

# A Yukon Fish Camp For Visitors



A fish wheel, on the Yukon River, scoops up salmon.

By CHRIS BOLGIANO

**M**Y husband, Ralph, and I were on the banks of the Yukon River 1,500 miles from its source in Canada and 800 miles from its mouth at the Bering Sea. Surrounding us were hundreds of fish hanging on drying racks scattered through a thin grove of cottonwood trees. The filleted flesh lapped in waves along the fish spines and glowed in the sun with an erotic hue of orange-pink that could only be called salmon. The feel was leathery and plushy, like the footpad of an animal, and my fingertips came away glistening with oil. Through this ancient summer ritual of fish camp, the richness of salmon would help feed our host, Paul Stevens, his family, dogs and neighbors in the nearby Athabascan Indian town of Stevens Village through the frigid Alaskan winter. (Paul has since moved, for half the year, to the village of Venetie, north of Fort Yukon; his brother Willie will probably continue to work at the camp.)

Several years ago the 70 or so people of Stevens Village, impelled by a 1971 law that made them (and most other Alaskan native villages) a for-profit corporation, opened Wood Yard camp, about 20 miles downstream from the village, to tourists, making it the only working native fish camp in Alaska accessible to outsiders. They bought a six-seat boat, replaced last year by a 49-seat aluminum motorboat, and invited travelers on the one road north from Fairbanks to stop briefly at the Yukon River bridge for a six-mile journey upriver to the camp. Tourists showed enough interest that the corporation expanded the options to include staying at the camp overnight. Last summer, Ralph and I were the first tourists to do that.

We had arrived in the early afternoon of a hot sunny day with a dozen others. Everyone wandered through the camp, about half an acre of rolling hills covered with spruce and birch and outbuildings, and then clustered around the boat captain, a young white man named Tim, as he explained why and how salmon were sliced and dried. Paul sat stonically to the side, a small, spare, dark man in his mid 50's who never looked directly at

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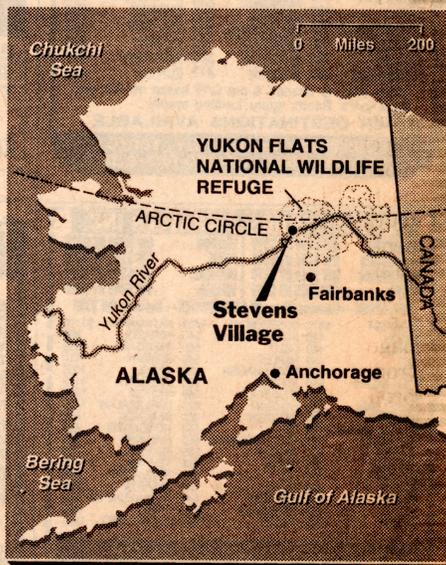


Photographs by Charles Mason for The New York Times

### Gathering fish from one of the nets, about 75 feet long.

anyone. Soon the little crowd filed back on the boat. The sound of human voices faded; there was now only the rattle of the cottonwood leaves in the breeze, the buzz of flies around the fish, and the steady whispering of the river. Paul finished his coffee and walked down to his skiff, obviously preparing to leave. Then he came back. "The guns are under the canoe," he said. These were the first words he had addressed to us. "In case the bears come back." And he left.

Athabascans are taciturn by western standards; Paul clearly assumed he had told us everything we needed to know. Two grizzly bear skins tacked onto trees illustrated a basic fact of fish camp life: salmon are bear magnets, and salmon were drying all over the place. Exploring the camp in Paul's absence, we soon found bear tracks along a sand bar. We also discovered, one by one, a dozen dogs chained around the camp, hidden in the shade of trees. Within the perimeter of



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the dogs were a couple of cabins; a tent for storage, next to which we pitched our own for sleeping, and a smokehouse with a corrugated tin roof and plastic tarp sides. Inside, a tiny fire smoldered in a 55-gallon drum opened on both ends, and fish hung like sheaves of tobacco in a North Carolina barn. One of the cabins — a canvas tent, actually, set on a log foundation — was Paul's bedroom. There was a metal bedstand and mattress covered with mosquito netting, and a rifle with a hawk feather tied to the barrel. The other cabin, of brand new plywood, was a museum, with photos of Stevens Village families from the early 1900's to the present, building canoes and skinning muskrat as they had, in more or less the same ways, for 1,000 years. There was also a cunning miniature of the ubiquitous Alaskan fish wheel that scoops salmon from the rivers and dumps them into a holding box. Paul's fish wheel lay stranded on the shore, smashed by unusually high spring flows.

When Paul returned — having fetched gas and coffee at the river crossing — he said, "I take you to pull fish." We climbed into his banged up skiff. The Yukon was about half a mile wide at that point, gathering itself together again after braiding through 11 million acres of watery maze called the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, a prime waterfowl breeding area. The banks were rolling hills that came abruptly down to the shoreline, covered with stunted, skinny spruces. The forest silhouette was like a

young boy's summer haircut, short on the sides and spiky on top.

Wood Yard had been one of many camps feeding cords of wood to Yukon steamboats; all this forest had probably been cut over. In places the high banks were rubbed raw by the river, showing half ellipses of soil and silt in striations of brown and gold. Willow and grasses bowed above a pebbly beach where Paul anchored the boat. Until the fish wheel was repaired he was using three gill nets, each about 75 feet long, that entangled and drowned salmon.

“LET you do it,” Paul said to Ralph with a shy grin, “so you can't say you've never pulled fish from a net.” He demonstrated how to pull the net up and work it from one end to the other. Fifty-pound dog and king salmon were lashed so tightly that getting them out was hard work. Those that weren't yet dead sometimes bit before they were clubbed with pliers. The bottom of the boat was soon awash with huge fish that shone red, pink, silver and gray in the long slanting light of the Alaskan afternoon. At the last net Paul scanned the shore carefully for bear tracks before he anchored. “I hope my neighbors don't come around just now,” he said. He had been up all last night, he told us, keeping a grizzly and her cub out of camp. He shot over their heads because he didn't want to harm them; grizzly and black bears are among the most powerful spirits in the Athabaskan world.

Back in camp, Ralph worked for hours in the slow dusk, cleaning and slicing dog salm-



Salmon fillets hanging outside to dry for winter.



Photographs by Charles Mason for The New York Times

## The Wood Yard fish camp covers about half an acre of rolling hills.

on into dog food. (When the last of the three daily tours came in, people crowded around him and asked him questions as if he was Athabascan, while Paul, who is, wheeled away from anyone who faced him.) Paul rendered the choice king salmon, running the flat side of the blade almost lovingly along the fillet to scrape off grit, then making slashes perpendicular to the spine, to hang them most efficiently for drying. These caused the hanging fish to ripple like chain mail.

Always the river ran on the edge of sight and consciousness; at times we sat for long periods in silence, studying it. In the blue and rose pastels of evening it looked soft and gentle, deceptively so, for the eddies and boils were among the most treacherous of the entire river. Downstream it muscled through Ramparts Canyon, where peregrine falcons dove from 1,000-foot cliffs. Across from us the round hills were patterned in textured greens like a tapestry, with white birch stems threading through impenetrable shoreline thickets. Paul collected the fish offal and took it to the opposite shore for the gulls, who screamed a raucous thanks. The fish heads, with their meaty cheeks, went to the dogs. We had fish for dinner, too, great thick slabs of king salmon that I fried in Paul's black skillet. We added broccoli and peaches, at the suggestion of an Alaskan that we bring fresh food as a gift. Captain Tim had joined us for dinner, and afterward we sat quietly as before, watching the river. A couple of ravens croaked hoarsely. In Atha-

bascan legend, Raven made the world. I looked at Paul to see what he made of them, but he was squinting hard at the river. A black bear was out there swimming toward us. Paul and Tim took off in the boat and circled the bear three times. With binoculars I saw Paul talking to the bear, and the bear turning his head to listen. But he continued across that swift, strong current and landed a quarter mile down from the camp, where Tim shot him as he bounded into the woods. We still wonder, Ralph and I, what would have happened if Paul had been alone. We pondered Tim's motivation: maybe he was trying to show off, or to head off any liability our potential encounter with a bear could pose for the corporation.

It was midnight, and a glimmering dusk emanated from the river as well as the sky.

The Athabascan way is to show respect by not wasting an animal, and in that cool midnight light the men butchered the bear. Steam rose from the body. Mosquitoes, which had been tolerable, thickened into a cloud around the men's blood-smeared arms. The quarters were hung in the smokehouse with some discussion as to which village elders they should be offered to.

In the morning we ate bear shank for breakfast, a taste like beef and a texture beyond tough. The morning load of tourists paused in wonderment at the clotted bear-skin draped across the wood cutting trestle. We left with the noon group, and walked up to Paul to say goodbye. "I wish you guys could stay," he tossed over his shoulder as he turned and, with a now familiar motion, strode away. ■

## Arranging a fish camp visit

Yukon River Tours offers two to four trips a day in summer to Wood Yard fish camp from the Yukon River bridge crossing, 126 miles northwest of Fairbanks. This year the last tours are Sept. 7; they resume June 1. The cost is \$25 a person (\$30 next year). It is possible to arrange through the outfitter to spend the night, for \$45 a person.

Visitors must bring their own sleeping bags; Yukon River Tours has some tents. We brought all our own camping equipment (tent

and sleeping bags) and whatever groceries were needed to supplement the abundant fish. Mosquito repellent is essential.

Custom tours of Ramparts Canyon and Yukon Flats can be arranged, for \$100 a person, including camping on land owned by the Stevens Village corporation. Stevens Village itself is not open to tourists.

Yukon River Tours is at 214 Second Avenue, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701; (907) 452-7162.

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