



A Steam Tractor at Washington Creek



Delivered by steamboat in 1905, the Washington Creek steam tractor serves as a reminder of failed attempts to sell local coal along the Yukon River.

Washington Creek has been the scene of some ill-advised attempts at coal mining. . . . the outlook for profitable exploitation is not hopeful.

—Alfred H. Brooks, 1906

One of the stranger sights greeting visitors traveling along the Yukon River between Eagle and Circle is a steel behemoth called the Washington Creek steam tractor. Perched near the edge of the river, the machine with its hefty steel-clad boiler and menacing spiked wheels seems like a monster from another age. And in a sense it is. The thirteen-foot-high hulk represents the age of coal and an era when gold was not enough to sustain the Klondike-Alaska Gold Rush—the steamboats carrying stampedeers needed energy!

In 1897 and 1898 when gold-seekers swarmed north to the Klondike, nearly one hundred paddlewheel steamboats plied the Yukon River carrying people and supplies to Canada and to gold camps on the American side of the border. Each vessel burned large amounts of firewood or a mixture of wood and coal from British Columbia. Ship captains bought the coal near the mouth of the river at St. Michael for \$15 a ton. Meanwhile, woodchoppers stashed thousands of cords of wood at key points along the river. But, carrying enough coal for a 3,000-mile roundtrip was difficult and convenient stands of timber on the upper Yukon were soon depleted.

Discovery at Washington Creek

Recognizing that a fortune could be made in supplying coal to the steamboats, a prospector named Napoleon Bonapart LaBrie discovered promising quantities in 1897 along a Yukon River tributary called Washington Creek. After forming the Alaska Coal and Coke Company, LaBrie began extracting coal from tunnels about twelve miles inland. Soon, a second group arrived to sink their own tunnels and began transporting coal to the river by dogsled. The work was difficult and dangerous, and it seemed unlikely the coal miners could keep costs low enough to meet the price of imported coal.

Quality was another problem with the Washington Creek deposits. Initial reports indicated that the coal was “the equal of any coal found in the world,” and early tests in steamboat engines seemed to support this conclusion. However, more sober assessment by the U.S. Geological Survey revealed that the coal was “soft” or sub-bituminous, meaning that in steam boilers it produced too much ash, not enough power, and too much of a glass-like build-up called “clinker.” In addition, the soft coal was prone to “slacking,” the process of drying and fragmenting that made it more likely to spontaneously combust in storage.

Arrival of the tractor

During the gold rush the north country became for many a field of dreams, and the coal miners at Washington Creek would not be discouraged. The Alaska Coal and Coke Company’s grand plans included using a train to carry coal to the banks of the Yukon and convincing the Valdez & Yukon Railroad to make Washington Creek the terminus of a trans-Alaska railway (neither happened). By 1905 the company had imported a 110-horsepower steam tractor, also called a “traction engine,” built by the Best Manufacturing Company in San Leandro, California. Patented in 1890 by a California grain farmer and inventor named Daniel Best, the steam tractor was originally designed to replace teams of draft horses in agricultural fields, but it soon became popular in the timber and mining industries as a means of transporting heavy loads.

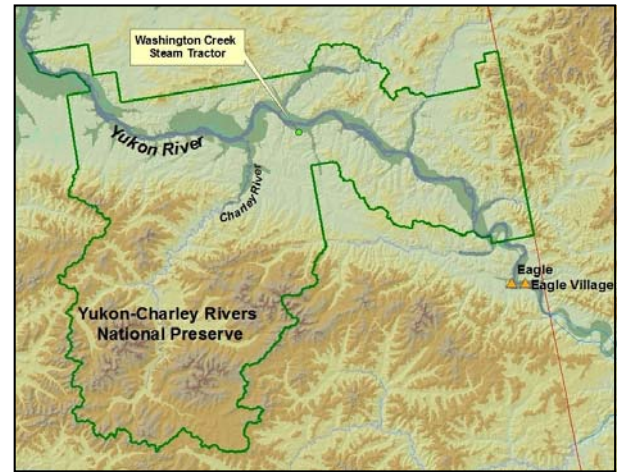
At Washington Creek the machine was supposed to pull a string of five coal sleds carrying ten tons of coal each from the coal mine to the bank of the Yukon during the winter. The coal would then be stockpiled until summer when it could be sold to passing steamboats. However, the enterprise was already doomed. In 1906, Alfred H. Brooks, chief of the U.S. Geological Survey in Alaska, explained,

Washington Creek has been the scene of some ill-advised attempts at coal mining. Though there is considerable lignite [sub-bituminous coal] in the basin, much of the money spent in development has been wasted on experiments in transportation rather than in testing the seams as to extent and quality. . . . the outlook for profitable exploitation is not hopeful.

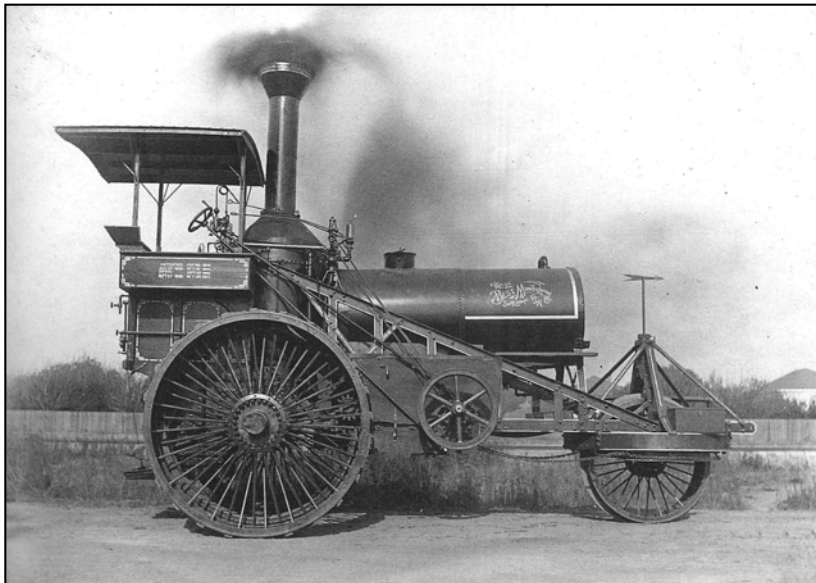
Not only was the quality of the coal insufficient, but the market for coal along the Yukon River was drying up as steamboats converted to oil power and their numbers dropped from one hundred to fewer than twenty-five. It is unknown if the steam tractor ever hauled coal sleds or how well it functioned, but within a year the mine was shut down and the tractor was left to rust.

An historical curiosity

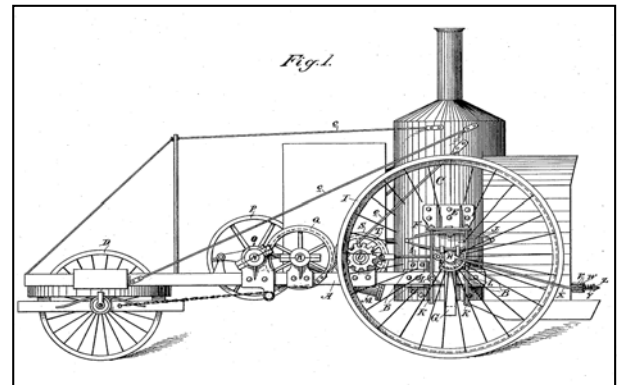
In later decades the abandoned mine served as a hardware store for resourceful locals. During the 1930s a miner and trapper named George Beck removed the tractor's water tank and transported it by dogsled down the river to serve as a rain barrel, and spokes from the eight-foot-high wheels were turned into bolts that Ed Biederman used to build his fish wheels. It is not known where the cab or the smoke stack ended up. In 1980 the area became Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, a park unit created in part to preserve and interpret the history of the Klondike-Alaska Gold Rush. Today the old steam tractor serves as a reminder of the fever-pitch of the gold rush, the entrepreneurial spirit of the stampedes, and the challenges faced by anyone trying to pry profits from the North's frozen soils.



Examining the Washington Creek steam tractor.



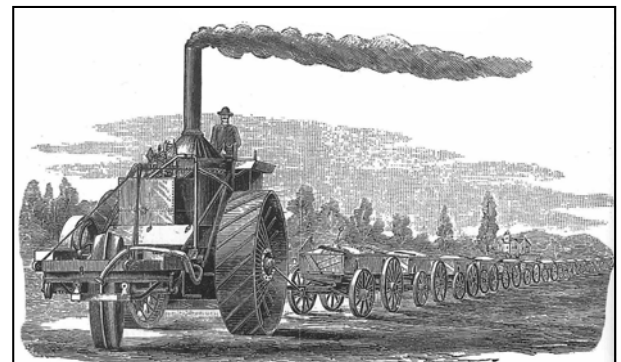
A Best 110 H.P. traction engine under steam, ca. 1910.



D. Best patent drawing, September 23, 1890.



Best Manufacturing Company trademark, ca. 1900.



Towing string of wagons, promotional ad, 1890.