

Forgotten bulldozer in the bushes reveals 1958 saga

by Gary Titus



Bulldozer in Moose Creek

Years ago a friend and I were exploring the remote Upper Russian Lake region on the Kenai Peninsula. We started hiking from the end of Snug Harbor Road following the Russian River Trail through stands of spruce and shadowed by snow-covered peaks, until we reached the shores of Upper Russian Lake. We then decided to explore the wilderness off the trail and set out along the shoreline of this large lake, hoping to reach Goat Creek.

After hiking for awhile, we noticed a faint trail heading into the woods. As always, we had to see where it would take us. The trail continued a short distance from the lake through a wet boggy area un-

til it entered a hemlock forest. We expected to find an old campsite, or even more exciting, an old trapper's cabin, but the scene before us was totally unexpected. There, in a stand of hemlock trees, sat a large yellow D-7 Caterpillar. This is not something you would expect to see in the wilderness, let alone far from any roads or people. So the historian in me had to know what it was doing there and how did it ever reach this far from roads into the wilderness. Here is the story of what we had discovered.

The watershed of the Russian River starts high in the remote Chugach Mountains above Upper Russian Lake. As a result of the low proportion of glaciers in the watershed, the water in the Russian River is very clear. Stream flows are most affected by summer snowmelt and fall rainstorms. Any sediment that enters the river settles out in Upper and Lower Russian Lakes.

Just southeast of Upper Russian Lake, in the watershed of the Resurrection River system, is a small, moderately glaciated stream by the name of Summit Creek. This stream is the primary headwaters of the Resurrection River system. Summit Creek forms an alluvial fan on a broad pass separating the Russian and Resurrection River watersheds.

Normally, the glacially silted Summit Creek flowed into the Resurrection River system, while the Russian River watershed received its water from clearwater sources like snowmelt and groundwater seepage. This all changed sometime in the late 1950s. A flood sufficiently shifted the Summit Creek bed and changed its course to allow the glacial silt waters to flow into the clear waters of the Upper Russian River system.

This had the potential to alter the ecology of the entire lower end of the drainage and the Russian River salmon fishery. So in 1957, the Kenai National Moose Range, the agency which then managed the river, decided human intervention was needed to move Summit Creek back into its original channel.

Alaska Regional Refuge Supervisor David L. Spencer contacted the Air Force, Alaska Railroad, Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Public Roads, and the Forest Service to provide the manpower, equipment, helicopter,

and supplies for the undertaking.

The plan was to move a D-7 Caterpillar overland while the ground and rivers were frozen in order to have it on site in the spring when the work could be accomplished. So a cat was obtained and transported to Seward. The eighteen-mile, two-month adventure of misery, frustration and hilarious comedy of errors up the Resurrection River began with deep snow, mechanical failures and a session with the D-7 incapacitated in "Misery Creek."

The trip began from Seward on March 5, 1958 and the day's progress of seven and a half miles up Resurrection River seemed promising. The men spent the night camped out with hopes of finishing the trip in the next couple of days. As with most trips, a first day of travel without difficulties should have foretold the future.

What lay ahead were days filled with deep snow, mechanical trouble and minuscule progress. The trip soon ground to a halt in the icy waters of Moose Creek, later renamed Misery Creek by the crew. It was here that the dozer broke through the ice and, if that wasn't enough, a track came off. The men worked in the cold waters and on snow-covered banks, and they were able to repair the track, only to have the cat mired deeper into the icy waters of the creek when they attempted to extract it.

With the large dozer mired in Misery Creek, the decision was made to bring in a small D-4 Caterpillar in hopes of using it to extract the D-7. The men hiked back out to Seward to put the next phase into action.

The men returned, taking another three days to reach Misery Creek with the D-4 dozer. The wet, cold job of extracting the D-7 from the waters of Misery Creek began. After a day of back-breaking work, the larger cat stubbornly remained in the waters. With the D-7 incapacitated in Misery Creek, the decision was made to continue with the D-4 to Summit Creek the next day to check out any further difficulties. The trip

was made in two days and the crew finally saw Summit Creek. The trail was now blazed. The men returned to Misery Creek and continued to work extracting the captive D-7 from its waters. A day was spent rigging block and tackle, and finally the cat slowly emerged from its watery prison and was repaired.

On April 30th, the men broke camp and left Misery Creek without a backward glance and moved on to Summit Creek. They arrived at 8 pm without any further difficulties. Here the cat would sit waiting until the spring thaw.

The intended mission was accomplished during the spring of 1958. The crew worked ten days constructing a 1,300 cubic yard dike to divert the silt-laden Summit Creek back into the Resurrection River. After the work was done, the agency left the larger cat near the dike in case further repairs were needed and the smaller cat was taken back to Seward. The costly and time-consuming project was finally brought to completion.

If the creek should break through the dike now, or in the future, I would expect that the decision would be made to let nature take its natural course. There is basically no reason to worry about the Russian River's ecosystem or the fishing. The Upper and Lower Russian Lakes would most likely continue to filter out the silt as they have done for ages, so the sockeyes can continue their annual journey, through the bears and people, to reach their final destination. With the mystery of the D-7 solved, I can continue exploring and finding answers to other questions, of which there are many to keep me busy for years.

Gary Titus has been a Backcountry Ranger, Cabin Manager, and Historian at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, since 2000. He has been hiking on the Kenai at every available opportunity since 1979. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.