keeps one of the traditions of Alaska's maritime history alive.

Historical Significance

Ron Whalen's petition to convert the Wolf Creek Boatworks into a fishing lodge, which required that the U.S. Forest Service transfer the land from the public domain to his private ownership, triggered an investigation into the property's history—federal legislation requires agencies to carefully consider historic properties on public lands that may be affected by projects. John T. Autrey, then the Ketchikan District Archaeologist for the Tongass National Forest, conducted two studies of the facility in 1986 and 1988—he concluded that the Wolf Creek Boatworks met the conditions for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places because of its ties to Southeast Alaskan maritime history.[114] He believed that "A boat works of this type may have been commonplace during its time, but the integrity should be considered a rarity today."[115] Preservation Alaska listed the Wolf Creek Boatworks as the second of their top ten most endangered historic properties in 2021.[116]

A view of the fully functional overhead belt system inside the Wolf Creek Boatworks.[p-51]

The National Park Service maintains an official list of the country's historic properties deemed worthy of preservation—the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Placement on the list primarily constitutes an honorific title—the NRHP alone cannot stop an owner, whether federal or private, from making changes or even demolishing the historic property. The NRHP cannot restrict future owners' right to use, develop, or sell private property. Inclusion in the NRHP carries certain benefits if private owners choose to utilize them—aside from the cultural value of preserving historic properties, the federal government offers grants and special tax credits for owners of historic properties.[117]



A 1927 map of the Territory of Alaska, published by the Kroll Map Company of Seattle, showing the location of nearby boat shops that operated during the first half of the twentieth century. The Wolf Creek Boatworks is the only one that remains.[p-52]

Conclusion

The Wolf Creek Boatworks, where craftsmen built and repaired boats over the last eighty-five years, is deeply tied to the network of industries that played significant roles in Southeast Alaska's development and generations of people from Kasaan and Hollis who utilized the Boatworks to care for the vessels that supported their way of life. Six generations of caretakers prevented the elements from reclaiming the building, and the current owner, Sam Romey, thoughtfully restored the shop's unique historical machinery over the course of two decades. While the physical building has been bought and sold several times, none of the owners of the Wolf Creek Boatworks ever received the deed to the land the buildings sat on. Since the land was historically under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service, previous owners purchased the structures and received Special Use Permits to operate on public land. Sam Romey's Special Use Permit expired on December 31, 2015; the district ranger opted not to renew the permit.[118]

The view of Twelvemile Arm from the Wolf Creek Boatworks.[p-53]

In 2017, Congress mandated through the Alaska Mental Health Trust Act that the U.S. Forest Service transfer 20,580 acres of federally managed land, including the Wolf Creek area, to the Alaska State Mental Health Trust and that the Trust, in turn, transfer 17,341 acres of state land to the U.S. Forest Service.[119] The Alaska State Mental Health Trust took ownership of the federally managed land on August 30, 2021.[120]

Although the Alaska State Mental Health Trust's chapter in the Boatworks' story began recently, the agency's roots run deep in history. Congress passed the Mental Health Trust Enabling Act of 1956 to address a longstanding issue in the Alaska Territory's history—the treatment of the mentally ill and disabled. Before Alaska became a state in 1959, the territorial legislature considered mental illness a crime; anyone of any age who could not care for themselves and had no caretaker could be convicted as an "insane person at large" and sent to live in Morningside Hospital in Portland, Oregon.[121] By the time the institution closed in the 1960s, officials sent at least 3,500 Alaskans to live there; many were never seen or heard from again.[122] The Act of 1956 established a trust for eligible beneficiaries to help them receive care; the Alaska State Mental Health Trust generates funds to pay for these services by managing one million acres across the state.[123] The Trust intends to log the timber it received and will likely return $20–$30 million for mental health services.[124]

Under the terms of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Act, the U.S. Forest Service was required to give Sam Romey notice in December 2019 to remove the buildings from the area and vacate the land by the following year.[125] In response to this notice, he founded the Historic Wolf Creek Boatworks non-profit group and filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service in 2020; the case was ultimately dismissed in June 2022. Sam applied for a negotiated land sale with the Mental Health Trust to sell a parcel he owns nearby and to purchase the land beneath the Boatworks. At the time of this publication, the Mental Health Trust is adjudicating that application.[126] The fate of the Wolf Creek Boatworks rests in the hands of the Alaska State Mental Health Trust; its future remains unknown.

A view of the sunset at Wolf Creek from Twelvemile Arm, 2022.[p-54]

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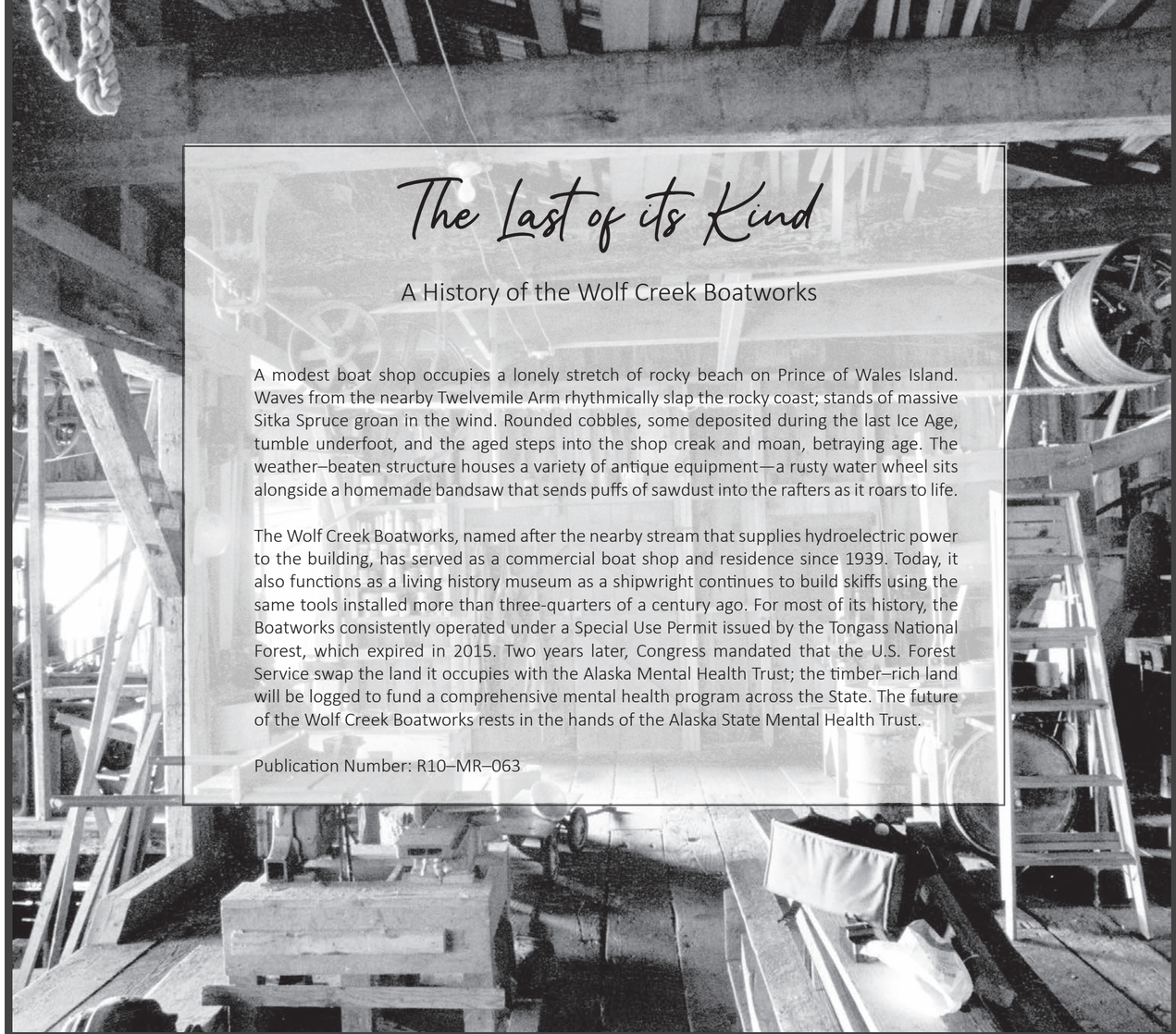

The Last of its Kind

A History of the Wolf Creek Boatworks

A modest boat shop occupies a lonely stretch of rocky beach on Prince of Wales Island. Waves from the nearby Twelvemile Arm rhythmically slap the rocky coast; stands of massive Sitka Spruce groan in the wind. Rounded cobbles, some deposited during the last Ice Age, tumble underfoot, and the aged steps into the shop creak and moan, betraying age. The weather–beaten structure houses a variety of antique equipment—a rusty water wheel sits alongside a homemade bandsaw that sends puffs of sawdust into the rafters as it roars to life.

The Wolf Creek Boatworks, named after the nearby stream that supplies hydroelectric power to the building, has served as a commercial boat shop and residence since 1939. Today, it also functions as a living history museum as a shipwright continues to build skiffs using the same tools installed more than three-quarters of a century ago. For most of its history, the Boatworks consistently operated under a Special Use Permit issued by the Tongass National Forest, which expired in 2015. Two years later, Congress mandated that the U.S. Forest Service swap the land it occupies with the Alaska Mental Health Trust; the timber–rich land will be logged to fund a comprehensive mental health program across the State. The future of the Wolf Creek Boatworks rests in the hands of the Alaska State Mental Health Trust.

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