National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve

Tall Caches in Yukon Country

Josh Spice, NPS

This log cache at the Smith Public Use Cabin in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve has metal sheeting on the roof and moose antlers adorning the entry. It was likely built in the 1980s to protect food, furs, and trapping equipment.

Sometimes a man has to watch his supplies pretty close, and they usually build a 'cache'—that is, a little platform set high up on light poles. He can then haul up his bacon and 'grub' and cover it with a tarpaulin. The risk of leaving the grub in the cabin is that the bears get at it.

—*San Francisco Examiner*, July 18, 1897

Traditionally, survival at high latitudes depended upon one's ability to obtain food, tools, and winter clothing and guarantee they would be there when you needed them. For this reason, the cache—from the French *cacher* (to hide)—is an essential piece of backcountry life. In 1897, one observer in the Klondike wrote simply that a cache is "a doghouse on stilts to store provisions in." But it was the dogs that were the problem. Hungry sled dogs were notorious for sniffing out and devouring unattended food as well as the sinew lashings on sleds, the skin boots called mukluks, and even furs that had been scraped clean of fat and flesh. In country where food is scarce, wild animals like bears, wolverines, marten, and lynx are also clever at getting human food. To keep hard-won items safe, an elevated cache must have tall posts that are either greased or wrapped in metal sheets (like that from kerosene cans) so that claws are less likely to find purchase.

Tall caches can be found throughout Alaska, but here we focus on the Yukon River and, more specifically, examples of these practical structures in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. The national preserve, positioned between the river towns of Circle and Eagle, has a rich history of Indigenous villages, gold mining camps, and hunting and trapping, all demanding the use of caches. When describing Yukon River settlements in 1898, the journalist John Sidney Webb wrote,

> *However simple the habitation, it must always have the cache, or storehouse, propped upon posts to keep the supplies out of reach of the dogs; for these dogs can bite through a tin can and almost climb a greased pole in search of food. The cache should have a place on the coat of arms of Alaska; it is universal.*

The mother of invention

The cabin-on-post style of cache probably came to Alaska with Russian fur traders in the early 1800s or with agents of the Hudson's Bay Company arriving from Canada, but Alaska Native people already had their own traditions and designs. To preserve fish and game meat, Athabascan, Yup'ik and Iñupiaq people built elevated racks using trimmed poles or driftwood or dug holes in the ground, which had the added advantage of refrigeration thanks to permafrost. Dog sleds and skin-covered boats like kayaks and umiaqs were placed on racks to keep them out of reach of animals and above snow level. This practice continues today on St. Lawrence Island and wherever skin boats are in use.

As the two traditions blended, Alaska Native fur trappers used log caches to protect supplies along remote routes; in fish camps, the cache might have special poles underneath for curing salmon or drying nets. When describing Indigenous villages on the Yukon River in 1869, Frederick Whymper with the Western Union Telegraph Expedition wrote,

> *Nearly every dwelling has a stage for hanging furs or fish on, and a small wooden house or 'cache' perched in the air on four poles, with a notched log for a ladder, is used to stow away supplies and keep them safe from their dogs, or from wild animals prowling around the village.*

Ethics and survival

In the early years of gold mining in the Yukon River corridor, a code of ethics developed regarding caches. The prospectors who struck gold on the Fortymile River (1886) and on Birch Creek (1893) believed that stealing from another person's cache was a serious crime—the theft could spell death for the owner if he entered the country expecting to have a supply of food. However, if a person met with misfortune on the trail and needed the food to survive, the rules were different. This is illustrated by the poet Joaquin Miller who was making his way to Dawson City in 1897. He and his party had heard rumors of food shortages farther north in the Klondike goldfields, and they were encouraged when they came upon a full cache along the trail:

> *We were surprised and delighted to pass a big cache of ham, flour and all that. Now we knew that there was no starvation for starving men are always excused for breaking into a cache. They, of course, must leave their name and address.*

Decades later, during World War II, a military test flight out of Fairbanks went badly wrong and a B-24 bomber crashed leaving three dead and one survivor—Lt. Leon Crane who parachuted into a snowy landscape at temperatures between 30 and 50 below zero. Knowing a rescue party was unlikely, Crane began following the Charley River north toward the Yukon River. After difficult days of struggling through deep snow, he discovered something wonderful: a small snow-covered cabin containing sacks of sugar, powdered milk, cocoa, and raisins as well as a rifle, a frying pan, and a pair of moose-hide mittens. Outside in a tall cache he found tools, a coil of rope, tents, and two large cans of edible tallow. A trapper and miner named Phil Berail had built the cabin, and when Crane later thanked him for leaving the supplies that saved his life, Berail replied in his own laconic way that "he was pleased that it had been useful."

Threats to an iconic structure

In many cases today, tall caches have been replaced by sheds and electric freezers and as an architectural form they have been largely reduced to kitchy roadside attractions. However, authentic, historical examples are still standing and deserve to be protected. These survivors are particularly vulnerable for several reasons. First, caches are often regarded as mere outbuildings and are therefore ignored; second, like any wood structure, the roof and walls suffer from wind and rain; and lastly, where the support poles enter the earth, the wood can rot or be eaten by ants, and, seemingly without warning, the whole structure topples over.

Old food cans at the Sam Creek cabin cache.

For more information

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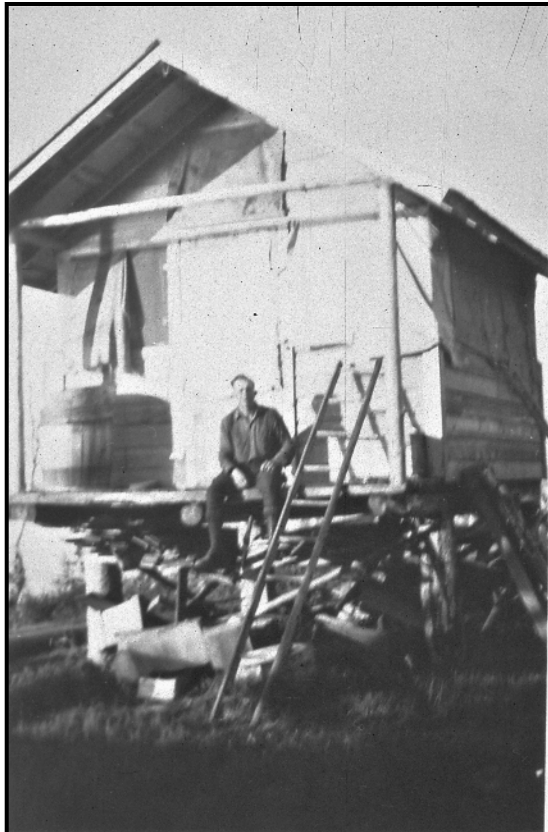

Left: The frame-built cache and drying shed at Slaven's Roadhouse on the banks of the Yukon River, ca. 1935. This cache still exists, but today it sits on the ground. Bill Lemm Collection, NPS.

Top Right: Tall cache at Fourth of July Creek Mine. Gold mining at this site continued until the 1980s, and the miners used the cache as a garage for earth-moving equipment. In recent years it has collapsed.

Bottom Right: This tall cache at the Sam Creek cabin was large enough to store supplies delivered by steamboats for gold miners who lived and worked nearby in the 1930s and 40s. Twenty years ago its roof collapsed and the cache fell off of its foundation posts.

Color photographs on this page by Chris Allan, NPS.