

Archaeology students strike it rich at historic mining sites

Archaeology students use painstaking techniques to excavate the site of the old post office in the historic mining community of Tofty. The students spent the summer digging for artifacts at Tofty and Coldfoot on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management.



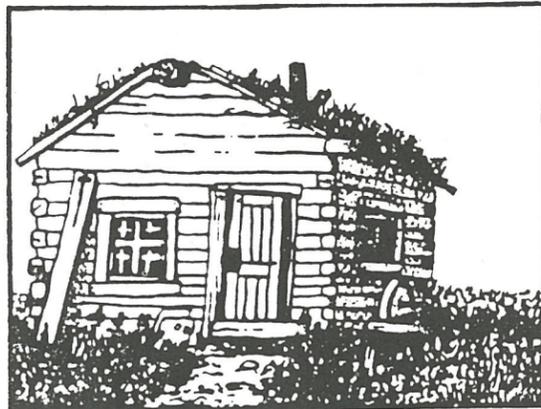
Dan Gullickson

Student archeologists spent last summer digging for paydirt at two historic mining sites on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska.

In this case, the paydirt was nails, broken glass, pieces of leather, cans and other artifacts left by gold miners at the small communities of Tofty and Coldfoot early in this century.

Robin Mills, a doctoral student with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, wants to study how different methods of abandonment influenced the type of artifacts found at historic sites. With the help of BLM archaeologists Howard Smith and John Cook, and 10 students in the archeology field class at UAF, Mills spent the summer digging for artifacts at the two mining sites.

They spent two weeks at Tofty, where miners built a settlement after gold was discovered in 1906. Tofty is about 15 miles northwest of Manley Hot Springs, at the end of the Elliott Highway. It flourished until the 1920s with a post office, three road houses, stores and dozens of other structures. As mining activity declined in the Manley area, the residents moved away. In 1969 a wildfire swept through the area,



burning down any existing structures.

After driving 260 miles north of Fairbanks on the Dalton Highway, the archeology field crew spent 10 weeks at Coldfoot, which was settled by gold miners in 1899. By 1902 the community included a post office, two stores, a gambling hall, two road houses, seven saloons and dozens of other buildings. It was largely abandoned by 1910, when miners moved a few miles north to Wiseman.

The students catalogued around 10,000 artifacts during the summer. "Coldfoot had a shorter occupation period and was abandoned more abruptly than Tofty," says Mills. "Tofty had a road system, while Coldfoot depended on dog sleds and horse-drawn river skiffs to bring in supplies from Bettles. A lot more organic artifacts were found at Coldfoot—leather straps, pieces of harness, shoes and fragments of cloth and canvas."

Fire destroyed most of the organic material at Tofty, but Mills says the lack of artifacts also fit with his abandonment scenario. "When ease of access exists, little in terms of artifacts remains."

The workers excavated the site of the post office at Tofty and four structures in Coldfoot. They included cabins, a store, and—based on the poker chips, broken whiskey bottles and women's garter belts they found—possibly a saloon or gambling hall.

They also excavated three trash pits and an outhouse. "Outhouses are actually good places to find artifacts because nobody is going to go in after the things they lose," Mills says.

The students hailed from Colorado, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, New York and Washington, in addition to Alaska, Mills says. It was a chance for them to hone their archeological techniques in the field while helping Mills research his doctoral thesis. This was the second year of field work at Coldfoot in cooperation with BLM.

The students signed on as volunteers with BLM, which provided transportation and other logistical support. Smith said Jack and Mary Neubauer, and Andy Miscovich, who hold the federal mining claims at Tofty and Coldfoot respectively, extended full cooperation to the project.

"Cultural resources is one area where we have established common ground with the miners," Smith says. "Everyone recognizes the need to preserve these resources and to learn more about our history."

—Andy Williams

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—Robin Mills,
University of Alaska Fairbanks



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Robin Mills, a graduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, inspects a mine shaft sunk by early gold miners in Tofty.