

OF GOLD AND GRAVEL

A Pictorial History of Mining Operations at
Coal Creek and Woodchopper Creek, 1934–1938

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve



National Park Service

Edited and Notes by Chris Allan

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2021

Acknowledgments

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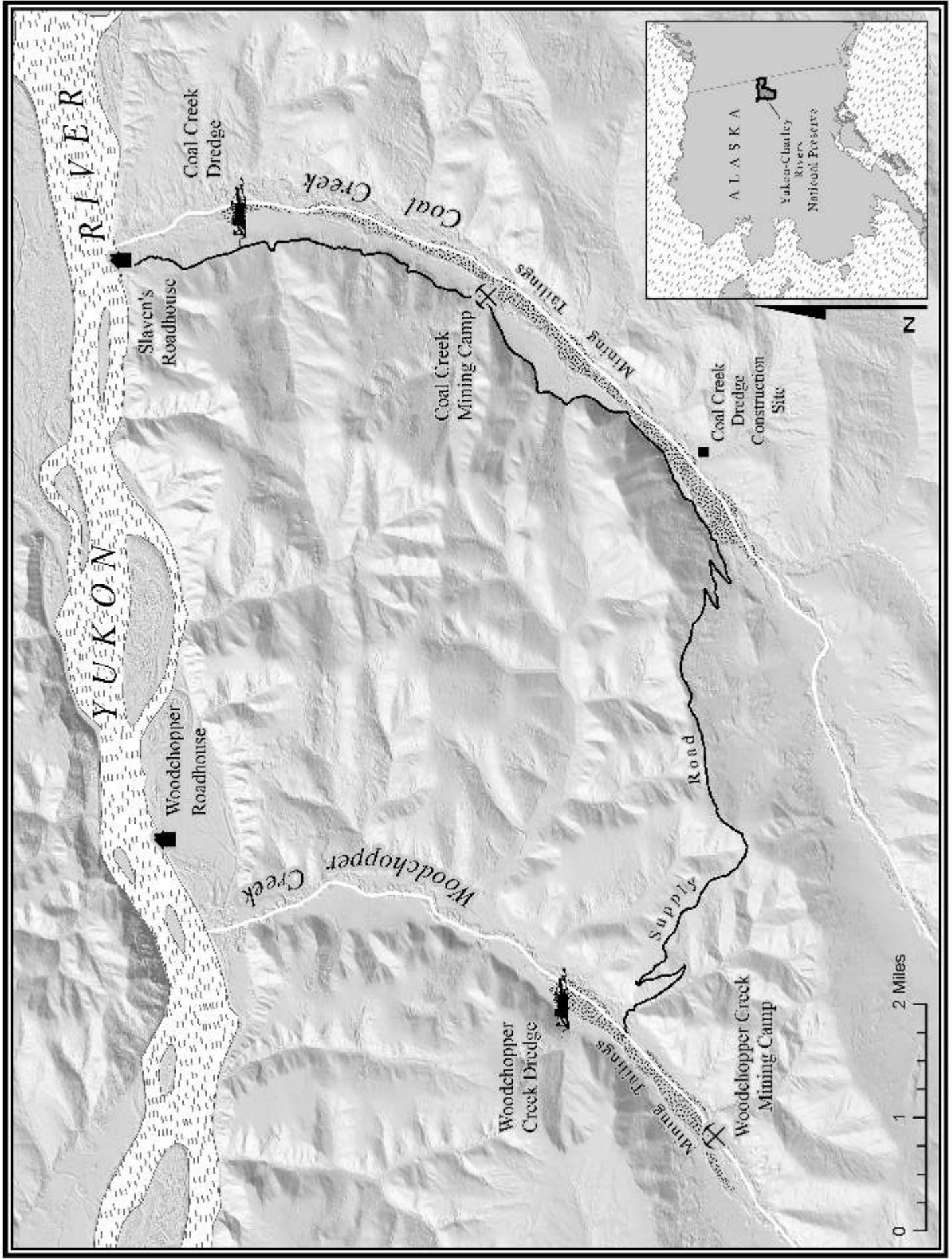
Front Cover: View from the pilot house of the Coal Creek gold dredge showing the bucket line carrying gravel to be processed inside the machine. The bucket line could dig up to twenty-two feet below the surface. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, Stanton Patty Family Papers.

Title Page Inset: A stock certificate for Gold Placers, Inc. signed by General Manager Ernest N. Patty, November 16, 1935. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, Stanton Patty Family Papers.

Back Cover: Left to right: The mail carrier Adolph "Ed" Biederman, his son Charlie, daughter Doris, the trapper and miner George Beck, Ed's son Horace, and Jack Welch, the proprietor of Woodchopper Roadhouse. The group is at Slaven's Roadhouse on the banks of the Yukon River posing with a mammoth tusk recovered from a placer mining tunnel. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, George Beck Family Papers.

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Map by Martin Byrne, GIS Team, NPS Alaska Regional Office.

Introduction

The search for gold along the stretch of the Yukon River that now passes through Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve began in fits and starts. First came fur traders looking for gold in the 1870s, then discoveries on the Fortymile River in the mid-1880s and near Circle City in 1893, and a few years later the famous Klondike stampede which also inspired miners to seek their fortunes on the American side of the border. In all of these cases, the gold was hard to find and harder to recover. This booklet focuses on a later era when miners on twin Yukon tributaries—Coal Creek and Woodchopper Creek—used dredges to harvest traces of gold from massive amounts of gravel. Between 1934 and 1960, these mechanized giants transformed the landscape, provided work for dozens of miners, and did what earlier generations could not—make relatively poor ground profitable.

This effort was the brainchild of Alexander McRae, a Canadian investor who made his fortune in the lumber, salmon canning, and whaling industries before turning his attention to northern gold. Always alert for new business opportunities, McRae examined the economic landscape of the Great Depression and predicted the U.S. government would soon boost the price of gold. To find promising mining lands, he hired the best mining expert he could find—Ernest Patty—who was then a professor in the School of Mines at Alaska's newly founded college in Fairbanks. Together the two men zigzagged their way across Alaska and the Yukon Territory looking for mining claims to buy.

After a number of disappointments, Patty recommended they visit Coal Creek, located between the towns of Circle and Eagle. The creek had long been home to “pick and shovel miners” and with their permission, Patty and McRae purchased churn drills to gauge the amount of gold they might expect to unearth. The drilling teams also explored as far away as the Charley River. When they were satisfied with the numbers, measured in pennies per cubic yard, McRae purchased multiple claims from Coal Creek's old-timers and formed a new mining company—Gold Placers, Inc.—with Patty as general manager.

Just as McRae had predicted, President Roosevelt passed the Gold Reserve Act on January 30, 1934, which raised the price of gold from \$20 to \$35 an ounce as part of an effort to combat the depression and stabilize the value of the dollar. Moving quickly, Patty hired the dredge designer Charles Janin to identify the requirements for successful dredging at Coal Creek and searched for a manufacturer. The winning bid for the project came from the Walter W. Johnson Company for a medium-sized, four-cubic-foot bucket dredge with a steel pontoon hull that cost \$143,000, including delivery from Oakland, California.

From the beginning, Gold Placers, Inc. employed a combination of experienced dredgers, local small-scale miners, and students who Patty recruited from the School of Mines. The emerging mining camp also had a family atmosphere because one of the dredge's first winchmen, Alvin Hendricks, arrived with his wife Mildred and five-year-old son. Ernest Patty's wife Kathryn and their sons also spent the summers at the camp, and in later years, three Han Athabascan families—the Junebys, Pauls, and Davids—came from nearby Eagle Village to live while the men worked for the company.

Dredging was difficult, muddy, noisy work. To prepare the ground, tractor operators (called catskinners) stripped away moss and tree stumps, hydraulic cannons blasted away the dense, black soil, and workers pounded “points” that injected water into the earth to melt frozen gravel. After the ground was thawed, the dredge, groaning and clanking, dug into the gravel layer up to twenty-two feet below the surface. In its first year, the dredge produced over 3,000 ounces of gold and nearly 400 ounces of silver. These results were so encouraging that Patty recommended that McRae also buy mining claims along neighboring Woodchopper Creek. The Canadian agreed and promptly ordered a second dredge and founded a second company—Alluvial Golds, Inc.

The two companies, each with its own dredge, worked as sibling operations. The Coal Creek operation had the Yukon River landing where nearly all of the dredge parts and fuel arrived, while Woodchopper Creek camp had the only airstrip in the area, allowing planes to deliver people and supplies. A rough 12-mile road ran from the river landing at Slaven's Roadhouse up the Coal Creek drainage and over the hills to the Woodchopper camp. Over the next twenty-five years, the twin dredges worked in concert, sharing crewmen and parts, and unearthing over 10,000 pounds of gold worth, at the time, over six million dollars.

The photographs in this booklet were all taken by company employees between 1935 and 1938. Today much of what appears in the images—the dredges, camp buildings, roads, hydraulic pipe, and prospecting drills—remains in place. Slaven's Roadhouse also survives and has become a public-use cabin and one of the most popular stops for travelers on the Yukon River. All of these historic resources are part of the Coal Creek Historic District, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and managed by the National Park Service. If you have a chance to visit, please help to protect these resources by leaving everything as you found it to be enjoyed by generations to come.

Collections & Photographers

The photographs in this volume came from six collections. Below you will find each listed with a brief profile of the photographers. Captions in the booklet are followed by initials indicating where each photograph can be found (for example, GB for George Beck Family Papers):

(GB) George Beck Family Papers, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives

George Beck arrived on the Yukon River in 1934 and worked for Ernest Patty as a tractor operator transporting supplies and equipment at Coal Creek and hauling a portable prospecting drill as far away as the Charley River. Shortly thereafter he met and married Nellie Biederman, daughter of the mail carrier Ed Biederman. The couple moved to a log cabin downriver from his father-in-law's fish camp near the confluence of the Kandik and Yukon rivers. During the winters, when dredging was not possible, George took his two young sons on hunting and fur trapping excursions. His photographs offer a detailed portrait of life along the Yukon River in the 1930s.

(WL) William E. Lemm Photographs, National Park Service, Fairbanks Administrative Center

Bill Lemm came to the Yukon River country in the early 1930s to join his brother. Together they built a log cabin on the Tatonduk River near the U.S.-Canada border and spent the winter of 1934-1935 cutting cordwood to sell to steamboats that plied the Yukon. When summer arrived they moved to Eagle where they gardened and worked for the Alaska Road Commission. In 1936, Lemm heard about the Coal Creek dredging operation and walked over one hundred miles from Eagle to Slaven's Roadhouse. There he talked his way into jobs as a dredge builder, tractor operator, and jack-of-all-trades. Lemm's photographs show every stage of the dredge's construction and the challenges of melting acres of permafrost in advance of the giant machine.

(EH) Everett S. Hamman Photographs, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives

In 1935, Everett Hamman operated the first tractor at Coal Creek—a Caterpillar “Diesel Forty”—to carve a seven-mile road from the Yukon River to the dredge-building site and a two-mile ditch along the hillside to divert water from Coal Creek for use in stripping and thawing operations. Hamman and his crew also used the tractor and a track-equipped wagon from the Athey Truss Wheel Company to transport pieces of the Coal Creek dredge that had spent the winter on the banks of the Yukon River. Although the collection contains only thirteen photographs, they offer a useful chronicle of dredge construction and camp logistics.

(AH) Al Hendricks, Jr. Photographs, National Park Service, Fairbanks Administrative Center

Before Ernest Patty hired him as the Coal Creek dredge's winchman in 1937, Alvin Hendricks worked on a dredge at Walker Fork, a tributary of the Fortymile River about 100 miles to the southeast. Hendricks' wife Mildred worked as a cook at the Coal Creek camp and his young son, Al, Jr., mushed with his dog Taku and ran his own trapline for lynx, marmot, and snowshoe hares. The winchman's job was the highest paid of the dredge crew because he operated an array of levers that controlled the dredge's direction, speed, and digging depth. The winchman also controlled the mechanisms that washed the gravel, separated the gold, and dumped waste rock at the rear of the dredge. Scans of the Hendricks family photographs are used with permission and were made available to the National Park Service when Al, Jr. and his family visited Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve in 2012.

(EP) Ernest N. Patty Papers and (SP) Stanton Patty Family Papers, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives

The Canadian investor Alexander McRae hired Ernest Patty in 1934 to locate mining properties in Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Patty arranged for the purchase of mining claims on Coal Creek and Woodchopper Creek, and he worked as the manager of McRae's mining operations until 1953. Each summer, his wife Kathryn and their sons Ernest, Jr., Stanton, and Dale joined him on trips to inspect the dredges and direct the work. Dale would take over management duties in 1954 and worked in that capacity until 1960 when dredging was halted on both creeks. Before working for McRae, Ernest Patty was a professor at the School of Mines (part of the early University of Alaska Fairbanks), and in 1953 he began seven years as the university's president. The Patty family's photographs, contained in two collections, represent some of the finest images chronicling this era.

CHAPTER 1: THE SEARCH FOR GOLD



Churn drills, like this one at Coal Creek, pulverized gravel to create a slurry that could be tested for gold worth pennies per cubic yard. By drilling at 100-foot intervals, Gold Placers, Inc. created detailed maps of gold values across the drainage. (SP)



Left to right: Alexander McRae, Ernest Patty, and Ira Joralemon pan for signs of gold along the Charley River in 1935. McRae needed to assess the potential profitability of old mining claims before investing in a dredge. (AH)



Workers at Coal Creek use a mobile "Airplane" drill to test gravel for gold values. The drill was designed by C. Kirk Hillman of Seattle to be light enough that the disassembled unit could be dropped from an airplane into remote locations. (SP)



The "Prospector" by C. Kirk Hillman was a churn drill capable of moving with tracks over rugged terrain. This drill and the "Airplane" model were used to create maps of gold values at Coal Creek, Woodchopper Creek, and beyond. (SP)



A Caterpillar tractor pulled this "go-devil," a sled that carried supplies for the "Prospector" churn drill. The sled carried fuel, tools, bits, drill pipe, and steel sluice boxes for processing the rock slurry recovered from drill holes. (SP)



Workers with their partially assembled prospecting drill at the Charley River. Roughly 100 stampeder worked the gravels of Charley River tributaries in 1898-99, but when Ernest Patty sent this crew in the 1930s, they did not find enough to warrant dredging. (GB)



Frank Slaven (foreground) and other old-timers prospecting for gold near the Charley River. They are using a steam boiler to melt frozen ground and buckets to bring the gravel to the surface. The ladder next to the boiler emerges from their mine shaft. (WL)

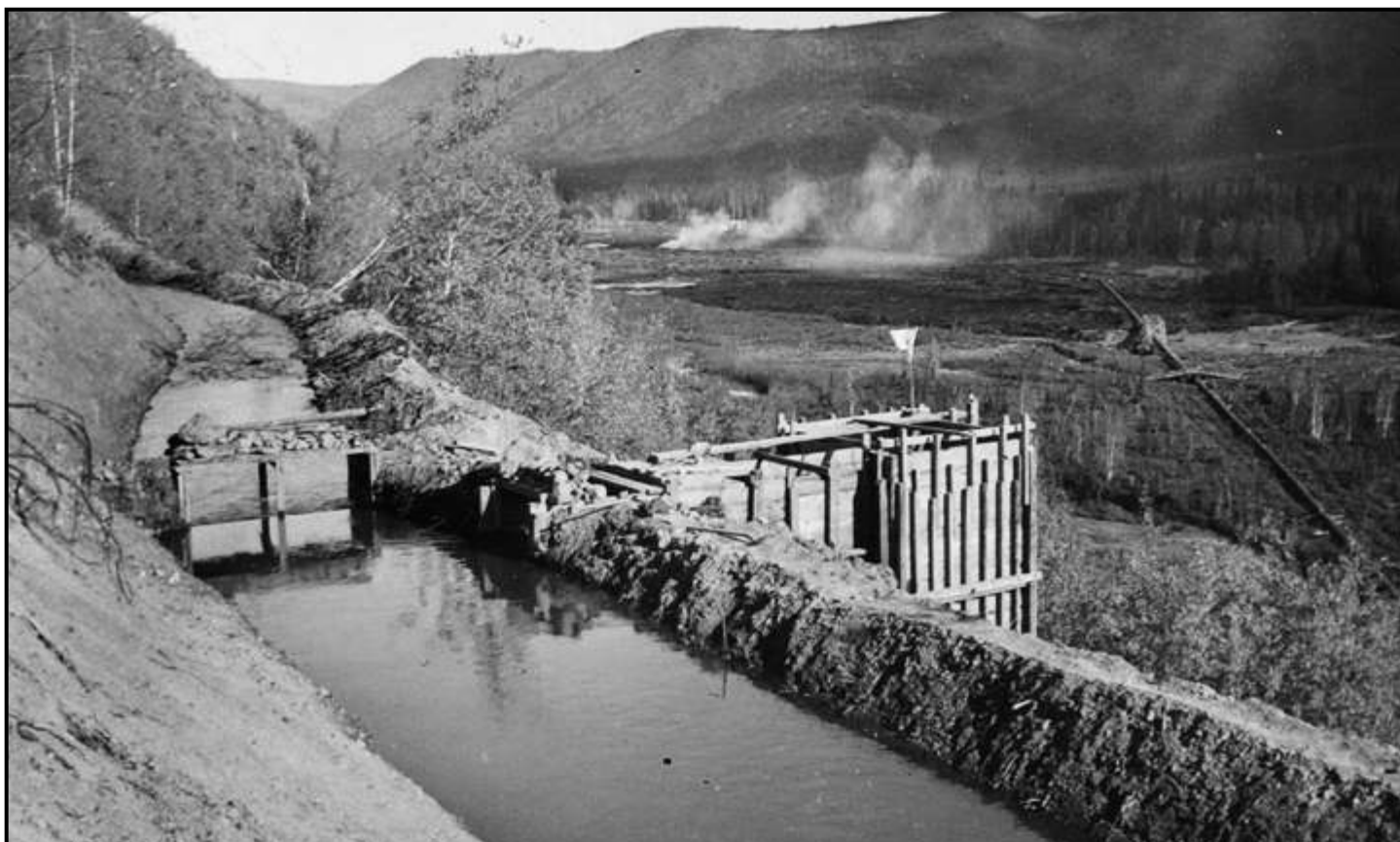
CHAPTER 2: STRIPPING AND THAWING



A battery of hydraulic cannons, called giants, strip away the organic material (called muck) to begin thawing the permafrost below. This ground preparation was essential because the dredge's buckets would be damaged by frozen gravel. (EH)



Ernest Patty and his wife Kathryn stand along the two-mile ditch above Coal Creek. The ditch provided water under pressure for stripping and thawing in advance of the gold dredge. (EP)



This penstock (right of ditch) diverts water to a system of hydraulic piping (far right) for stripping and thawing. As the water descended into the valley, gravity created enough pressure to supply multiple giants and hundreds of thawing points. (SP)



An elaborate system of hydraulic piping was used to transport water for giants and thawing points. The points, made of rubber hose and steel pipe with a chisel bit, were driven into frozen ground, inches at a time, to melt many acres of permafrost. (SP)



This temporary bridge supports a pipe carrying water under pressure across a portion of Coal Creek. As the dredge moved along the creek drainage, this bridge would be dismantled and erected elsewhere. (SP)



Caterpillar-style tractors with bulldozer blades were the only vehicles capable of maneuvering through a soggy landscape of melted earth and diverted creek water. And even with treads, these machines often became mired and needed to be rescued. (AH)



A dredge employee uses a hydraulic cannon, or giant, to strip away the ground's organic layer and accelerate thawing in advance of the dredge. At the rear of the nozzle are counter-weights to help the worker handle the power of the cannon. (AH)



A Caterpillar tractor hauls a load of piping from the Yukon River near Slaven's Roadhouse to the area of dredge operations. The Alaska Road Commission and Gold Placers, Inc. worked to improve this roadway between 1935 and 1939. (GB)



A field of thawing points used to inject air-temperature water into the ground to melt permafrost. This work needed to be done the year before the dredge arrived to ensure that thawing had reached at least twenty-five feet of depth. (SP)

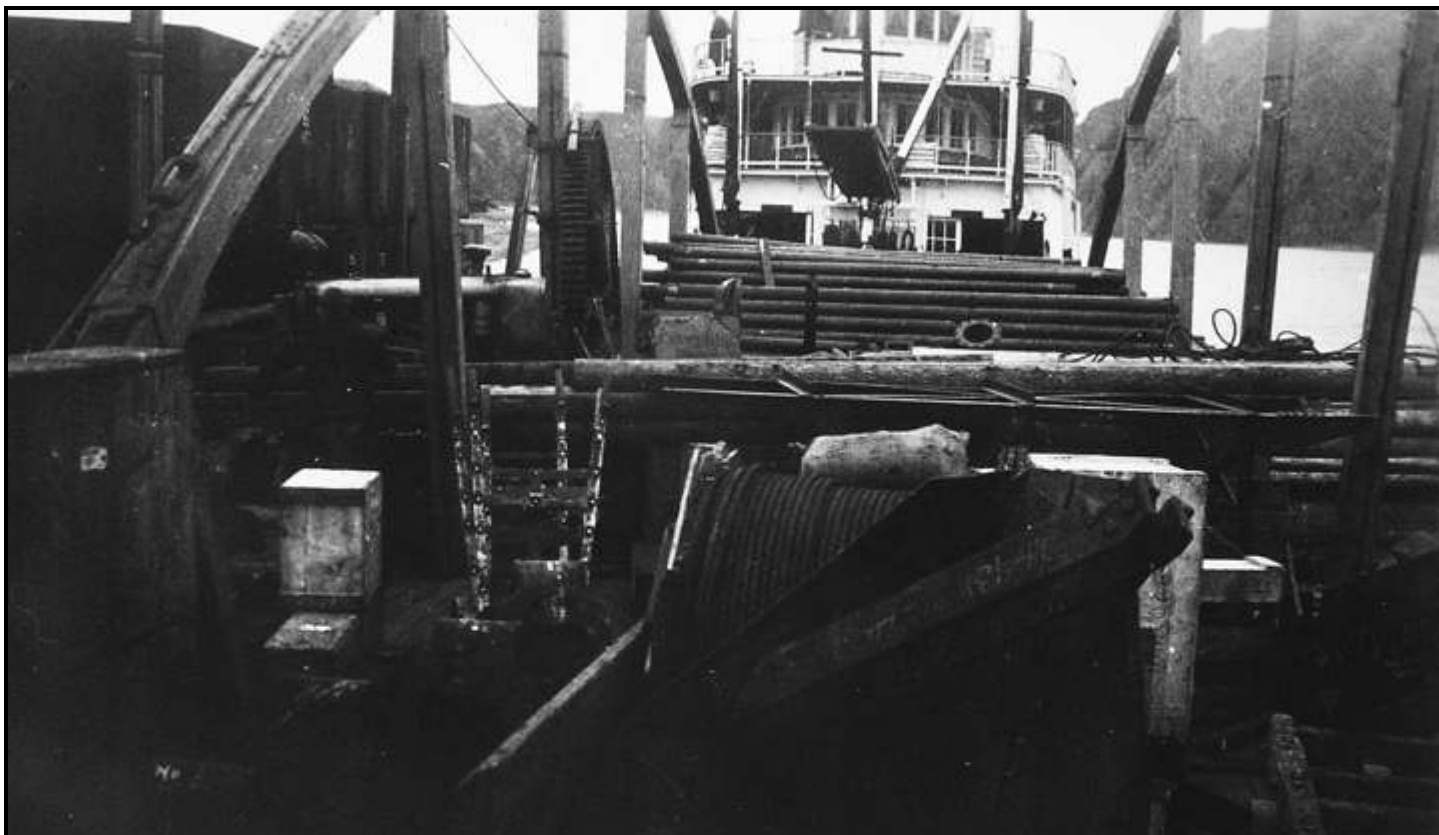


Thawing points were equipped with a “hammer and anvil” system, which allowed a worker to drive the chisel bit a few inches at a time into melting permafrost. The work was backbreaking and made more difficult by mosquitoes and standing water. (AH)

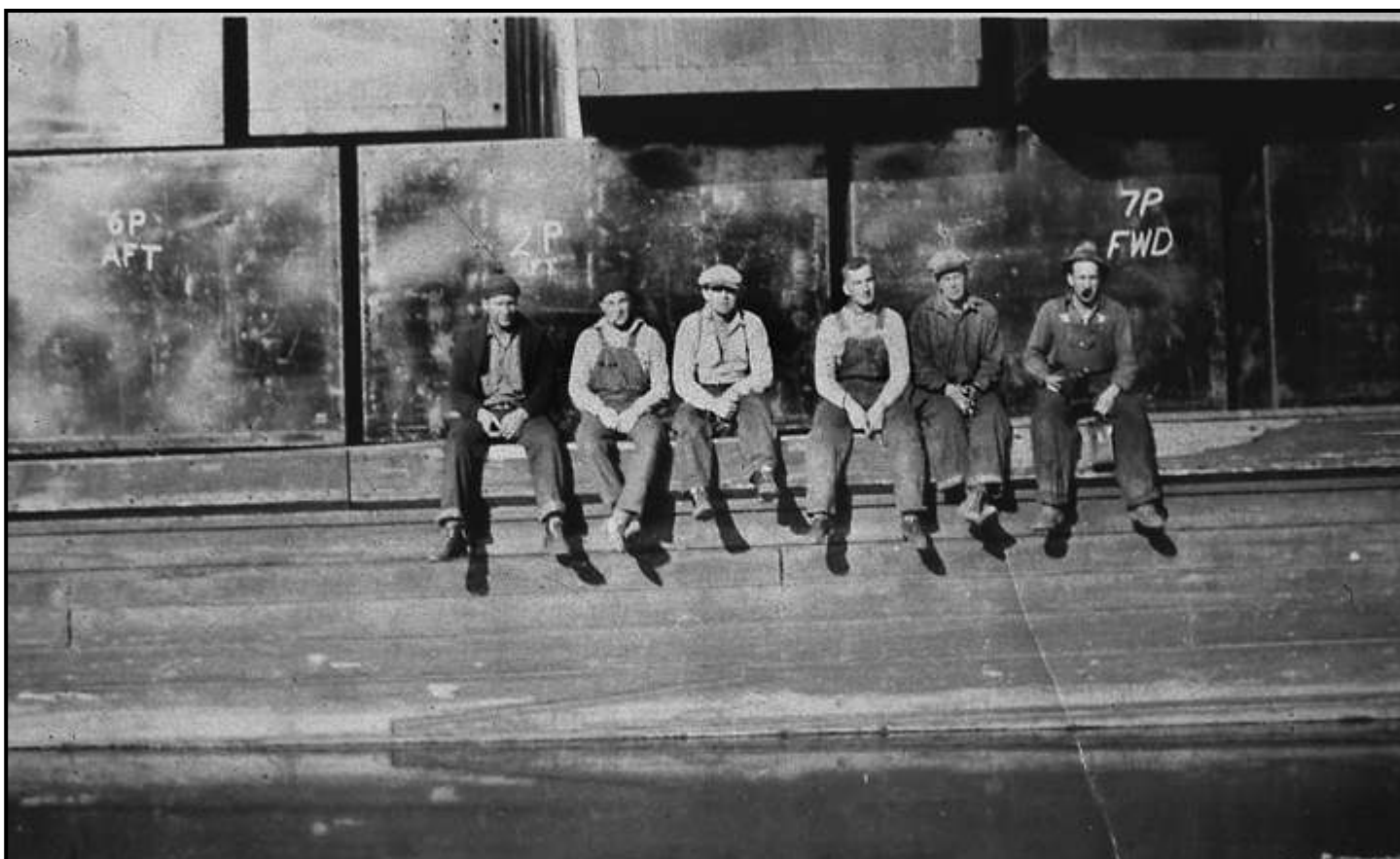
CHAPTER 3: DREDGE CONSTRUCTION



Employees on a break during the construction of the Coal Creek gold dredge. The Walter W. Johnson Company of California designed the dredge and sent a foreman, Sam Palmer, to direct the work. The dredge was assembled in seventy-two days. (WL)



A steamboat pushing a barge carrying parts for the Coal Creek dredge to the landing at Slaven's Roadhouse. Without the White Pass Railroad between Skagway and Whitehorse and steamboats like this one, the enterprise would not have been possible. (WL)



Workers rest on the edge of a Yukon River barge delivering sections of the Coal Creek dredge's steel pontoons. At the time, most dredge pontoons were made of wood, but steel was necessary in Alaska to resist the crush of ice in winter. (WL)



Frank Slaven (left) and others unload dredge parts from a barge near Slaven's Roadhouse (at right on the bluff). The price of the dredge included delivery to this point; reaching the construction site seven miles inland was up to Gold Placers, Inc. (GB)



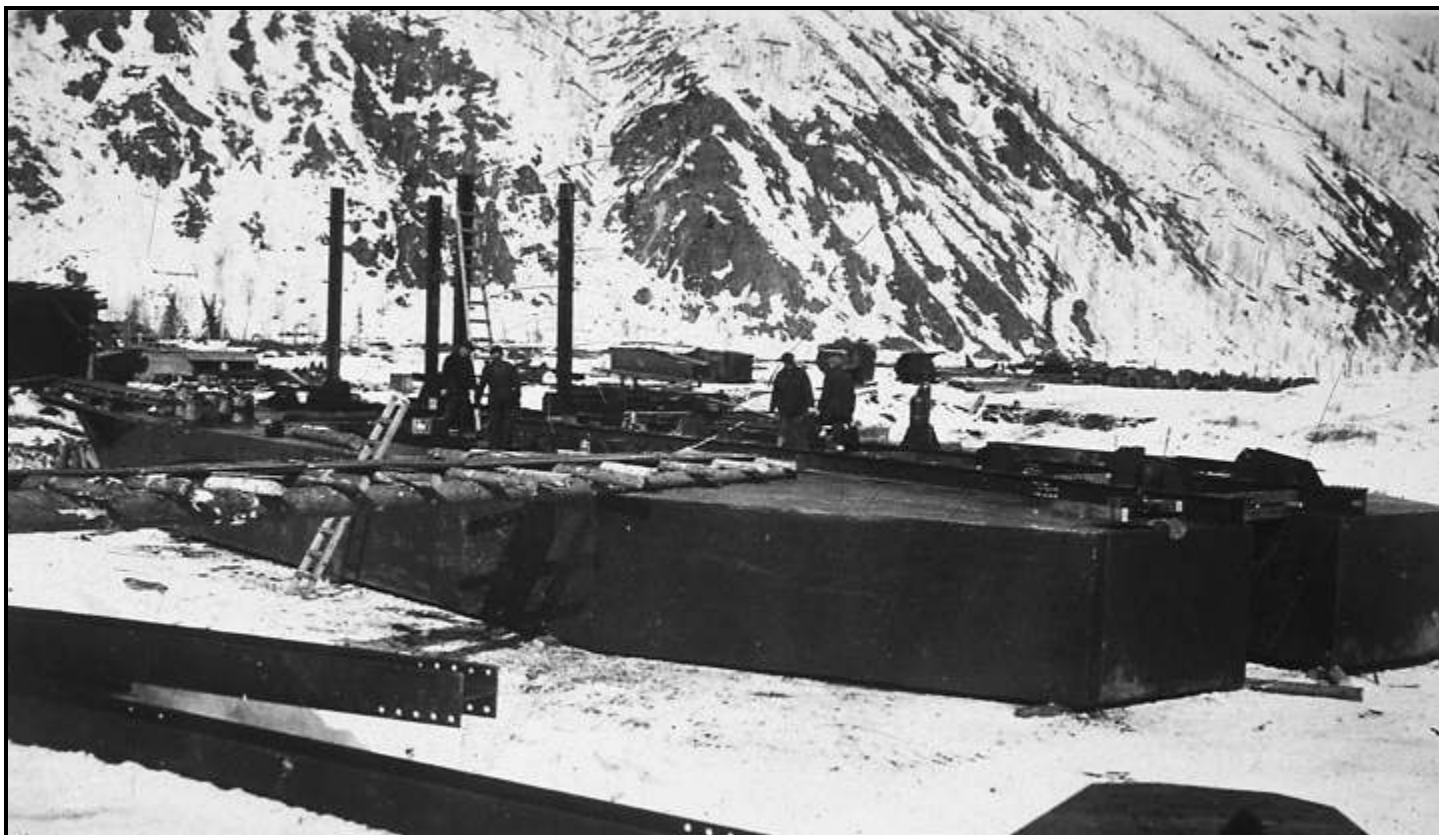
Workers transport the 40-foot-long "spud" weighing nearly seventeen tons to the dredge construction site. The spud, installed at the rear of the dredge, served as an anchor and pivot point that could be raised or lowered as the dredge advanced. (GB)



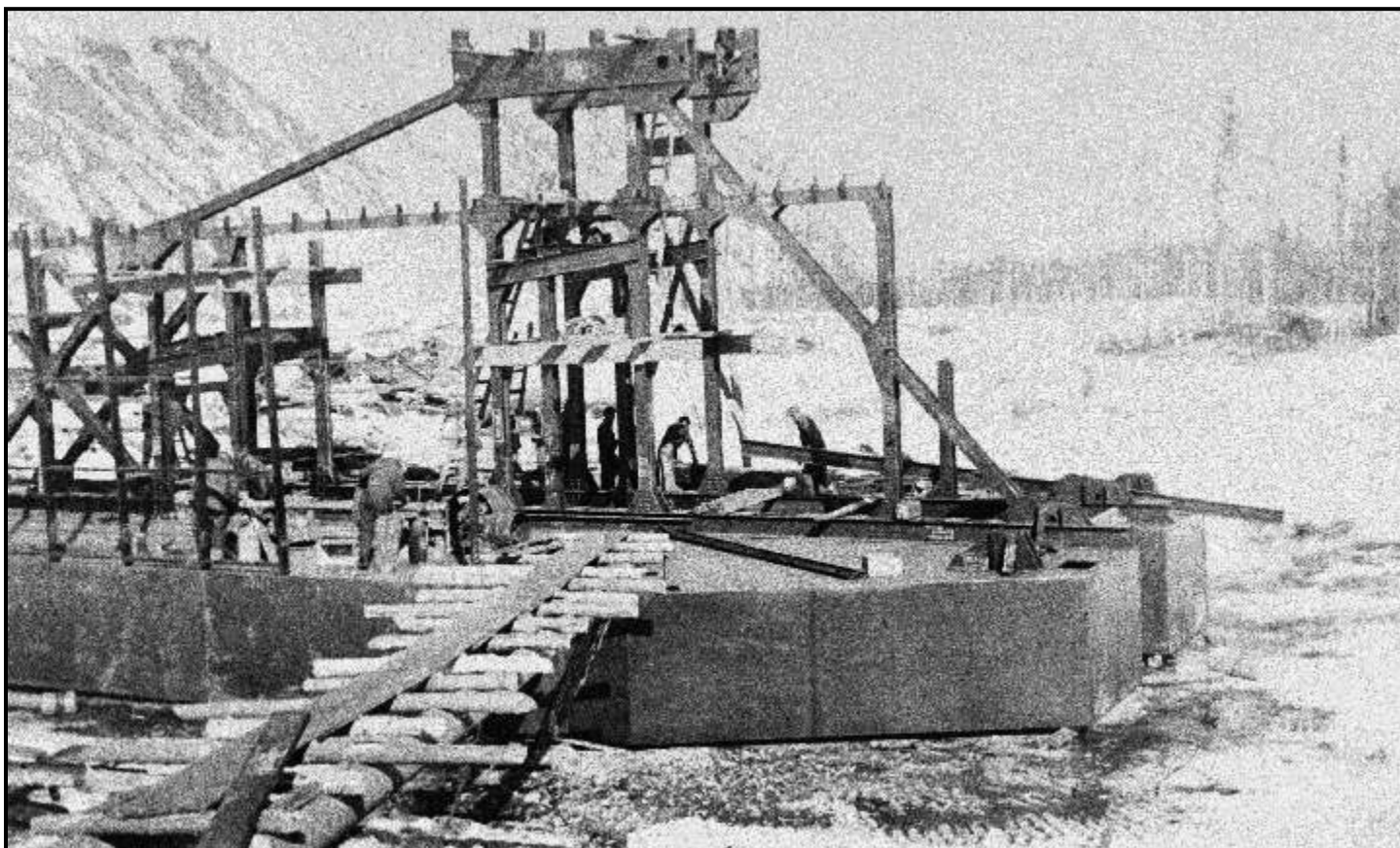
In early March 1936, tractors and sledges on the bank of the Yukon River prepared to move dredge parts up Coal Creek to begin construction. Moving heavy loads overland was easier over snow and when the ground was still frozen. (GB)



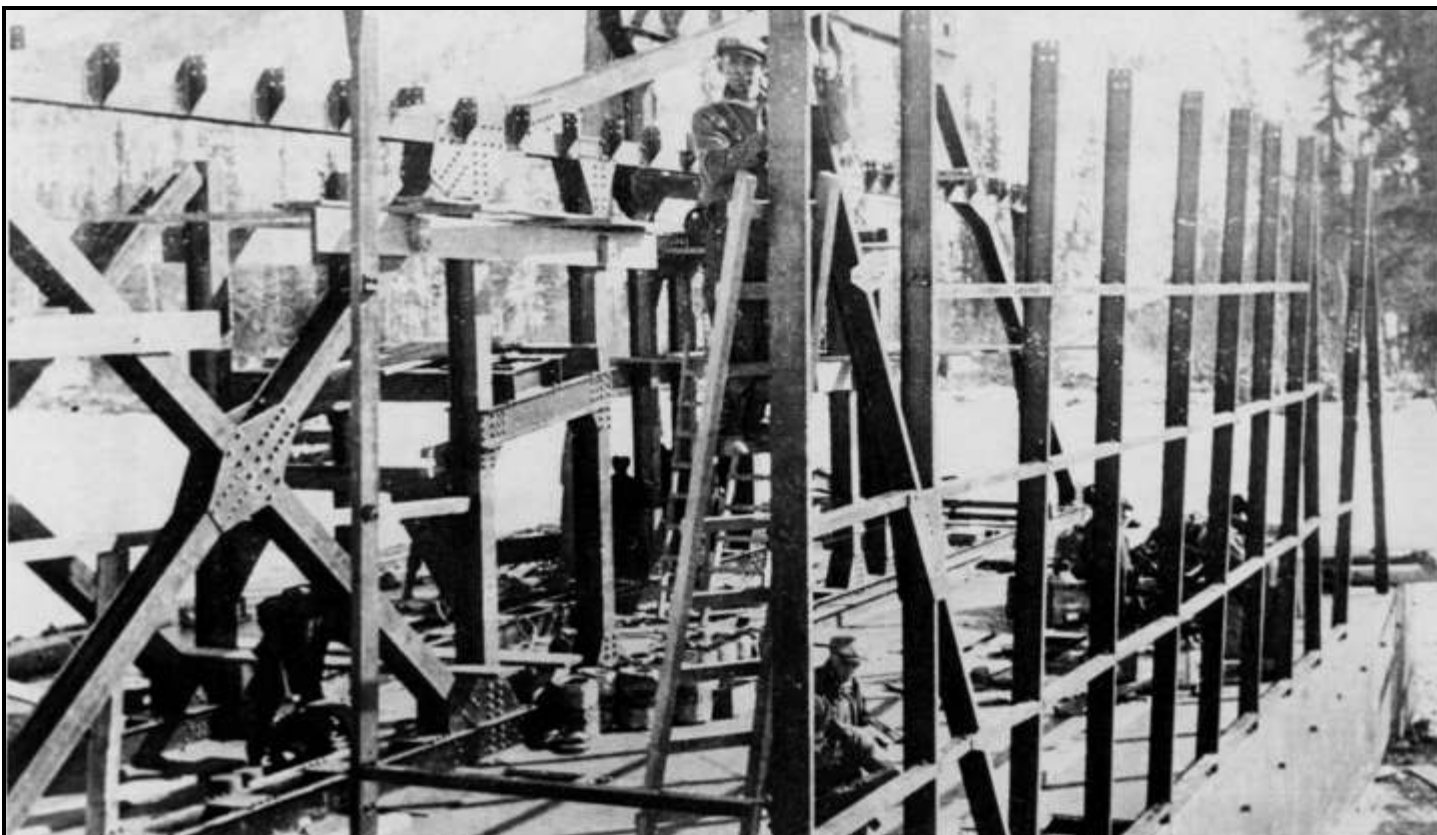
Dredge buckets and sections of the trommel (the dredge's main gravel-washing mechanism) lie in the snow, waiting to be transported to the construction site. In all, the parts, tools, and other equipment weighed about 400 tons. (EP)



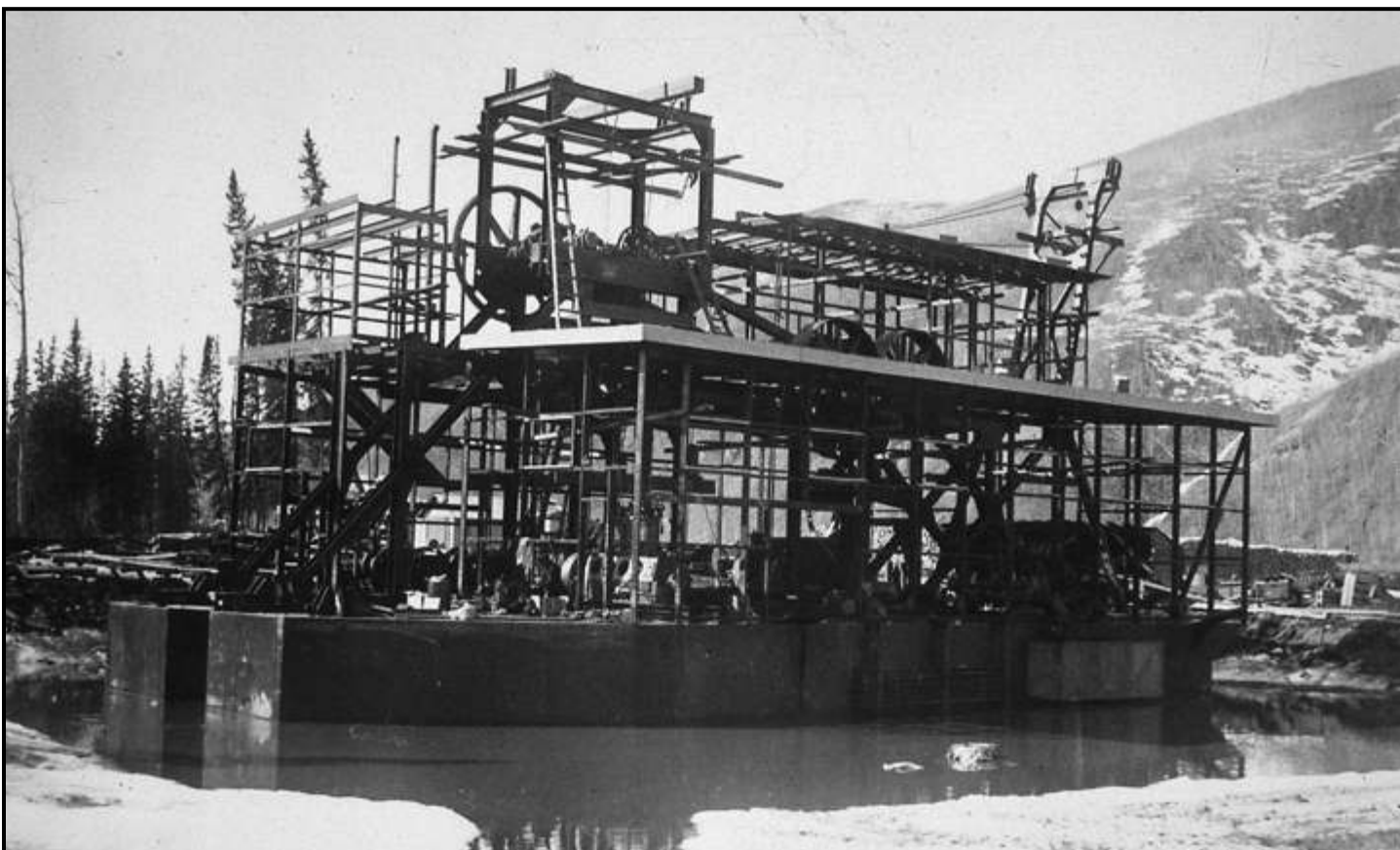
Construction of the Coal Creek dredge took place on a frozen pond because the ice provided a flat, level surface, and when the pond melted in the spring, the dredge would float and be ready for action. (WL)



The Coal Creek dredge's superstructure of steel I-beams riveted into place begins to take shape. The notch at the bow of the dredge, between two sections of pontoon, would allow its sixty-two buckets to dig over twenty feet into the earth. (GB)



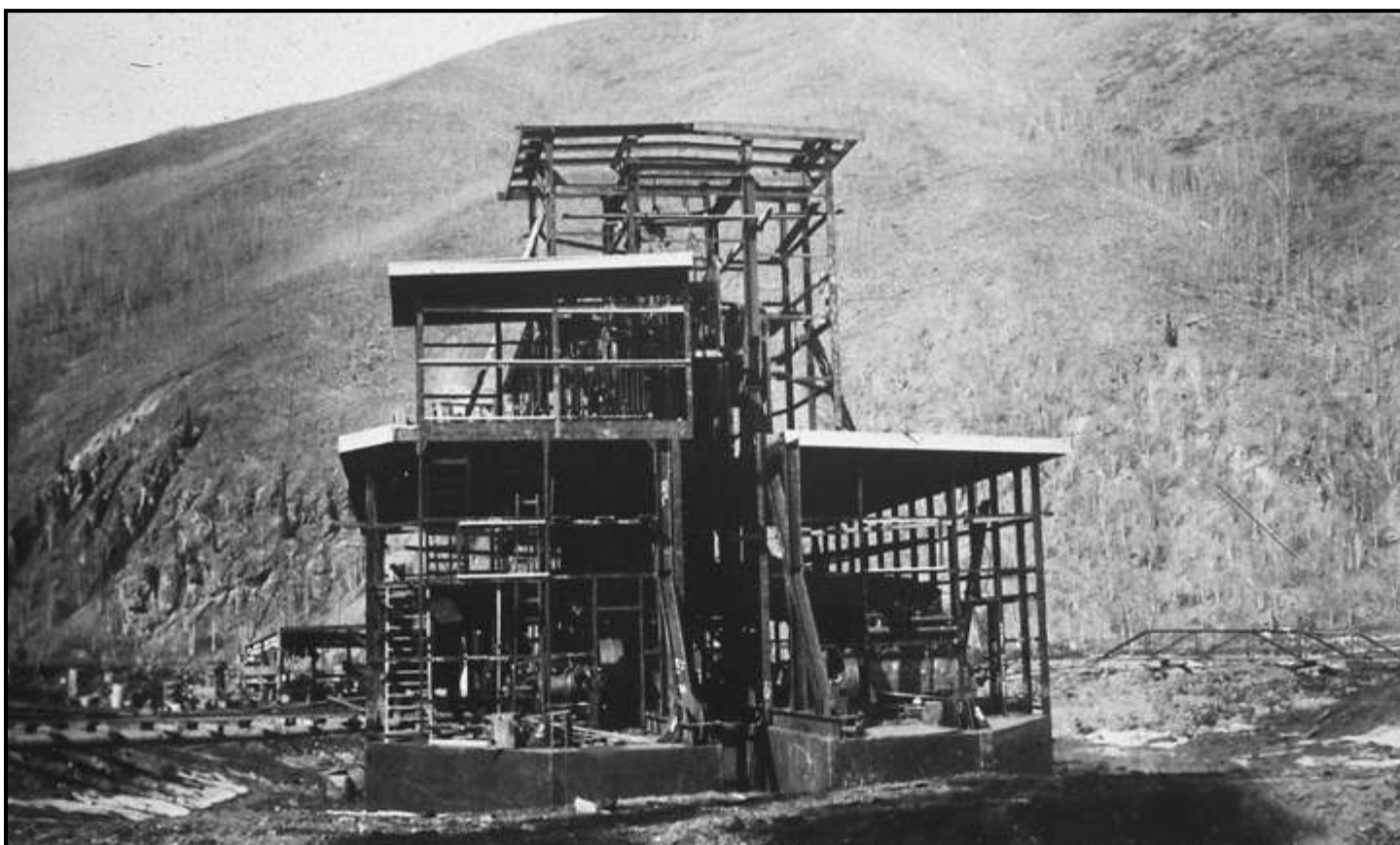
Workers on the “bull gang” affix steel struts to create the dredge’s superstructure. The metal was held in place by rivets that had to be pounded with hammers while they were still red-hot and malleable. (GB)



With the dredge’s superstructure nearly complete, the workers next installed the bow gantry and bucket line and the stacker that ejected waste rock to the rear. They also placed thirty tons of ballast rock inside the pontoons to prevent listing. (WL)



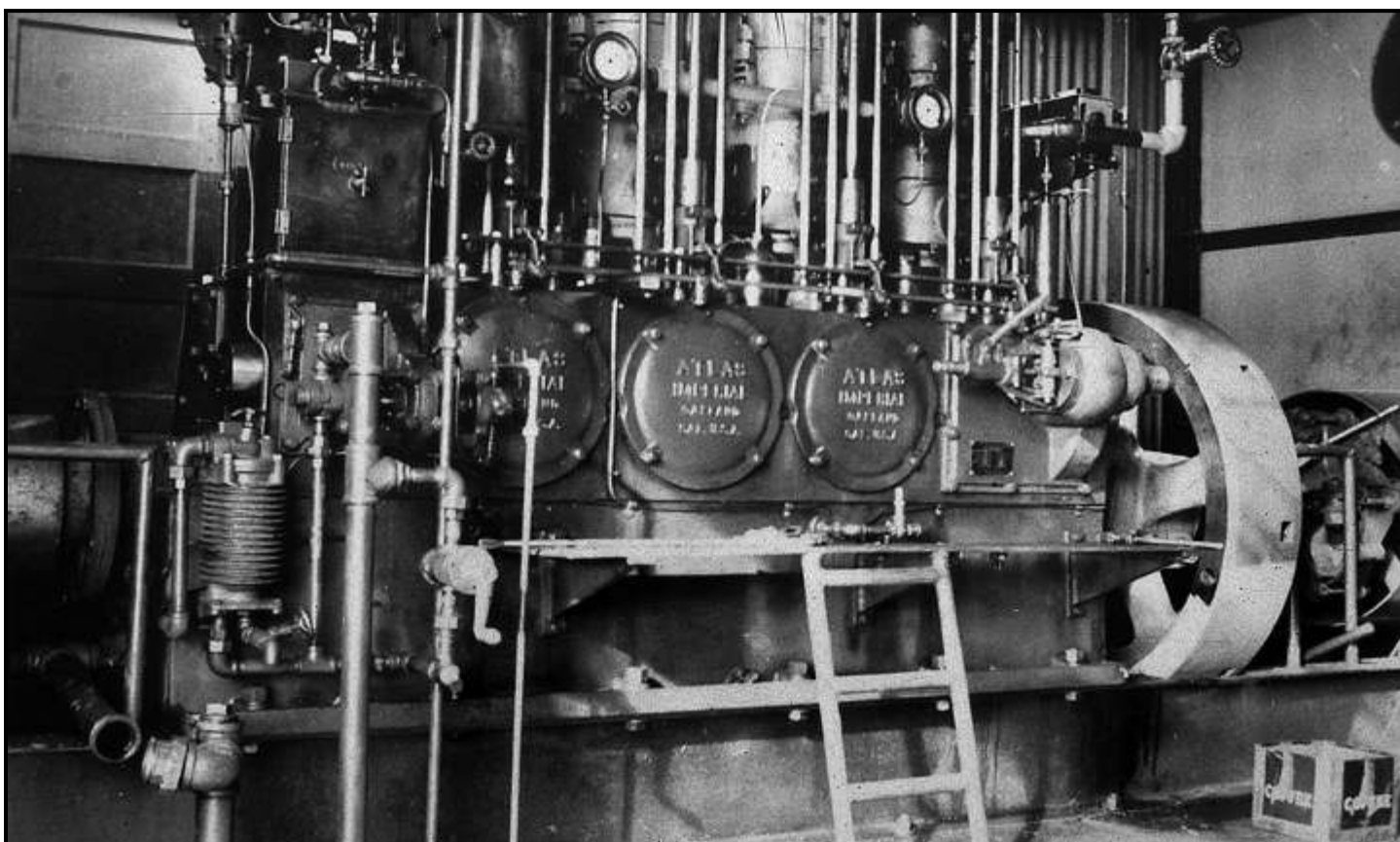
Dredge buckets, each capable of holding four cubic feet of material, wait to be installed. Each season, the digging edge of the buckets was worn away from constant use, so the buckets were designed with replaceable lips. (WL)



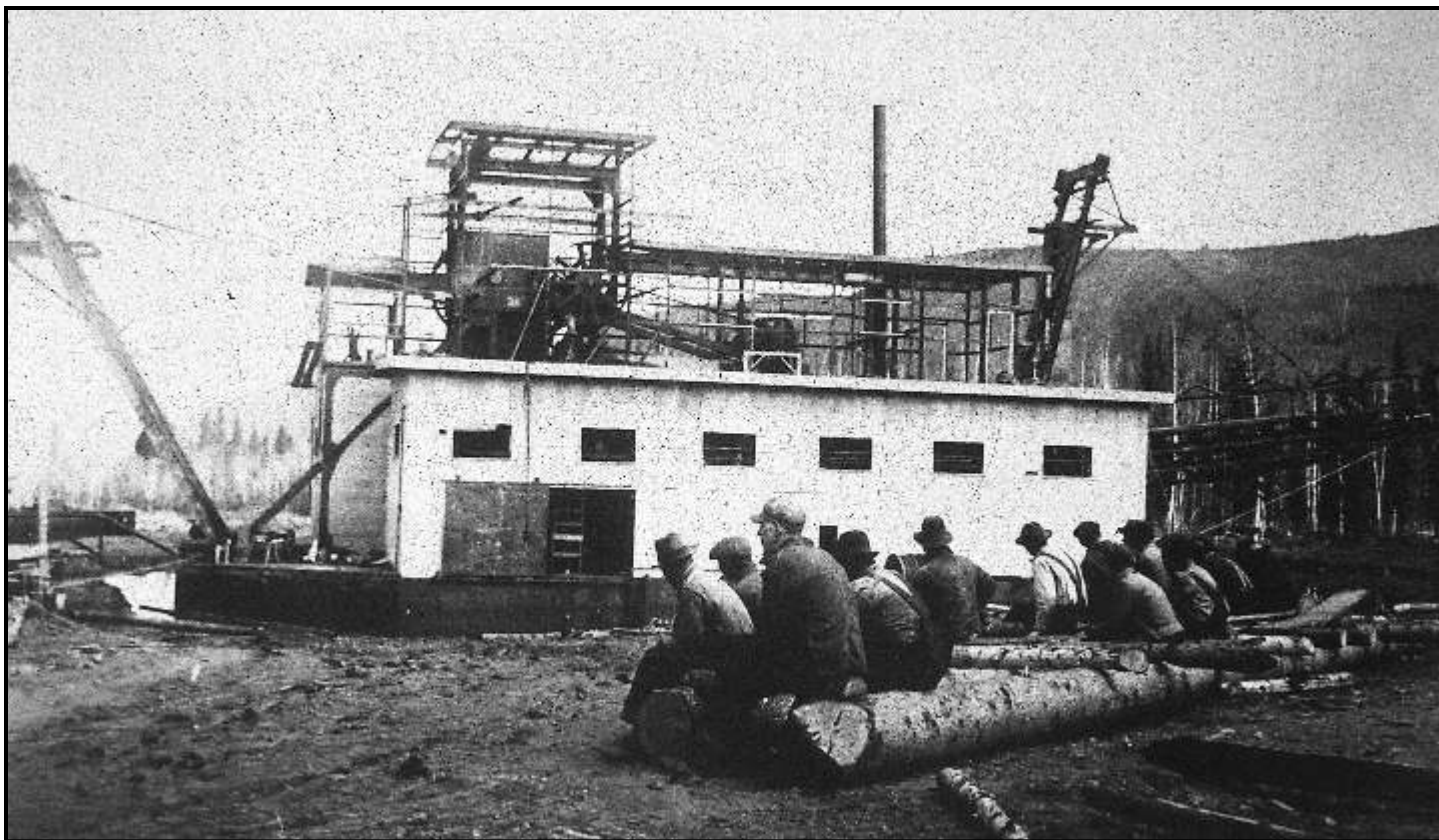
On the lower right one can see the Atlas diesel engine that powered most of the dredge. The pilot house at the upper-left is where the winchman used levers controlling an elaborate suite of cables and winches to operate the dredge. (WL)



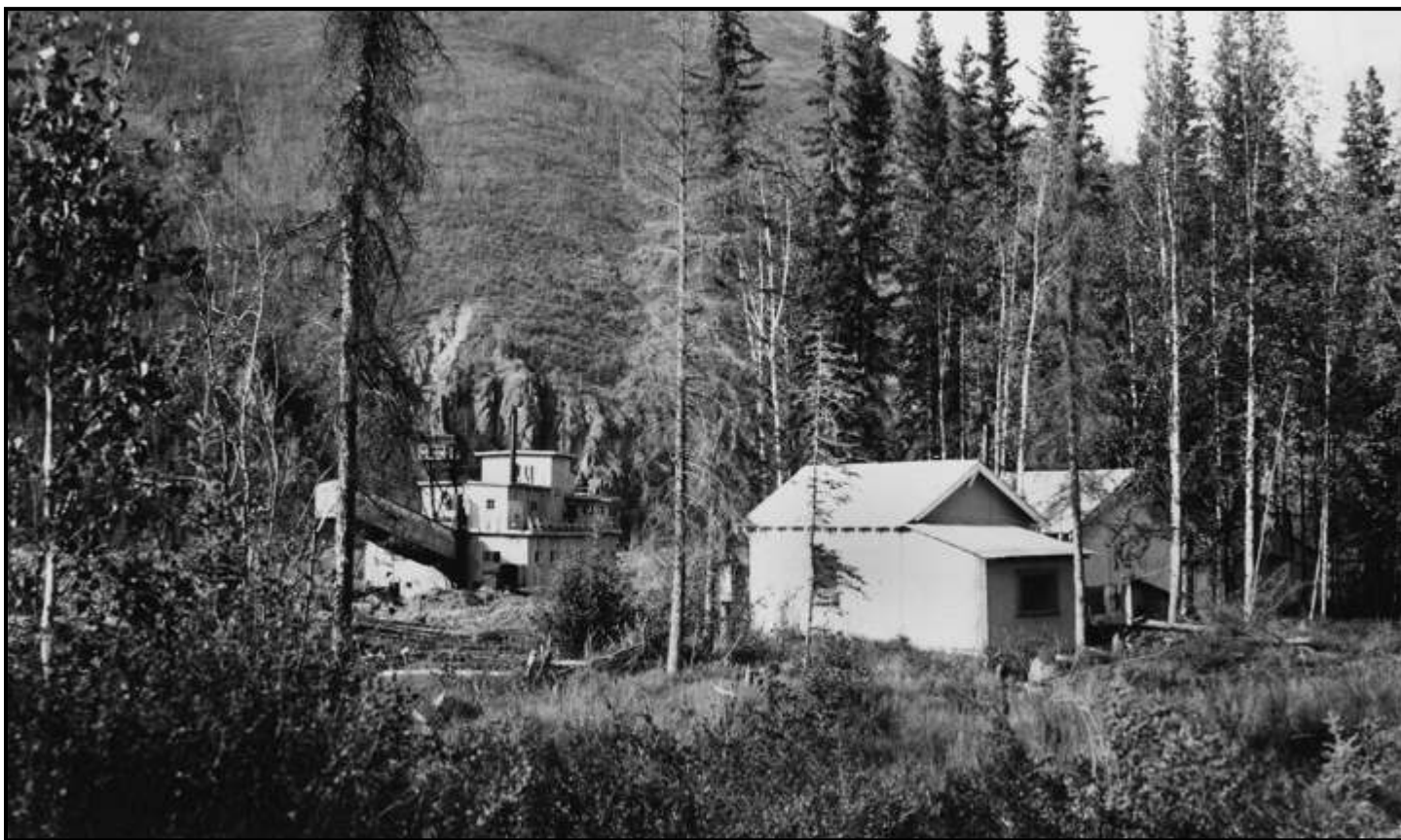
Ropes and pulleys were essential for lifting heavy dredge parts into place; the siding has been installed on the port side and soon the bucket line (parts seen at far left) will be lifted into place. (WL)



The Atlas diesel engine used heavy canvas drive belts to power the dredge's bucket line and trommel. Atlas engines were typically used on ships where constant movement and wet conditions were the norm—dredges were no different. (WL)



The construction of the Coal Creek dredge began on April 8, 1936 and ended on June 18—in just seventy-two days these workers assembled an enormously complex mining behemoth that would soon begin digging and processing gravel. (WL)



The Coal Creek dredge working within sight of new camp buildings. As the dredge moved across the landscape, most of the camp moved with it. This early location, near a tributary called Cheese Creek, was abandoned by 1938. (AH)



Once in operation, the dredge floated in a pond of its own making, and as it excavated gravel, long steel cables attached near the bow were used to pull the machine left, right, or forward. Note ripples in the water where a cable slipped beneath the surface. (SP)

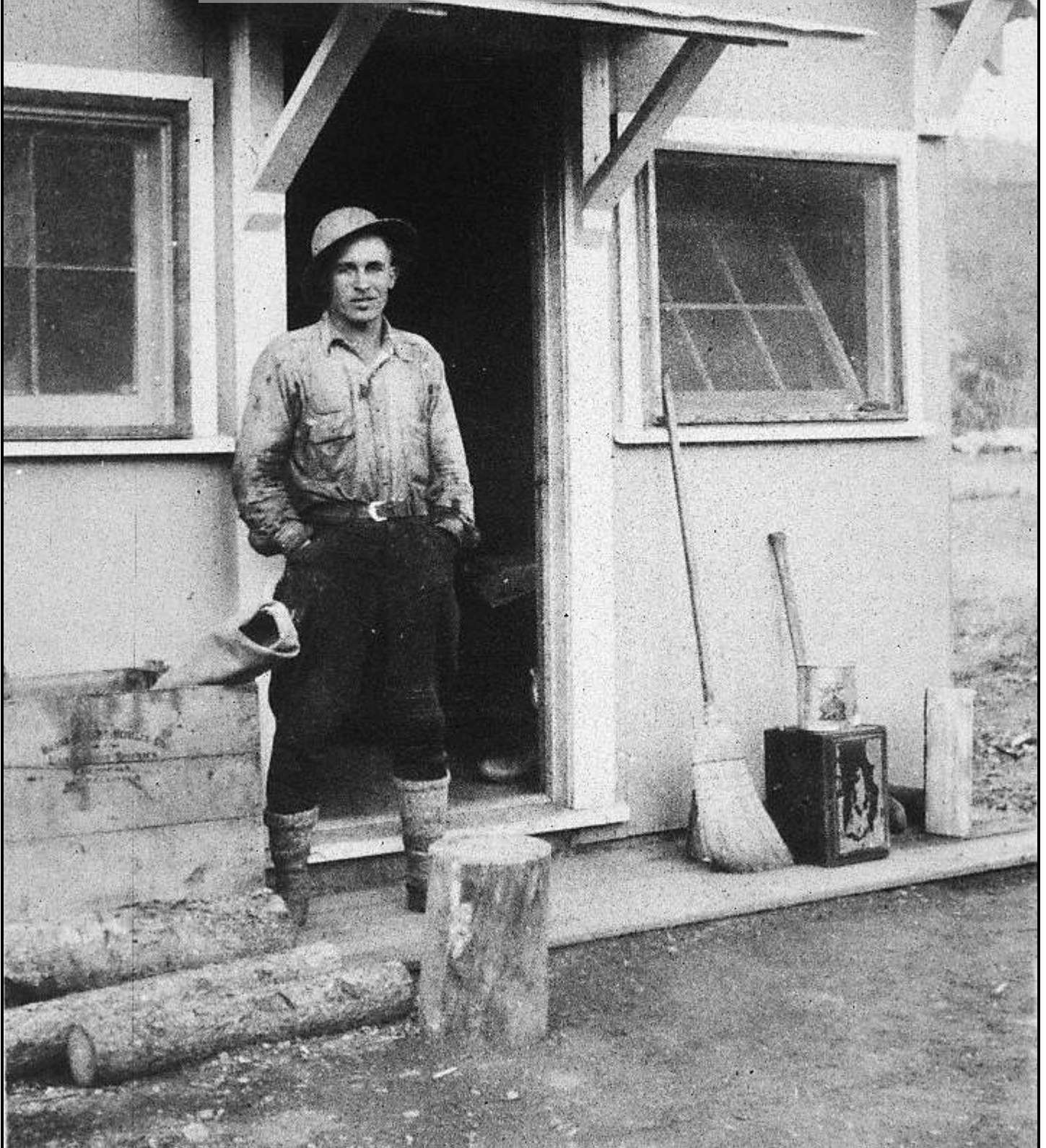


The dredge's sixty-two buckets could be raised or lowered to find the richest layer of gold-bearing gravels, and the work continued non-stop until late October or early November when sub-zero weather ended the season. (AH)

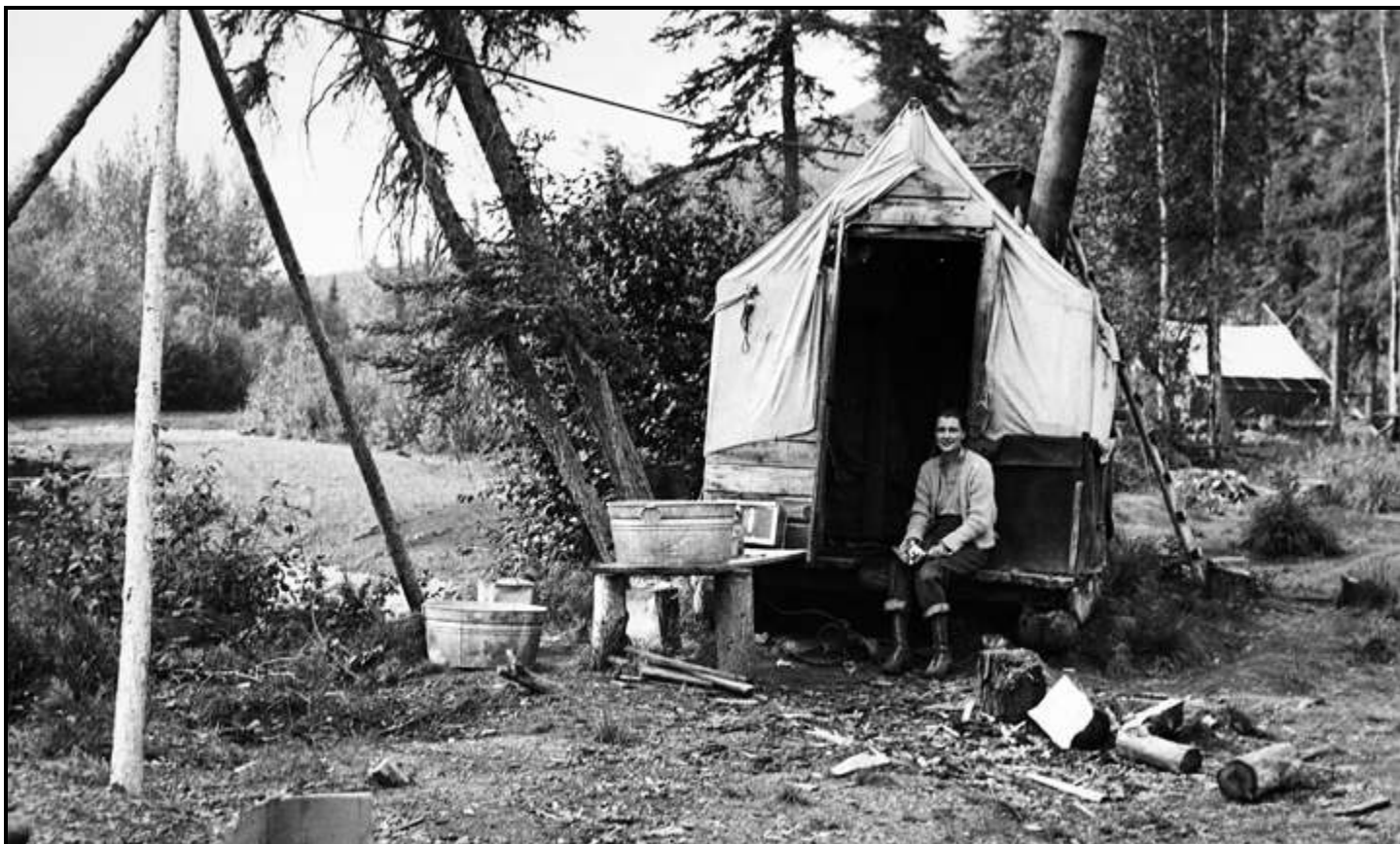


The Coal Creek gold dredge on its first full day of operation, July 1, 1936. General Manager Ernest Patty later wrote, "Its two diesel engines began coughing; the winchman moved the dredge out of the construction pit and the bucket line started to revolve and bite into the gravel. It was a great moment to hear the thump of the first gravel falling into the hopper." (EH)

CHAPTER 4: BUILDING THE CAMPS



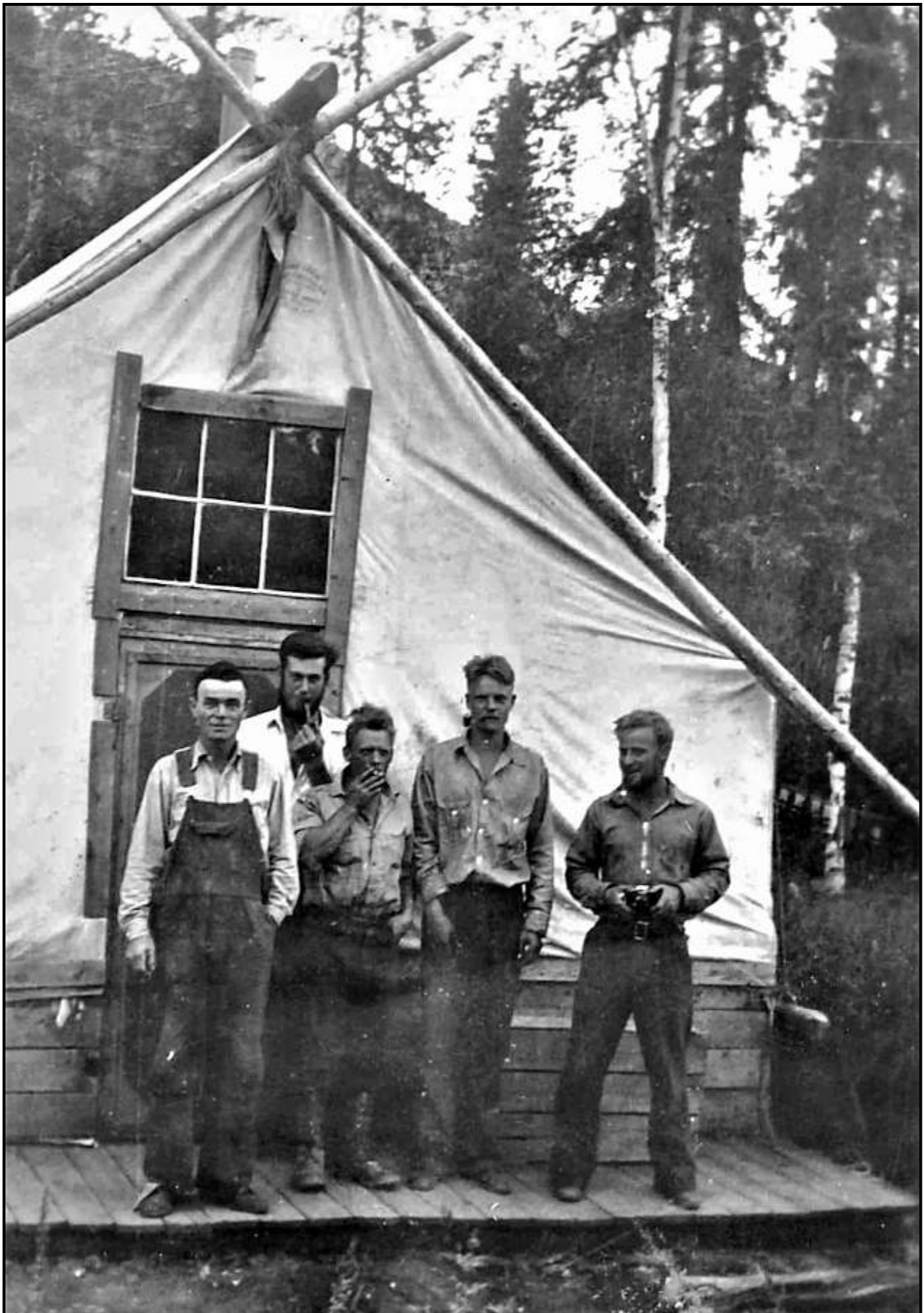
Dredge worker and photographer Bill Lemm at a Coal Creek bunkhouse. For Lemm and other members of the crew, buildings like these were home for the four-month dredging season. (WL)



Kathryn Patty, wife of the general manager, at a wood-framed tent that served as a bathhouse in the days before the Coal Creek mining camp was finished. (SP)



These bunkhouses were built on log skids equipped with steel cables that made it possible for tractors to relocate the entire camp to be closer to the gold dredge as it moved up and down the Coal Creek drainage. (SP)



Coal Creek dredge workers in front of their temporary quarters before frame bunkhouses were completed. Many dredge workers were students in the University of Alaska's mining program in Fairbanks. (AH)



The earliest camp buildings at Coal Creek were a combination of log cabins and frame structures. The logs were local, but the materials for the rest of the buildings arrived from California via Yukon River steamboat. (EP)



The Coal Creek dredge in its first weeks of operation near the Cheese Creek tributary. To the left of the spruce tree is a machine shop, blacksmith's shop, and warehouse for dredge parts. (SP)



A barefooted dredge employee repairs chimney flashing to stop a roof leak in his temporary bunkhouse at the Coal Creek mining camp. (WL)



The early days of construction at Woodchopper Creek mining camp in 1937. Not long after this photograph was taken, bulldozers cleared land for an airstrip because there was no road linking the Woodchopper camp directly to the Yukon River. (EP)



A pilot with the Pollack Flying Service of Alaska delivers supplies at the newly constructed Woodchopper Creek airstrip. (AH)



Bill Lemm making coffee at the summit of the road between the Yukon River and the Coal Creek mining camp. This road was eventually extended westward across the hills to reach the Woodchopper Creek camp. (WL)



Dredge workers near the newly finished kitchen and mess hall at Woodchopper Creek mining camp. With a road linking Woodchopper Creek to Coal Creek, supplies and sometimes whole buildings could be transported back and forth. (SP)



Built in 1937, the Woodchopper Creek gold dredge was also owned by the Canadian investor Alexander McRae. It operated under the business name Alluvial Golds, Inc. and was similar in design to the one at Coal Creek. (SP)

CHAPTER 5: LIFE AND WORK IN MINING COUNTRY



Mildred and Al Hendricks, Jr. in one of the International trucks used to drive the road between the Yukon River and Coal Creek mining camp and from Coal Creek to the Woodchopper Creek camp. (AH)



Dredge workers at the Coal Creek mining camp engaged in a fierce tug-of-war on Independence Day. This was the only day during the season the crews were not working. (AH)



A potato-sack race on Independence Day. The piles of waste rock in the distance, called tailings, were deposited by the Coal Creek gold dredge. (AH)



Dredge workers at the Coal Creek mining camp display their team banner in preparation for Independence Day celebrations. The name P.O.I.N.T.S. is a reference to their work driving thawing points into the earth in advance of the dredge. (WL)



Al Hendricks, Jr. (left in coveralls) and his dog Taku gather outside the Coal Creek camp's mess hall to enjoy an Independence Day orchestra. The triangle hanging from the building was used to call the dredge workers to meals. (AH)



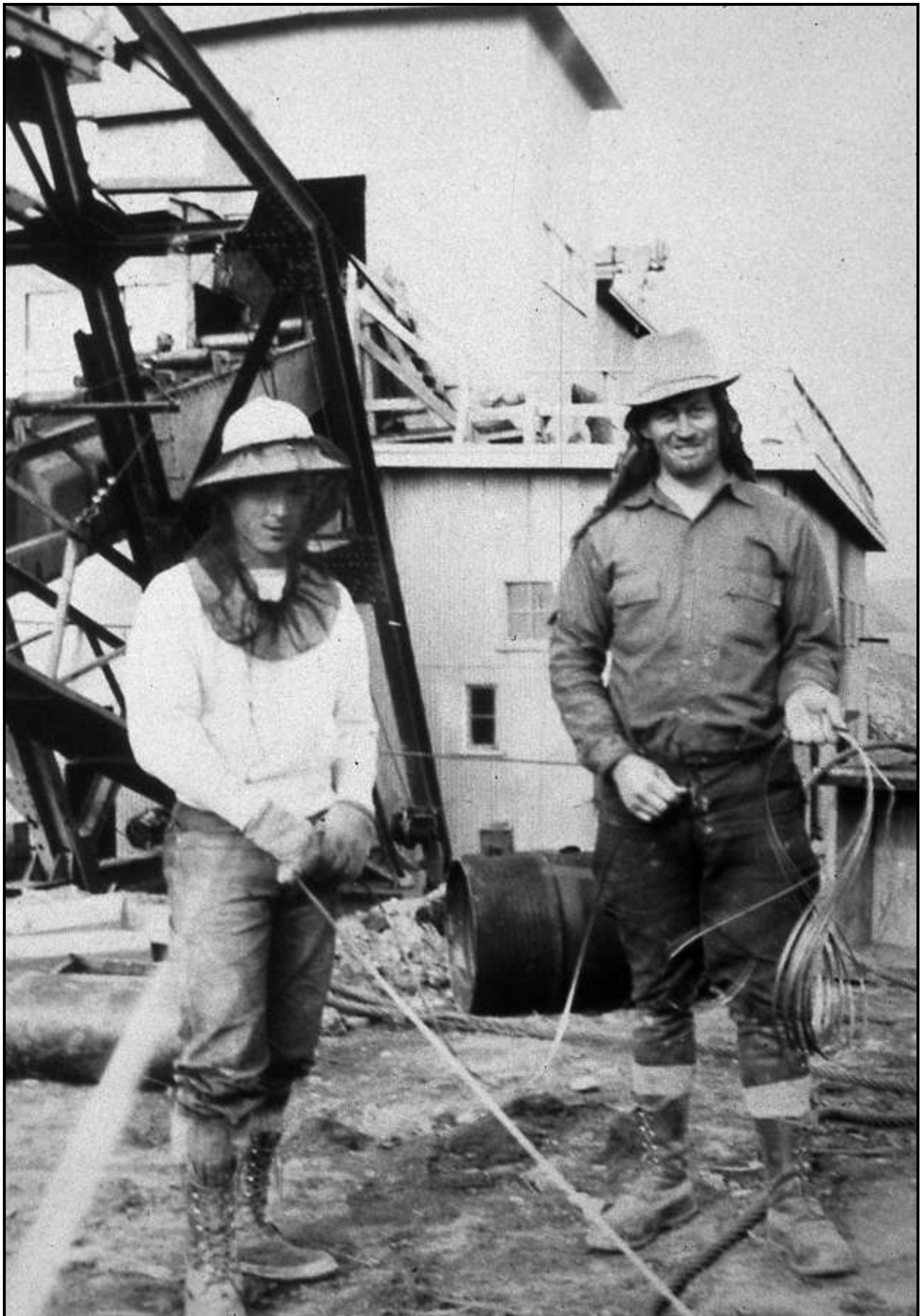
Al Hendricks, Jr. (left), son of the Coal Creek dredge winchman, and Stanton Patty, son of the general manager at both Coal Creek and Woodchopper Creek, shared adventures in the mining camps each summer. (AH)



Dredge workers were never idle. Here they cut and stack cordwood to fuel the steam boilers mounted inside each dredge. The boilers helped to melt ice that built up inside the dredge in Spring or Fall when temperatures dropped. (SP)



Bill Lemm, a catskinner and dredge worker, transports a portable cookhouse using his tractor and the Athey wagon. Moving buildings, either dismantled or on log skids, was a routine part of dredge operations. (WL)



Dredge workers repair the heavy cables used to lock the floating dredge to anchors on land and to pull it forward when the buckets were done excavating a section of earth. The head net hints at the mosquito menace. (WL)



Mildred Hendricks (left) and friends gather on an upper deck of the Coal Creek gold dredge. Mildred worked as a cook in the mining camp and was married to the dredge winchman, Alvin Hendricks. (AH)



George Beck (right) and another catskinners pose in front of one of the company's Caterpillar tractors at Coal Creek camp. Because the tractor arrived in Alaska without a seat, they bolted a small sofa in its place. (GB)



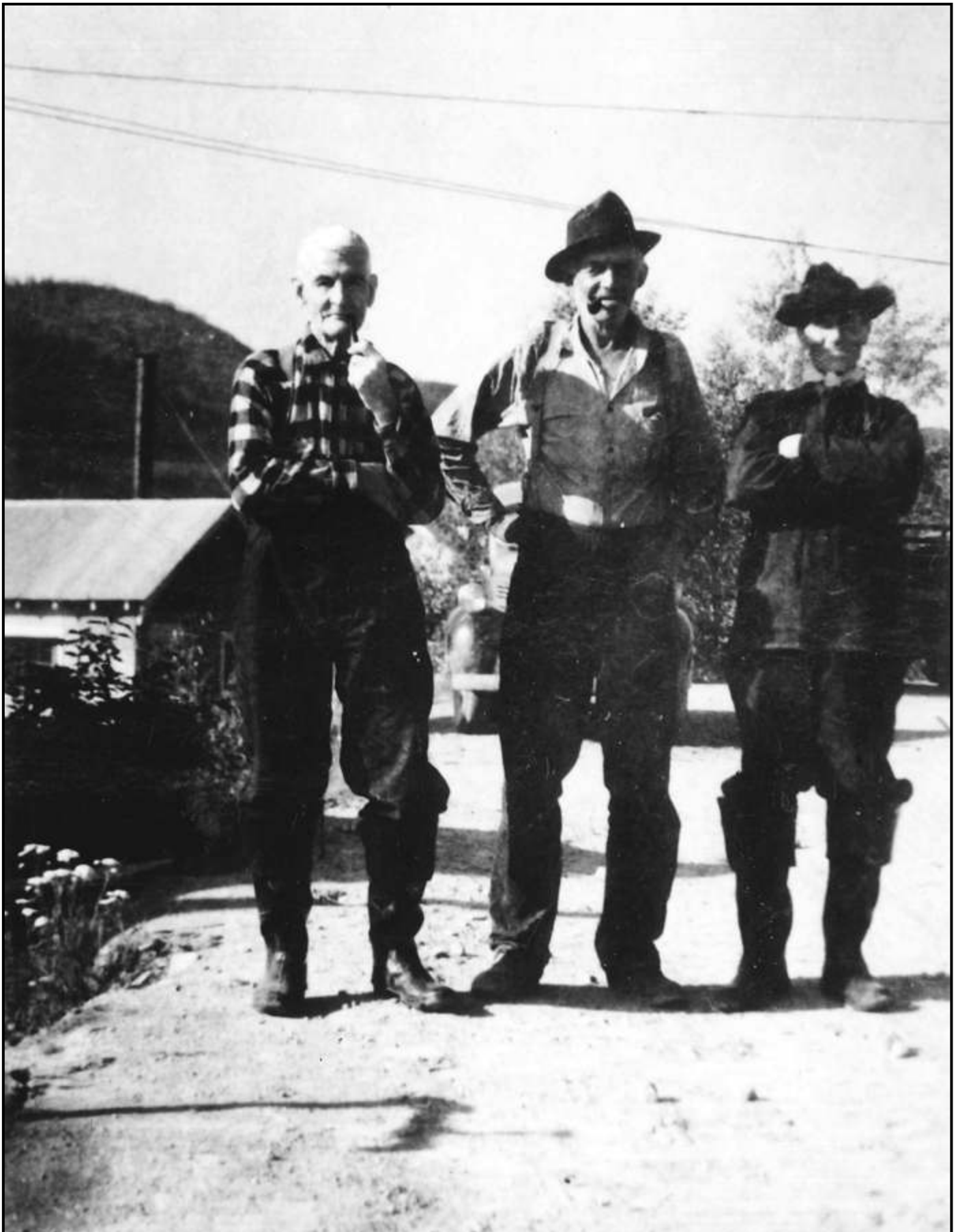
A dredge worker drives points in a thawing field while the Coal Creek dredge works the previous year's melted gravel. The steel piping of a thawing point was long because it needed to melt up to twenty-five feet down. (AH)



Alexander McRae (left), Ernest Patty, and others gather to observe the first step in refining gold from the dredges. In a retort, they heat a mixture of gold and mercury until the mercury vaporizes leaving behind a “sponge” of gold and other minerals. (SP)



The “sponge” is heated a second time in a crucible until it is molten. Once the gold is poured into a mold, impurities called “slag” can be chipped away and the gold bar is sent by U.S. Postal Service to a bank in Seattle, Washington. (SP)



The old-timers: Art Reynolds (left) lived and mined at Sam Creek; Phil Berail (middle) worked as a hydraulic foreman for Gold Placers, Inc; and Sandy Johnson, known for building cabins along the Yukon, helped to build Slaven's Roadhouse. (EP)



After long hours driving a tractor or working on the dredge, Bill Lemm gave his fellow mine employees haircuts. (WL)



Moving along Coal Creek during periods of high water was never easy. To make their way up the drainage, dredge workers installed a cable-sling tramway while others used improvised log bridges at their own peril. (AH)

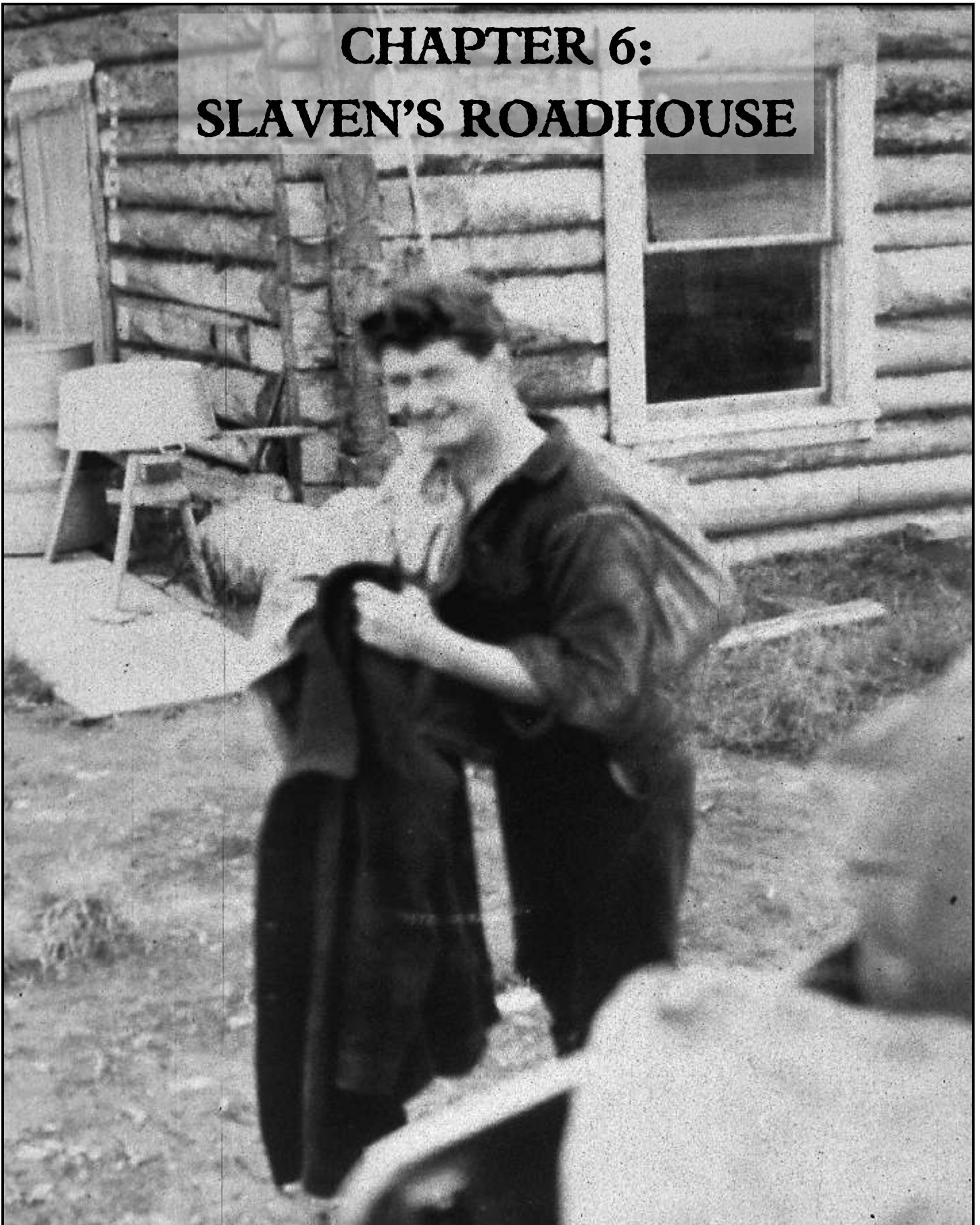


Workers take a break on the upper deck of the Coal Creek gold dredge. The size of dredging crews fluctuated from over one hundred in the early years to fewer than twenty during WWII when labor was scarce and only one dredge was in operation (AH)



Martin Adamik stands at the edge of his garden on the Coal Creek tributary of Boulder Creek. Adamik was famous for his vegetables and for his reclusive ways, though in 1936 he was listed on the Gold Placers, Inc. payroll. (AH)

CHAPTER 6: SLAVEN'S ROADHOUSE



Glen Franklin, seen here at Slaven's Roadhouse, was the accountant for Gold Placers, Inc. and served as the camp's postmaster. Here he hoists a bag of gold worth \$40,000 that will travel by boat to Fairbanks and then will be sent to a Seattle bank. (WL)



In the mid-1930s, Frank Slaven, one of Coal Creek's original gold miners, built and operated a roadhouse. He is seen here with his partner Mary Bissel and the men helping him to build the half-frame, half-log structure. (EH)



The steamboat *Yukon* pushes the barges *Muskrat* and *Stewart* to the landing below Slaven's Roadhouse. Barges like these carried supplies, including food and fuel, for the Coal Creek and Woodchopper Creek mining camps. (AH)



Visitors to Slaven's Roadhouse rest their feet at an elevated cache where meat and other foodstuffs could be stored out of the reach of hungry animals. (WL)



Bill Lemm stands atop 480 cords of wood on the banks of the Yukon River not far from Slaven's Roadhouse. After drying for a year, the wood was sold as fuel to passing steamboats. (WL)



Bill Lemm uses the camp's Athey wagon and a Caterpillar tractor to unload barrels of diesel and machine oil from a barge on the Yukon River. The Ford truck was also used to transport fuel and lubricants to keep the dredges working. (WL)



Jim McDonald and Bill Lemm watch over a stockpile of fuel barrels on the landing below Slaven's Roadhouse. The two Atlas generators on the Coal Creek dredge used 180 gallons of diesel each day, and more was needed to keep the tractors running. (WL)

Conclusion

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve is special for many reasons—for its natural beauty, its wildlife, its intact river ecosystems, and for its public-use cabins that shelter river travelers. But evidence of the preserve’s gold mining past is often hidden along woodsy trails and in overgrown camps located miles inland from the Yukon River. National Park Service planners in the 1970s knew that mining equipment and historical buildings were scattered thinly across the landscape, so they worked hard to ensure that the history of the place would not be ignored or forgotten.

In 1980, the U.S. Congress passed into law the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act that established Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve and many other park units. The legislation lists the reasons for creating the 2.5-million-acre preserve, including “to protect and interpret historical sites and events associated with the gold rush on the Yukon River.” This booklet supports that mandate and the preserve’s efforts to protect properties of regional and national significance.

Historic preservation is an important part of the National Park Service’s mission, and in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, the agency maintains a wide array of cabins, mining camps, and other historic structures. At the heart of the preserve, the Coal Creek Historic District serves as a hub where multiple preservation projects have taken place through the years, including restoration of Coal Creek mining camp, the Coal Creek gold dredge, and Frank Slaven’s roadhouse.

The twin gold camps of Coal Creek and Woodchopper Creek continued to produce profits through the 1950s, but, after a quarter-century of operation, the richest gold deposits were gone and rising costs for labor and supplies forced the gold dredges into retirement. Independent operators periodically leased the mining claims and operated the dredges, but they never returned to their former glory. Today these reminders of the past allow us to better understand a compelling period in the history of Alaska when gold-seekers struggled to confront the realities of mining in the Far North.



Members of the crew who replaced the roof of the Coal Creek dredge in 2017 (left to right): Don Corwin, Vincent Maccioli, Randy Smith, and Al Williams. Historic preservation efforts like these ensure that visitors continue to enjoy the preserve’s history.

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