



Involving Students in Archeological and Historical Research



Photo by Chris Houlette

In 2009, high school students gained hands-on experience with both historical and archeological research in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. In the photo, park archaeologist Dael Devenport (tan hat) assists students as they use rocker screens to search for artifacts missed during excavation.

Students learned that archeology is far more than just digging in the dirt.

For two weeks in July 2009, six high school students from four Alaskan communities traded television, texting, and a teenager's "normal" life for dirty, often tedious work, bunkhouse quarters, and the glamour of mosquito headnets in order to join an inter-agency research team conducting archeological excavations within Coal Creek National Historic Mining District in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

A special hands-on academy

The students had signed on to the Alaska Summer Research Academy (ASRA), an immersion-based "science camp" offered by the College of Natural Science and Mathematics at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. ASRA is designed to introduce high school students to a discipline of their choice by connecting them with faculty, staff, graduate students, and professionals in that field. The courses or "modules" are typically experiential and activity-based and are designed to promote curiosity and creative thinking. Successful completion of a module earns each student one college credit.

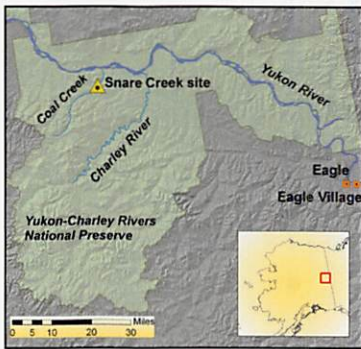
Under the direction of Chris Houlette, museum curator for Yukon-Charley, with assistance from Jim Whitney, archeology collections manager at the University of Alaska Museum of the North; Robin

Mills, historical archeologist from the Alaska-BLM Eastern Interior Field Office; and Dael Devenport, archeologist for Yukon-Charley, the students were immersed in the basic principles of historic and archeological research. Students were involved in an active research project investigating the history of the people who lived and worked in the park's Coal Creek National Historic Mining District.

The Snare Creek Historical Archeology Project

The main focus of the 2009 excavations was the Juneby-Paul-David Cabin site, a series of cabins and associated features initially constructed and occupied during the mid 1940s by three Han Athabascan families from Eagle Village, Alaska. Willie Juneby, Susie Paul, and Harry David worked for the mining company that operated the dredge on Coal Creek, and lived with their families at nearby Snare Creek. Today, the Snare Creek site consists of the remains of two cabins, and an associated cache, shed, outhouse, and the *trash scatter* in the vicinity of these structures.

The ASRA team chose to concentrate their investigations on one part of the complex: the remains of the Juneby cabin, which burned to the ground in 1950. Thankfully, the family was away at the time and no one was injured.



The yellow triangle marks the location of the Snare Creek Historical Archeological Project.



Six ASRA students rewind history at Snare Creek through hands-on activities.



An instructor demonstrates the use of a trowel while an unidentified metal artifact is excavated at Snare Creek.

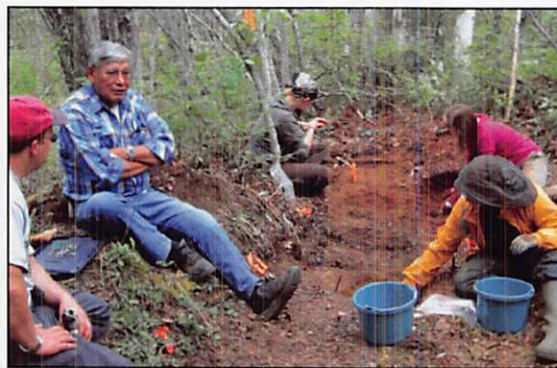


A beaded artifact found at Snare Creek measures about 2½ cm (1 inch) in length.

Listening to stories of place

As an important corollary to the archeological work, students experienced how archeologists investigate Alaskan history and Alaskan Native culture, and work with local residents to define the meaning and direction of archeological projects. Park historian Chris Allan helped students learn how *oral history* (recording stories of people connected to a place), and principles of historic research theory, are woven together to help interpret archeological discoveries.

Isaac Juneby, son of Willie Juneby, lived in the family cabin as a child. He now lives in Eagle Village and is one of the park's interpretive rangers. He joined the investigation to provide valuable information on what life was like at Snare Creek. Chris Allan interviewed Mr. Juneby to demonstrate how eliciting stories through questions, as part of oral history methods, provides valuable information on how place and artifacts fit together in history. Reminiscing about his life at Snare Creek, Mr. Juneby said, "It was such a life that in even looking back, you could see the good of it."



Chris Allan (far left) conducts an oral history interview with Isaac Juneby (plaid shirt) about life at Snare Creek, while students practice excavation techniques.

Excavating history at Snare Creek

The students, overseen by experienced professionals, excavated 23 test units (0.5 x 0.5 meter or about 1.5 x 1.5 feet)—with 17 units in the Juneby cabin foundation and six in the trash scatter. The team recovered several hundred historic period artifacts including both structural and domestic materials. Numerous cabin remains such as nails and shards of broken window glass testify to the near-total destruction of the cabin. The group also found the rusted remains of a collapsible bed frame, a wood-fired cook stove, and a double-bit axe head. A fascinating array of domestic items were discovered including fragments of imported ceramics, faunal remains suggesting a mix of both commercially-acquired meat and hunted game, and a wealth of personal items such as various clothing hardware elements (e.g., snaps, zippers, buckles), a collection of seed beads, and partial beadwork decoration. A single marble attests to the presence of children.



At Snare Creek, students learn that metal can typology (types) can provide clues to site history.



Learning in the Yukon-Charley classroom.

Students learned that archeology is far more than just digging in the dirt. They learned, through experience, about archeology and how historical research lends a hand at putting together the big picture at a site. And students came away from the two-week ASRA experience at Snare Creek knowing and feeling that they are each a part of history. Who knows, perhaps decades from now, the ASRA students will look back on this experience and echo what Mr. Juneby said of his childhood at Snare Creek, "The time we spent here and the time we did what we did was the one that actually prepared us for our future."

What's next?

The Snare Creek Historical Archeology Project was designed as a two-year effort. The analyses of the data and artifacts collected from the 2009 investigations are providing intriguing insights to direct future investigations. A second ASRA session is being integrated into the research design for a return visit to Snare Creek during the summer of 2010.

For more information

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