JUST JUNK

or is it?

Sometimes junk talks. At Sourdough Campground BLM archaeologists have found "trash" that reveals details about the place.

The BLM Sourdough Creek Campground, on the Richardson Highway about midway between Glennallen and Paxson, has witnessed a lot more of Alaska's history than most people realize.

BLM plans to install exhibits at the campground telling this little-known story from prehistoric times to the present. The campground, a popular stopover for camping and fishing, is slated for complete remodeling beginning next summer as part of Recreation 2000, BLM's national program to help meet the growing demand for recreation throughout the United States.

Bob King, BLM state archaeologist, has discovered a variety of information on the campground's history and prehistory. King, along with Larry Kajdan from BLM's Glennallen District Office, photographed, measured and mapped archaeological sites there during the summer of 1987. They also documented four cabin sites from the early 1900s, remains of fox farming pens from the 1920s and 1930s, and evidence of the campground's first use as a highway construction camp in the mid-1950s.

In 1989, King returned with archaeologist Peter Bowers to do a full cultural resources inventory. They found additional borrow pits, some pits near a cabin and various historic artifacts dating from at least the 1920s.

Using federal census records, photo collections, and other written sources, King also has found photographs and early written material on the area's history. Particularly exciting to him was finding and interviewing Estella Ewan of Gulkana, an Ahtna Native elder who, as a child, lived in a cabin that once stood near the present boat launch area. "Her family's traditional subsistence activities within the area in the 1920s and later represents a continuation of Native use of the region from prehistoric times through the mid-part of this century," says King. Her father, known locally as "Sourdough Gene," built the cabin about 1924 to use as a part of a base camp for a trap line. His family hunted, fished, and trapped there from 1924-27 before moving to Gulkana. The Oscar Ewan family lived in the cabin from about 1930 to 1945, continuing in the same lifestyle. Foundation logs and refuse eroding from the river bank tell us more details about these people's lives.

The nearby Sourdough Roadhouse, built in 1903, is on the National Register of Historic Places as the oldest existing roadhouse in Alaska still operating in the original building. A past owner of the roadhouse who was looking to sell furs to early tourists built the fox-farming pens found in the campground today.

Research on this story, as well as the area's relationship to the nearby Sourdough Roadhouse, will be interpreted by BLM for the public. Future BLM signs and displays will also commemorate the old Valdez Trail (dating to Alaska's Gold Rush period) which later served as the general alignment for today's Richardson Highway , east of the campground. Also to the east is an early telegraph line to be interpreted for its significance to yet another stage in Alaska history.

BLM plans to install eye-catching informational displays and photographs in kiosks along a handicapped-accessible trail system throughout the campground area. However, these improvements will come in a later phase of development. The interpretive signing will be the "finishing touches" on the campground; first priority for the 1990 construction season will be to improve the access bridge and boat ramp.

Managing cultural resource sites through special on-site interpretation is a new direction in BLM and will also be planned for other BLM sites in Alaska.

"By educating the public about the importance of such sites as the ruins of relatively recent cabins, we hope that people will learn to appreciate that such remains from even our recent past are important and should not be destroyed by the illegal collection of artifacts or deliberate vandalism," says King.

—EB

Some of the "trash" unearthed at Sourdough campground reveals details of life there in the past: Clockwise from the top, ironstone and china fragments dating from 1910-1950; moose bones and a fragment of snowshoe hare jawbone; medicine bottle fragments, 1940-60's; beer bottle neck, 1950's-60's; window glass; shards of modern amber beer bottle, probably 1980's.

BLM hosts conference

BLM archaeologists recently hosted the 17th Annual Meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association in Fairbanks.

BLM archaeologists Bob King and Julia Steele gave papers, King's on the history of tin cans in Alaska; and Steele's on trade, settlement and subsistence on the Kaltag Portage; and three rock shelters near Haines. King also organized and chaired a symposium on historical archaeology in Alaska.

BLM's John Cook headed the project, assisted by Michael Kunz, Lee Douthit and Howard Smith.

Larry Kajdan digs up pottery shard from an old cabin site at Sourdough.