Bureau of Land Management – Alaska Open File Report 9

BLM/AK/OF-84/09

BLM-Alaska Open File Report 9
November 1984

Denali Mine On Valdez Creek, South Central Alaska: A Cultural Resources Evaluation

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Bureau of Land Management
Alaska

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Abstract

A cultural resource examination of the Denali Mine plan area found that no significant sites, structures or objects would be affected by the mine operation. Observations supplementing work of Dessauer and Harvey are also documented.

Introduction

The Glennallen Resource Area Manager under the authority of 43 CFR 3809 required a cultural resource examination of Denali Mine prior to authorizing new surface disturbance. On May 28-29, 1984, Beth Walton (Archaeologist, ASO/BLM), Cheryl McCaffrey (Biologist, ASO/BLM) and Joel Stratman (Geologist, WGM) accomplished the requisite field work. SUM Resources, Inc., the mine operator, most generously provided food, lodging, and maps. Very special thanks is extended to Guy Saco, Mine Manager; Jerry Harmon, Mine Superintendent and Joel Stratman for their time and expertise.

Background

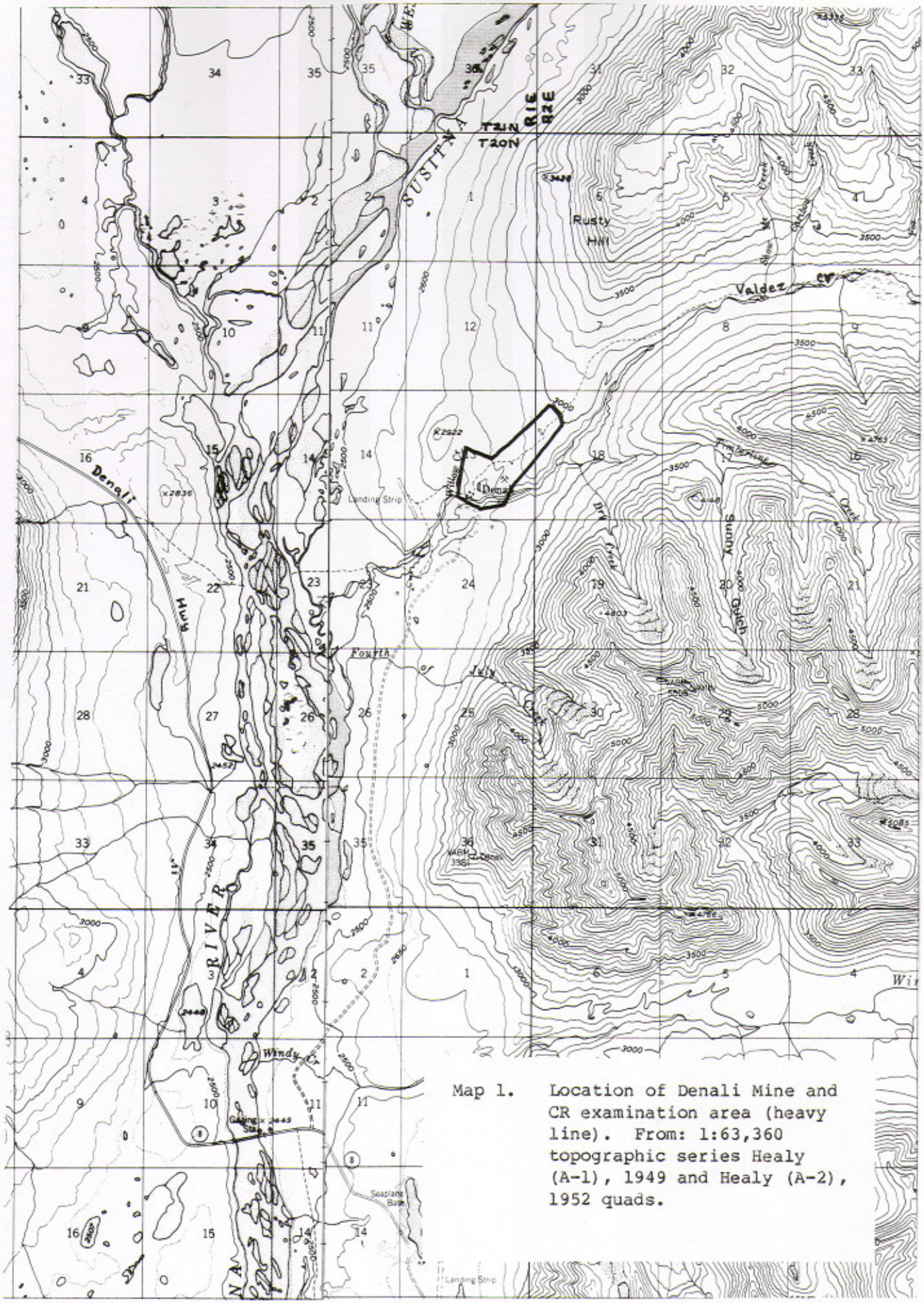
Valdez Creek has been a gold mining area since 1903. The area's local history has been documented in An Historical Resource Study of the Valdez Creek Mining District, Alaska-1977, by Peter F. Dessauer and David W. Harvey (1980). Between 1979 and 1983, mining in the Tammany cut was continued by the Denali Mining Co. In 1983, Valdez Creek Joint Venture took over exploration of the claim group and in 1984 assumed control of the mining operation as well. As the 1984 program proposes more than five acres of disturbance, a plan of operations was submitted to BLM Glennallen Resource Area.

The site of the old settlement of Denali (Map 1) is within the camp and access area of the present operation. A cultural resource examination was deemed necessary to determine the relationship between the remaining features of Denali settlement and the new operations. The mining plan requires enlargement of the spoil storage area, additional settling ponds and a new public access road across the claims; these areas are beyond Denali and were examined for prehistoric and historic material.

Environment

The Denali Mine lies on a long, broad, gentle slope about half way between the Susitna River and the abrupt rise of the mountains to the east.

The block of claims making up the Denali Mine area has been utilized for mining and for residence to varying degrees since 1903. Mining operations through 1981 had disturbed the natural landscape and vegetation of 40-50% of the present block of claims (Map 2). Trees



Map 1. Location of Denali Mine and CR examination area (heavy line). From: 1:63,360 topographic series Healy (A-1), 1949 and Healy (A-2), 1952 quads.

throughout the Valdez Creek drainage were utilized for construction of buildings, firewood and mine shoring. As a result of this intensive use there are very few trees in this portion of the Valdez Creek landscape.

At present the area not disturbed by the recent mining operations is densely vegetated with shrubs (willow, labrador tea, dwarf birch) and moss (sphaghnum). There is a sparce scattering of spruce near Willow Creek and occasional dense patches of blue joint grass. The willows are heavily browsed.

According to Dessauer and Harvey large game was plentiful in Valdez Creek drainage until 1917. By that date hunting to supply the miners had depleted the animals. This spring at least four moose with new calves were observed along Willow Creek and four caribou were ambling beside the Valdez Creek access road. This easy visibility of large game may indicate a return to the historic abundance of these animals.

The landscape and surface resources of the area, while not precluding prehistoric use, would not be particularly attractive to permanent occupation. The environmental factor leading to intensive historic use was, and is, the presence of gold.

Methods

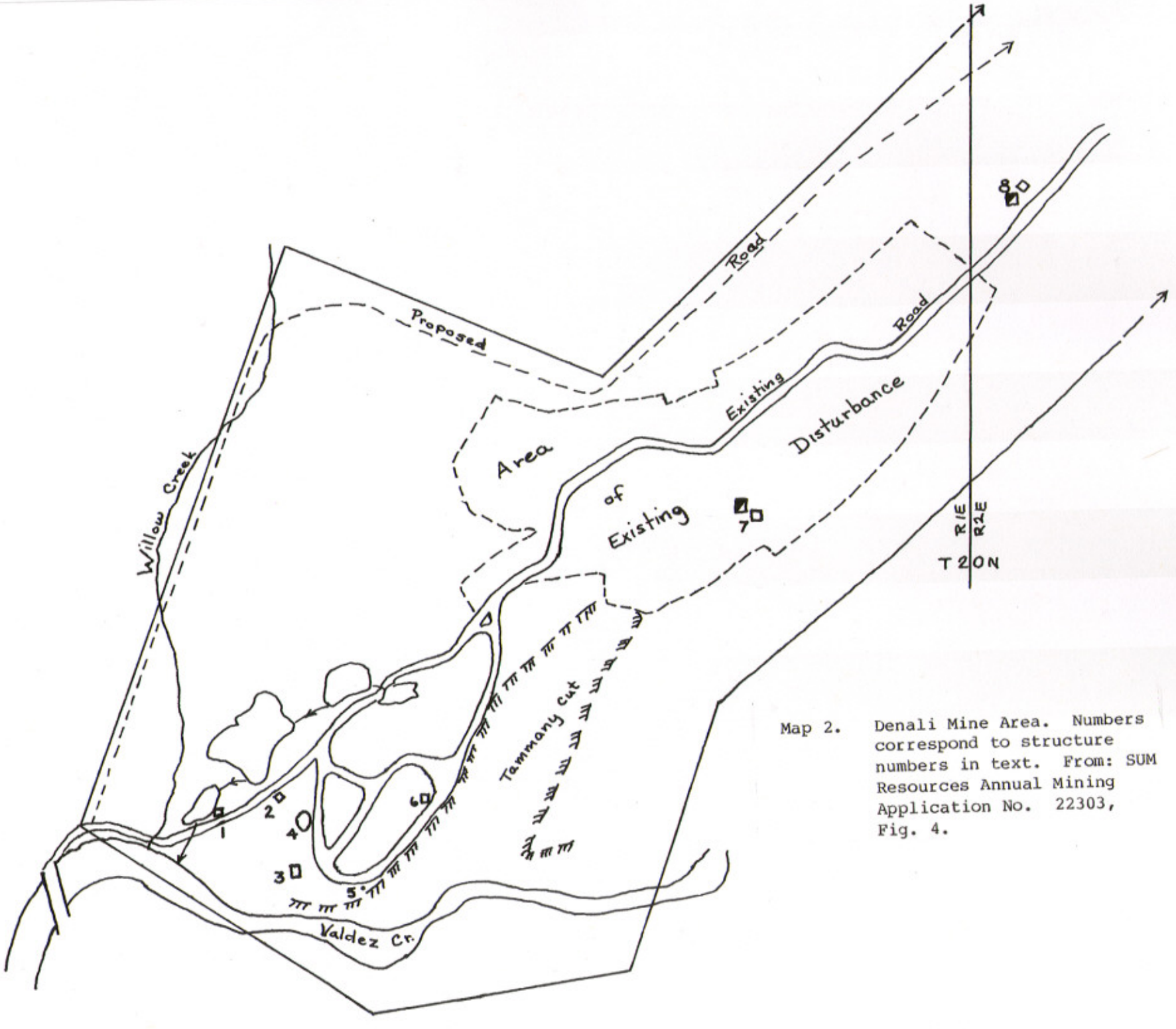
The BLM's staff conducted its examination for cultural resources on foot. Priority of areas was established by the most pressing needs of the mining operation. The sequence of areas was:

1. spoil disposal area
2. settling pond area
3. proposed road and exploration lines (Map 2).

Examination was by irregular transect; vegetation covered the ground completely in all areas traversed. Vegetation type and density were consistent throughout the area so the transect was replaced by a topographic change examination. Relative high points, flat spots and all three massive boulders on the gentle slope were examined. Subsurface samples were provided by 1 to 3 year old exploration trails and four trowel probes of high-or-flat spots. Standing weathered wooden structures were documented by field notes, sketches and 35 mm slides.

Findings

No material from the prehistoric or ethnographic time period was found. The historic period is represented by remnants of the Denali settlement.



Map 2. Denali Mine Area. Numbers correspond to structure numbers in text. From: SUM Resources Annual Mining Application No. 22303, Fig. 4.

As shown on Map 2 and numbered as below, the remains consist of:

1 Cabin ruin: logs, trash, broken bottles, broken china and a wood stove. The structure is completely destroyed.

2 Dog kennels: four simple sloped roof structures remain. All are in poor (unusable) condition.

3 Graves: white picket fences about 8' long, 5' wide and 4' high surround each of two graves. Both graves are in good condition. Fences are made of 4x4 corners and 2x4 rails with 4x1/4 pickets. The east grave is identified by a horizontal, bronze(?) plaque (approximately 12" x 8") that reads

P. J. McDonald
born 1873 died 1935
R I P

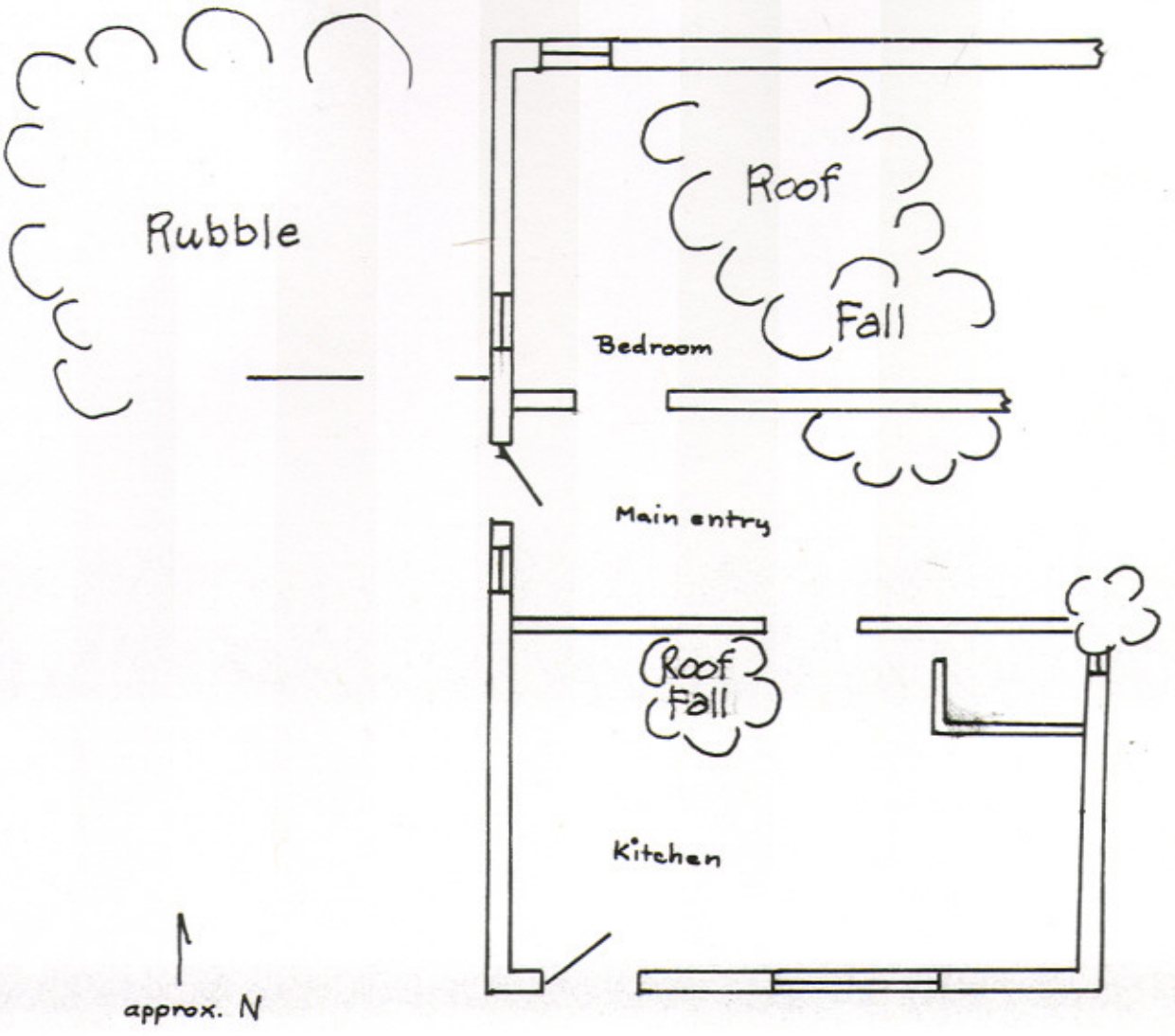
The west grave is marked by a smooth round-top wooden slab headstone. No lettering or paint is visible. The area enclosed by the fence and the size of the headstone are typical of an adult burial (graves and headstones for children are usually smaller than for adults). This is probably the grave of Joe Polken, ". . .killed in a hydraulic accident in 1922, . . .and the third for a Coffield child (1964-65)." (Dessauer and Harvey 1980, 94). No trace was found of this third grave. Both graves are in good condition.

4 Sled dump: The remains of sleds used to haul in supplies are primarily of running gear; no beds were observed. Tundra vegetation has obscured many pieces. There are likely more than ten and fewer than thirty pieces.

5 Three-hole Privy: This 9' x 6' shiplap plank structure is still in occasional use. The roof is gabled and there are 1 x 8" cornercaps. The interior has two partitions for semiprivacy of multiple occupants.

6 Superintendent's house: The roof and east wall of this three-room log cabin have fallen in. Dessauer and Harvey (1980: 89, 98-99) noted that this structure was partially collapsed in 1977. Observations in 1984 are at variance with the details given in their 1980 report, particularly in the floor plan (compare Fig. 1, p. 4 with Dessauer and Harvey, Fig. 5).

Exterior: walls are log (approximately 8" diameter) chinked with sphaghnum and burlap. Sawdust was used as insulation in the ceiling. On the east side, vertical bark slabs close the space between the bottom log and the present ground surface.



Sketch not to scale

Fig. 1. Superintendent's House

The main entry, a four horizontal over two vertical panel door, is nearly centered in the west wall of the structure. A second (kitchen) entry is in the south wall. This door is Z-braced, patterned tongue-and-groove (Fig. 2). There is one long 4/4 fixed window in the south wall. In the west, there is a 2/2 window beside the main entry door and a 2/2 window near the south corner of the bedroom. The standing remnant of the east wall has a small 2/2 window. The north wall has a 2/2 window near the west corner. All these windows are double hung. All remaining exterior frames are simple 1x6 casement painted a deep amber yellow.

Interior: Exterior logs were smoothed on the interior side. The interior floor space (Fig. 1) was divided into three rooms and a small walk-in pantry. Walls and ceiling were covered with canvas tarps. This, in turn, was overlain with patterned oilcloth on some ceilings and, at least in the main entry area, a wainscot of brown burlap. Windows and doorways had cornice treatments (Fig. 2).

7 Shack at Shaft No 1: This single room structure is 14' x 10'. The entry is in the west side of the south wall as is one 3/3 casement window. The exterior saltbox shape is modified to a gabled ceiling on the interior. The exterior planks were covered by tar paper and battened. The roof is corrugated tin. The three board door is locked with a new looking padlock.

From the exterior, the structure looks usable. Across the present access road from this shack is an earth covered structure. Only a doorway with wood lintel and rockwork about three courses high and about four feet on either side is still standing.

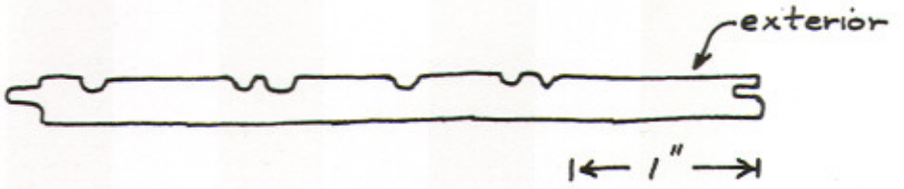
8 Shack at Shaft No 3: This board and batten one room structure measures 10'x10'. The entry is in the middle of the south wall. There is a 2/2 sliding casement window slightly south of center in the west wall. The interior has a table on the west wall and an open overhead rack in the northeast corner.

To the northwest of this shack lie traces of the ties for a tram; there are no rails, simply ties rotting into the tundra but discernable for about 100'.

Conclusions

No prehistoric material or sites were found. Given the dense ground cover, undifferentiated topography and the fact that the area was used for only fall hunting in ethnographic times, this result was expected. There is no reason to believe that any significant prehistoric site is located in the mine plan area. Additional inventory is not recommended.

X-Section of typical plank, south entry door



Cornice treatment for windows and doors (interior)

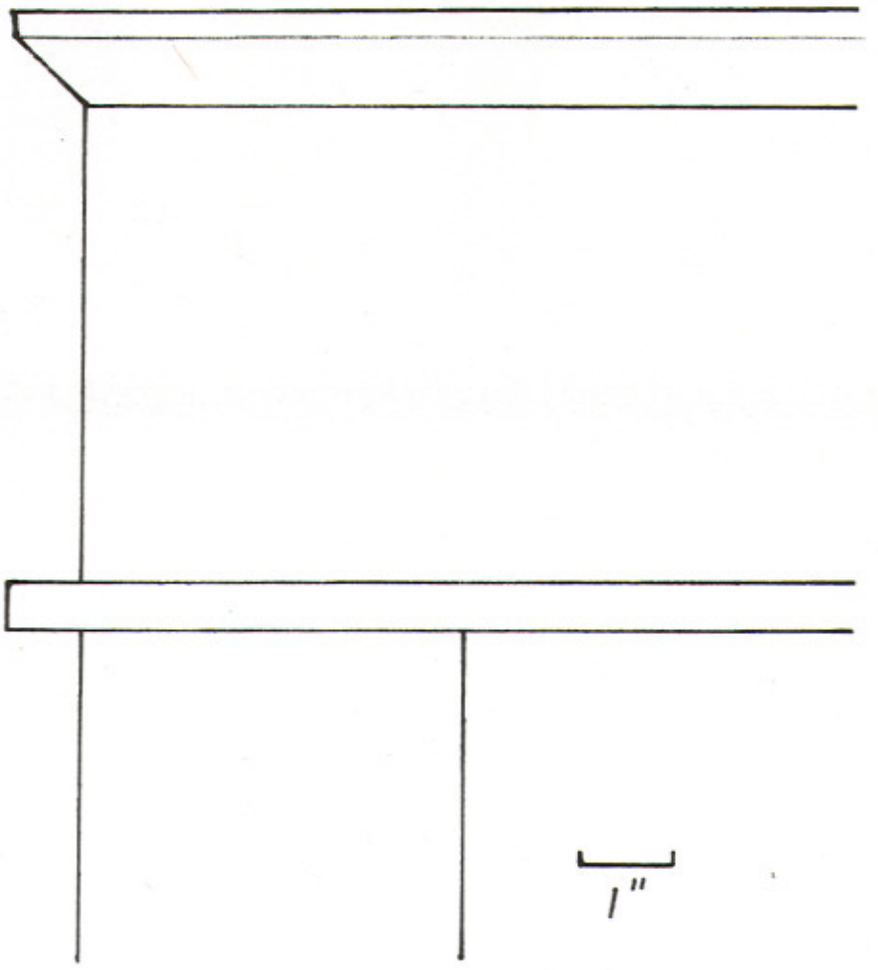


Fig 2 Details Superintendent's house

The historic settlement of Denali no longer has sufficient integrity to be considered a historic district. The remaining ruins (cabin, superintendent's house, sled dump, and kennels) do not preserve the feeling or association of a mining settlement; they are merely vestiges of the past. The superintendent's house had a certain elegance of architectural detail that was unusual in such mining camps. Unfortunately, the structural failure of roof and walls has destroyed the integrity of the house to the point that preservation is not prudent. These details were recorded here to complete the historic documentation. The shacks at Shafts 1 and 3 are in good condition but there is no demonstrable association of these structures with the historic mining period or with any specific person.

Based on the plan of operation and discussion with the mine operator, the operations will not disturb the graves, kennels, sled dump, superintendent's house, or privy. The cabin ruin between the access road and proposed settling pond #4 may be disturbed or may sluff down; since this structure is ruined, further disturbance is inconsequential. The shack at Shaft No. 1 may be disturbed in overburden removal. The shack at Shaft No. 3 is not in this year's plan area but may be disturbed in a future year. Although in good condition, these structures lack association with to the historic (1903-1930) period or with known persons and their disturbance would be inconsequential. Measurements taken in this survey will serve to document their structural characteristics.

Recommendations

The Denali Mine plan area contains no significant cultural resources and mining should be allowed to proceed. No additional inventory or evaluation is necessary.

As discussed with the operator, should subsurface material be encountered (for instance round or oblong areas of charcoal or a concentration of bones) in stripping the surface, the BLM must be informed and allowed the opportunity to evaluate the remains. The chance of such an encounter is estimated to be low in this area.