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Forks Roadhouse







Fire destroys historic Forks Roadhouse in Susitna Valley

Building erected in early 1930s burned Wednesday while caretaker was away.

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The Forks Roadhouse in Petersville, a relic of the gold rush era, burned to the ground sometime on Wednesday night.

The site was established as a supply depot for the gold fields of the Petersville Hills and Sustina Valley in the early 1900s. The building that went up in flames on Wednesday was constructed between 1930 and 1933, according to Talkeetna historian Roberta Sheldon.

A number of historical artifacts in the building were destroyed by the fire, said Talkeetna Fire Department Chief Ken Farina.

"It's a heartbreaker. A terrible heartbreaker," Sheldon said.

The roadhouse was located about 19 miles from the Parks Highway on the Petersville Road, which is closed during the winter months. The road is currently open to about 11 miles from the junction with the Parks near Trapper Creek. Traveling the remaining miles to the Roadhouse site requires a snowmachine, Farina said.

The damage was discovered on Thursday morning, said Alaska State Trooper spokeswoman Megan Peters. Sheldon said a caretaker, who had left for the day, returned to find smoke coming from the landmark.

On Thursday afternoon, owner Tamra Gillespie was en-route to the site to assess the damage. State fire investigators and troopers were also going in to try to determine a cause.

Calling from the road, Gillespie said she understood that, aside from the main building and a machine shop, no other structures were harmed, including cabins and a generator shed on the property.

Longtime Trapper Creek resident Mike Carpenter, who has made a study of the history of the area, said The Forks, as locals called it, was one of the oldest roadhouses in Alaska still operating as such.

"It was built back in the dog sled days," he said. "(Betty) McDonald had a roadhouse in Talkeetna and built the Forks Roadhouse for the horse and wagons that went up there to supply the camps. They filled the roadhouse with mining supplies but she didn't always have a clerk. So miners just went in, took what they needed, wrote it in a book and settled up with Betty in the fall."

The roadhouse's saloon was the setting for a loud fight that preceded the notorious Cache Creek killings in 1939 in which two men and one woman working nearby claims were slain. It was the biggest mass murder in Alaska up to that time, documented in Sheldon's book "The Mystery of the Cache Creek Murders."

Despite an intense investigation that brought FBI agents to the territory, the killer was never found. The victims are buried in the Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery. A more recent gold seeker cited in Sheldon's book ascribed eerie goings-on in the vicinity to their ghosts.

As mining declined, the roadhouse became a destination for hunters, Carpenter said. "The lopsided logs were sinking" before new owners rescued the building around 1970, jacking it up and adding new logs to the base.

In modern times it became a magnet for outdoor recreationalists, notably snowmachiners who repaired there for fuel, food, drinks and accommodations during excursions into the backcountry south of Mount McKinley.

Gillespie kept it open on weekends during the winter and brought in entertainment for the customers, including Alaska rocker LuLu Small.

"I am very bummed," said Small. I was going to be playing out there this weekend."

Small recalled her first trip to the roadhouse 10 years ago, which involved an hour-long ride on an Argo all-terrain vehicle. She played there several times last year, despite serious problems with arthritis that required her to ride sidesaddle on a snowmachine, towing her gear in a sled, and stopping to uncramp every 15 minutes or so.

"It was painful," she said. "But it's such a special place that, for the sake of the gig, I'd do whatever I have to do.

"It's going to be sadly, sorely missed."

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The New Forks Roadhouse



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