

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only
received 6/8/1987
date entered JUL 20 1987

Continuation sheet

Item number

Inventory

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INVENTORY

NAME: Woodchopper Roadhouse

LOCATION: Left bank of the Yukon, approximately 1 mile
upriver of Woodchopper Creek

UTM's: 07.725005.393025

QUADRANGLE: Charley River B-5 SCALE: 1:63 360

ACREAGE AND BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION: Two acres, boundary drawn
in a rectangle: 250' along the river bank; 350' back from
the river to include all identified cultural resources.

DESCRIPTION:

Woodchopper Roadhouse was a major establishment that developed out of the Woodchopper Creek mining camp. It was located among fifteen or twenty buildings about 100 yards back from the river. In order to create more dry land for cabins, builders dug drainage ditches around the site. According to a 1926 photograph, outbuildings near the roadhouse included: a gable roof shed; a residential cabin; dog barns; and a shed.

Steamboats tied up at a gangplank at the cut bank in the river. The bank rises fifteen or twenty feet above the river beach with a path leading up to the roadhouse. The site was cleared, the white spruce used for construction. It was readily visible from the river, an impressive combination of buildings and activities associated with the maintenance of a large complex in the wilderness along the Yukon. (P10,11)

This two-story roadhouse, 23' X 32' X 18'6", was constructed of 10" (average diameter) wall logs, peeled but not hewn and joined at the corners with saddlenotches. Joints were first chinked with moss then covered with mortar. In the northwest gable end, which faces the river, openings include the first floor door flanked by two windows with one window above on

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the second floor. The southeast gable end was built with a first floor door with one window above on the second floor. The southwest wall was built with one first floor window and two second floor windows. The northeast wall was built with one first floor window and three above on the second floor. The gable roof deck was made of 5" (average diameter) rough poles supporting a sod roof, which was covered at some time with corrugated metal. The exterior walls were covered on the inside with fabric, either canvas, linen, cheesecloth, or muslin. Interior walls were faced with rough sawn 1"X4" vertical planks, some covered with wall paper. Window and door frames were built of dimensional lumber. The floor was constructed of 8" (average diameter) log stringers at 3'-0" on center, which supported a plank floor covered with linoleum. The second floor was partitioned into four rooms which as late as 1976 contained bedframes and wardrobes.

CONDITION:

The old metal gangplank still sits at the steamer landing. Woodchopper Roadhouse, once in a clearing visible for miles along the river, now an alder thicket masks it from view. (I.3) The brush has grown up around a complex of buildings. Many of these cannot be found; for others there is just a depression or moss covered sill logs. The site now is comprised of a residential cabin with some furnishings intact, four or five courses of logs extant from a shed west of the roadhouse, and a shed northeast of the roadhouse with lapjointed corners which is now missing its roof. There is a large amount of heavy equipment, such as boilers and winches, strewn about the brush. (P15)

The roadhouse still appears massive although the roof has collapsed, as well as all of the southeast section and part of the southwest section of the second floor. The walls are caving inward. The cellar collapsed in on itself. Most of the first level flooring has been destroyed by flooding. Windows and doors are missing. The interior is now inaccessible because of advanced deterioration. The building has a visual impact because of its size and almost ghostly appearance in the wilderness. The feeling of the historic

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period is well conveyed by this site. Although the wilderness has reclaimed much over the years, the site retains historic integrity. (P13,14;I4)

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

Woodchopper Roadhouse, built ca. 1910. is the largest and oldest log structure on the Yukon between Eagle and Circle. Located halfway between these two towns, the roadhouse served as an important stop for travelers, as a woodstop for steamboats in the summer, and as the center of a small but active mining district. As early as 1907, Woodchopper was identified as a community served by Circle (Polk, 1907-8). The Roadhouse served as the post office from 1919-1923 and again from 1932-36. Miners' addresses were listed as Woodchopper, even when they were working on Coal Creek, which is the next creek upriver from Woodchopper (Ott & Scheele letters). The Biederman^{es}, owners of the Ed Biederman Fish Camp, who held the mail contract from 1912 to 1938 with only a few interruptions, used the Woodchopper Roadhouse as a winter stopover on the mail trail, which followed the frozen Yukon River. The numerous dog barns and dog houses still standing at Woodchopper were used to house the Biederman dog team as well as those belonging to other visitors and the owner. In the summer, steamboats stopped at Woodchopper to deliver the mail, take on wood, and undoubtedly to deliver freight for the district.

Valentine Smith, Fred Brentlinger, and Jack Welch, the three known owners of Woodchopper Roadhouse, are representative of the people who settled into the Yukon River community. Valentine "Woodchopper" Smith (origins of the nickname uncertain) was typical of early prospectors and miners. Born in Germany in 1861, Smith immigrated to the United States in 1883 (1910 Census). In 1905, he staked a claim on Colorado Creek, a tributary of Coal Creek. In 1907 and 1908 he staked several claims on Coal Creek in association with, among other, Frank Slaven, owner of the Frank Slaven Roadhouse. In 1910, he staked his first claim on Woodchopper Creek (Circle District Mining Locations 2:295; 3:224,225,302,303,304; 4:4,30,142,148,360) He settled in the area, continuing to

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mine, stake claims, and order equipment from Ott & Scheele in Eagle (Hurja,888; Ott & Scheele to V. Smith, July 17, 1917). It is not known exactly when he settled into the roadhouse business, but in the 1917-18 Alaska-Yukon Gazetteer and Business Directory, commonly referred to as "Polk's Directory", Valentine Smith is listed as running a roadhouse on Woodchopper Creek. This is the latest mention of him in any area records.

The next owner of the Roadhouse was another miner, Fred Brentlinger. In October of 1910 he staked his first claim on Coal Creek. Others followed, through 1928, on both Webber and Woodchopper Creeks. (Circle District Mining Locations, 4:135,191,373,374,375,418,449,454,457,479,500,536; 5:27,28,36,157,310,311) In 1914, Brentlinger acted as notary public on one of Valentine Smith's claims (Circle District Mining Locations, 5:360). From 1919-1923, concurrent with his mining activity and roadhouse business, he served as postmaster at Woodchopper (Ricks,72) After 1929 there are no records relating to Brentlinger.

An important aspect of Yukon River lifeways was not only the opportunities, but the unique dangers. Jack and Kate Welch, who became the last operators of the Roadhouse in 1929, experienced both of these. In addition to running their Roadhouse operation, from 1932 until 1936 Kate Welch served as postmistress (Ricks, 72). Jack ran a trapline in the winter, had a fishwheel in the summer, and earned some money with his river boat (Patty, 144-145). (P12) In the early 1940s the Welch's had a terrifying experience during break-up when water and ice reached their second floor window (Patty, 145-147). Later, Jack Welch, fearing he had lost his mind, wounded himself in a suicide attempt with a gun. Kate, although crippled with rheumatism, dragged herself two miles to their nearest neighbor, George McGregor, for help. She died as a result of the effort. Jack was clearly mentally unbalanced. Searching for his wife, whose death he could not accept, he built himself a boat and floated downriver to the Bering Sea. He was never seen again (Patty, 147-149; C. Biederman).

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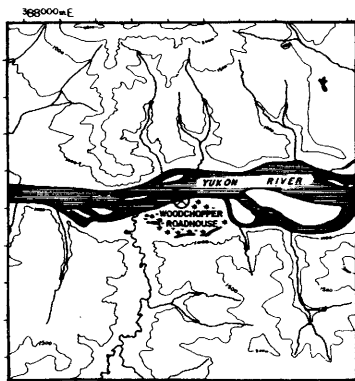
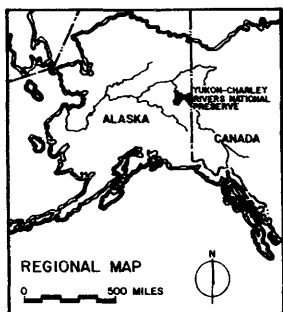
Inventory

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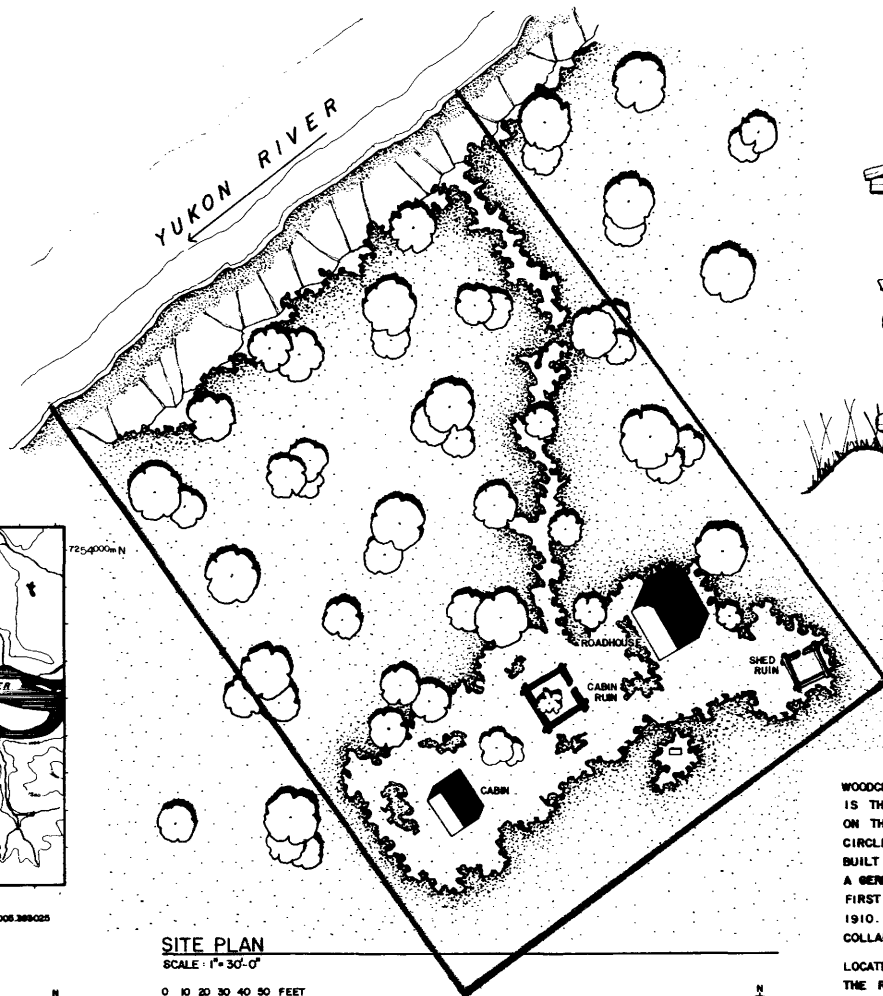
Woodchopper Roadhouse lost its many functions with the change of life along the Yukon occasioned by the airplane, the railroad, and the consolidation of mines. Gold Placers Inc., and Alluvial Gold, Inc., shifted the center of the mining district to Coal Creek, where the post office received delivery by airplane rather than dog sled or steamboat. The mail trail fell into disuse. At the same time, the number of prospectors and miners dropped off and river traffic decreased. Woodchopper Roadhouse has never been used since Jack Welch left in about 1944.

WOODCHOPPER ROADHOUSE



TAKEN FROM 1985 CHARLEY RIVER (S-5) 106 UTM 07.725008.389025

0 1 2 3 MILES
0 1 2 3 4 KILOMETERS



WOODCHOPPER ROADHOUSE, BUILT ca. 1910, IS THE LARGEST AND OLDEST LOG STRUCTURE ON THE YUKON RIVER BETWEEN EAGLE AND CIRCLE. THE BUILDING MAY HAVE BEEN BUILT BY VALENTINE "WOODCHOPPER" SMITH, A GERMAN IMMIGRANT MINER WHO STAKED HIS FIRST CLAIM ON WOODCHOPPER CREEK IN 1910. THE TWO-STORY BUILDING'S ROOF HAS COLLAPSED.

LOCATED HALFWAY BETWEEN THE TWO TOWNS, THE ROADHOUSE HOUSED WINTER TRAVELERS AND SERVED AS A WOOD STOP FOR STEAMBOATS IN THE SUMMER. IN ADDITION, THE ROADHOUSE FUNCTIONED AS POST OFFICE AND TOWN CENTER FOR THE MINING COMMUNITY ON WOODCHOPPER CREEK FROM THE EARLY 20th CENTURY UNTIL THE 1930's.

THIS BUILDING WAS DOCUMENTED AS PART OF AN HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT PREPARED BY THE ALASKA REGIONAL OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE UNDER THE DIRECTION OF REGIONAL HISTORIAN ROBERT SPUDE AND REGIONAL HISTORICAL ARCHITECT DAVID SNOW. THE BUILDING WAS MEASURED BY STEVEN PETERSON IN 1982, DAVID ANDERSON IN 1984, AND RANDALL SKEIRIK AND WILLIAM VANDEVENTER IN 1985. IT WAS DRAWN BY RANDALL SKEIRIK IN 1985. ALISON K. HOAGLAND WAS PROJECT HISTORIAN.

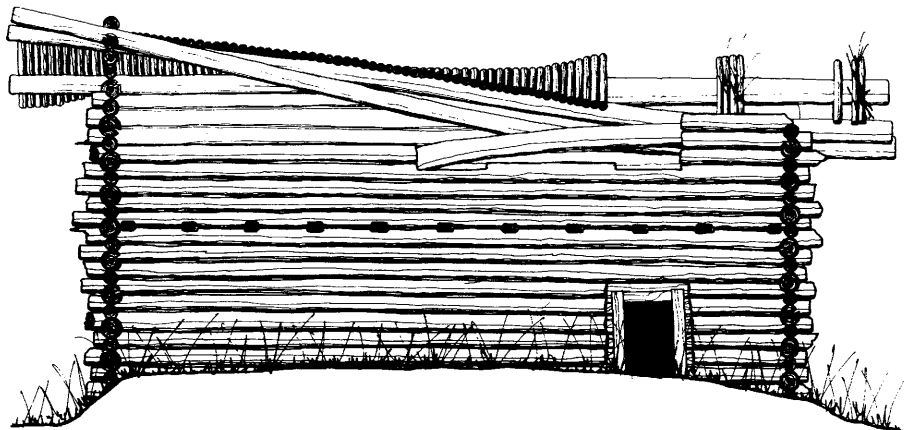
ILLUSTRATION 3

Woodchopper Roadhouse, site plan, with
boundary

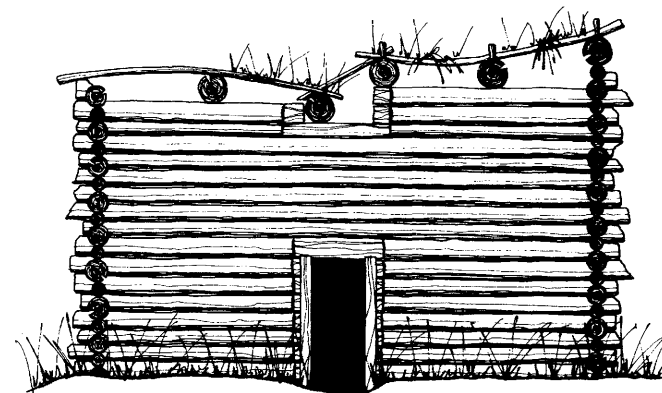
Yukon River Lifeways

Randall Skeirik

National Park Service, 1985



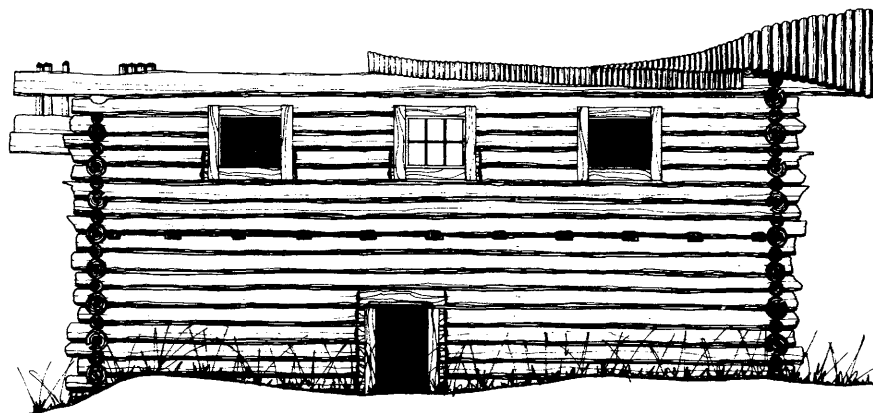
SOUTHWEST ELEVATION
SCALE: 3/8"=1'-0"



SOUTHEAST ELEVATION
SCALE: 3/8"=1'-0"

MATERIALS NOTES:

- WALLS:** WALL LOGS ARE 10" AVG. DIAMETER, PEELED BUT NOT HEWN AND JOINED AT THE CORNERS WITH SADDLE-NOTCHES. JOINTS WERE FIRST CHINKED WITH MOSS THEN COVERED WITH MORTAR. EXTERIOR WALLS ARE COVERED INSIDE WITH CHEESECLOTH OR MUSLIN. INTERIOR WALLS WERE FACED WITH ROUGH SAWN 1" x 4" VERTICAL PLANKS, SOME COVERED WITH WALL PAPER. WINDOW AND DOOR FRAMES ARE OF DIMENSIONAL LUMBER.
- FLOOR:** 8" AVG. DIAMETER LOG STRINGERS AT 3'-0" ON CENTER, SUPPORTED A 1" x 5" PLANK FLOOR COVERED WITH LINOLEUM, MOST OF WHICH HAS BEEN DESTROYED BY SEASONAL FLOODING. THE CELLAR HAS COLLAPSED IN ON ITSELF.
- ROOF:** THE ROOF DECK IS MADE OF 5" AVG. DIAMETER ROUGH POLES SUPPORTING A SOD ROOF NOW COVERED WITH CORRUGATED METAL.
- NOTE:** INTERIOR IS NOW INACCESSIBLE BECAUSE OF ADVANCED DETERIORATION.



NORTHEAST ELEVATION
SCALE: 3/8"=1'-0"

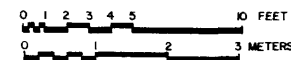


ILLUSTRATION 4
Woodchopper Roadhouse
Yukon River Lifeways
Randall Skeirik
National Park Service, 1985



Wood chopper - June 1929

1. WOODCHOPPER; YUKON RIVER LIFEWAYS
2. Eagle vicinity, Alaska
3. 4. 1929
5. Alaska Historical Library, Alaska
Road Commission
6. looking south 7. P11; I3

Woodchopper
PHOTO CREDIT REQUIRED:

ALASKA ROAD COMMISSION

Alaska Historical Library



1. WOODCHOPPER, JACK WELCH, LEFT AND
ED BIEDERMAN; YUKON RIVER LIFEWAYS
2. Eagle vicinity, Alaska
3. 4.
5. NPS-ARO, courtesy of George Beck
6. 7. P12; I3, 13

JACK WELCH, LEFT, RAN WOODCHOPPER
ROADHOUSE. ED BIEDERMAN, RIGHT,
RAN MAIL.

ND.

COURTESY GEORGE BECK



1. WOODCHOPPER ROADHOUSE; YUKON RIVER
LIFEWAYS
2. Eagle vicinity, Alaska
3. Jet Lowe 4. August 1984
5. Library of Congress, HABS collection
6. from the northwest
7. P13; I3, 4

22 1987

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
(Library of Congress Negative)

_____, Photographer
Date _____, 19____



1. WOODCHOPPER ROADHOUSE, MACHINERY;
YUKON RIVER LIFEWAYS
2. Eagle vicinity
3. Bill Vandeventer 4. June 1985
5. NPS-ARO
6. looking south 7. P15; I3

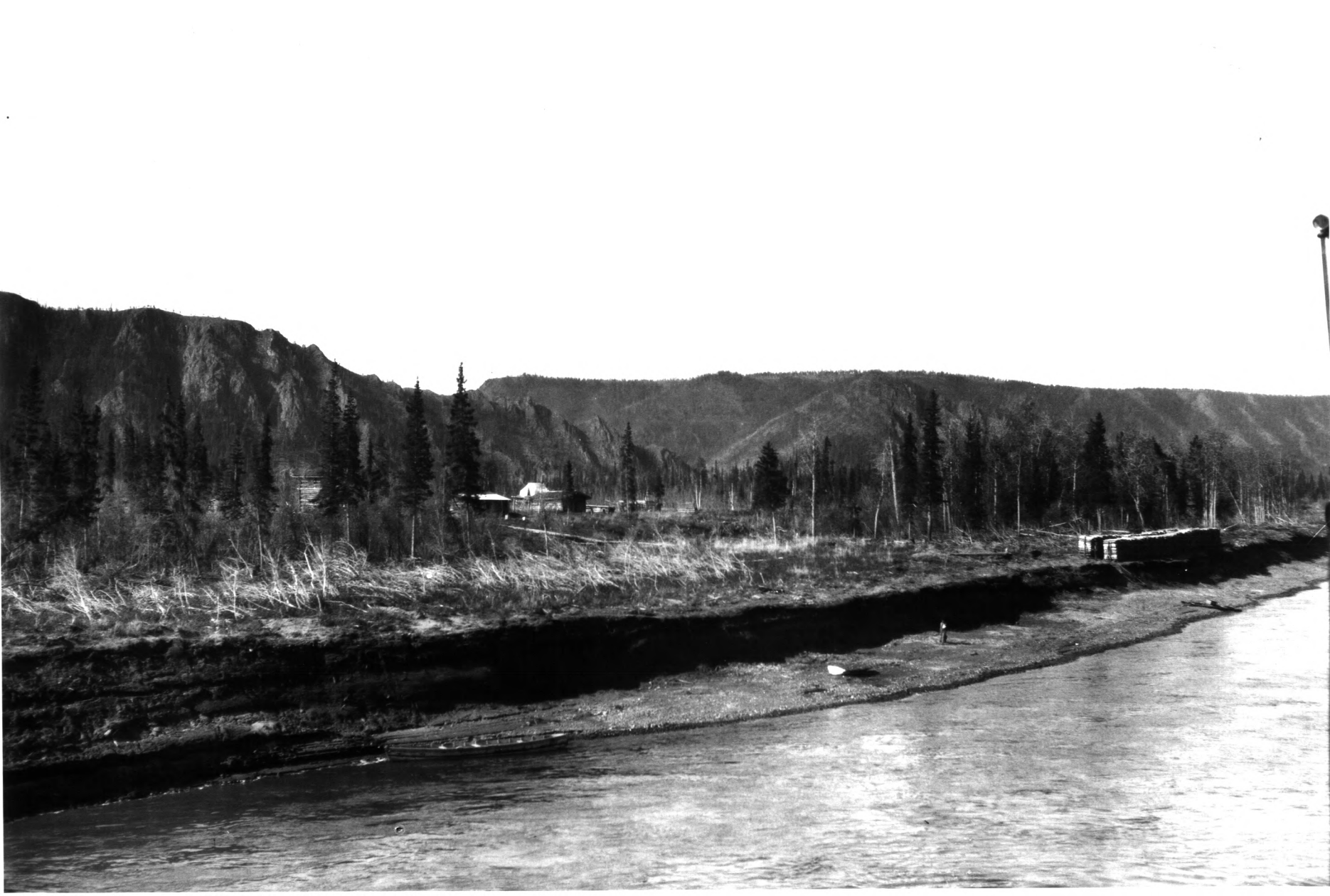


1. WOODCHOPPER ROADHOUSE; YUKON RIVER
LIFEWAYS
2. Eagle vicinity
3. Jet Lowe
4. August 1984
5. Library of Congress, HABS collection
6. south elevation
7. P14; I3, 4

MAY 22 1987

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
(Library of Congress Negative)

_____, Photographer
Date _____, 19____



1. TOWN OF WOODCHOPPER; YUKON RIVER
LIFEWAYS
2. Eagle vicinity, Alaska
3. J.B. Mertie 4. 1926
5. US Geological Survey, Denver #1277
6. looking south 7. P10; I3