

A Tale of Three Cabins: A Comparison of Features and Architecture

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Abstract

Historic cabins can show patterns of land use in remote areas. Three abandoned historic cabins were recorded during the Summer 2006 GRSLE project in the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming. Compared to many areas in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, this region has escaped many of ecological modifications that coincide with the development of the tourist industry. The study of this exceptional area is important because, even though the area is relatively safe from construction and other such man-made dangers, other biological and physical processes continue to modify the archaeological record. Research demonstrates some of the more striking similarities and differences between the cabins, which are designated the 1) Shepherd's cabin, 2) Chico's cabin, and the 3) Meadow cabin. Data on architectural features and styles of the cabins as well as the presence and content of rubbish heaps were collected as were historic cores for dendrochronologic analysis. While the Shepherd's cabin and Chico's cabin share many similar architectural features, including orientation, evidence of sod covered roofs, and the presence of rubbish heaps, the Meadow cabin, which was consumed by the Little Venus Creek fire, tends to differ in architectural style and the lack of a discernable rubbish heap. Possible explanations for the similarities and differences in the three cabins include different regional origins of the builders and construction at different times. Data from such cabins are essential to understanding historic land use in remote alpine regions and the development of contemporary landscapes.

Introduction

Historic cabins are a rich source of data pertaining to such topics as settlement patterns, historic land use, and common architectural styles of particular areas. The Shoshone National Forest, like any protected area, offers opportunities for research that, have disappeared from other portions of the area. The cabins that are analyzed here are merely three of many—both those that are known and that have yet to be rediscovered—in the area. While the area is relatively protected from development, there is little to be done to shield fragile cabins from the ravages of nature. Every cabin yields greater amounts of data. These data can then be analyzed and applied to questions about the people who built the cabins and modified the land. Common styles and origins of these styles could potentially be established, as could data pertaining to the differing ecological impacts and cultures of the various people who settled there. Despite the potential amount of data that could be gathered from such cabins, they remain a largely untapped resource.



Photo by: Dr. Todd

This cabin was undiscovered until after it was consumed by the Venus Creek Fire

The Haymaker Creek Cabin

Methods

While in the field all three cabins were visited. When at the cabins, notes concerning the architecture and features of the cabin were recorded. In addition, photographs of each wall and feature noted were taken. Supplementary drawings were made in the field notebooks. Where applicable, the presence and contents of rubbish heaps were recorded. These notes, drawings, and photographs have been analyzed for common and disparate elements between the three cabins.

While there, historic cores as well as cross sections of appropriate logs were taken for use in dendrochronological analysis. The historic cores were taken from logs that had either visible beetle galleries or intact bark. The holes produced were then filled in with corks. The cores themselves have an approximate diameter of 9mm and are generally under 10 cm in length. 11 historic cores were taken from the Shepherd's cabin, 7 from Chico's cabin, and 5 from the meadow cabin. The cross-sections were taken sparingly from the ends of logs in effort to be as unobtrusive as possible. 3 were taken from the Shepherd's cabin, 2 from Chico's cabin, and 1 from the Meadow cabin.

Shepherd's Cabin

Is located near a water source and the best preserved of the three. It also has a rubbish heap associated with it. The door is intact and faces east. There are windows in both the west/rear wall and the north/side wall, though the south/side wall is uninterrupted. The western/rear window has an intact wooden covering. The north/side window is uncovered, but the frame may have once supported glass. The cabin still contains a bed platform, shelves, and a fire pit. Oral history, as well as a name, links this cabin with shepherders.

The Walls

- consist of large logs with ends sawed to form rough rectangles and then laced together
- No plaster or mud chinking were used; instead thin boards were fitted between the logs
- Top logs on both sides (north and south walls) are longer and remain rounded on the ends. These logs were fitted to the sides by notches.

Roof

- One large central beam and the tops of the side walls form the main support
- Smaller logs with axe-hewn notches on one end and sloping bottom form the main structure and are held in place by large, rusted nails.
- Roof logs are covered with layers of tarpaper, then metal, rocks, and soil. The tarpaper is held in place by smaller nails that are not rusted.



The Shepherd's Cabin



Chico's Cabin

The Meadow Cabin

The Meadow Cabin was the most dilapidated of the three. It too was located near a water source. There was no rubbish heap discovered in association with it. The door, though gone, faced west. Also, there was only possible evidence of windows in any of the walls, a bed platform, shelves, or of a stove.

The Walls:

- The walls were constructed of large logs fitted together by means of axe-carved grooves. No nails were discovered in association with the cabin.
- Instead of chinking, the gaps between logs were filled with smaller logs. These logs appear to have been wedged in place between larger logs.
- The east/rear wall contained a smaller log that had been notched half way through. The notches were apparent both externally and internally and may have been a window.



The Meadow Cabin



The Meadow Cabin after the fire
Photo by: Dr. Todd

The Roof

- No definite signs of a center crossbeam were discovered.
- In the northwest corner 15 roof logs were present. The state of decay was intense; however, they appear to have been tapered to fit over the side/north wall.

Chico's Cabin

Is also located near a water source. The door is gone, but it faced east. There are windows in both the west/rear wall and the north/side wall, and none on the south/side wall. There were no coverings on either window. Inside the cabin are a shelf and a bed platform, and the remains of a stove were found three meters from the northeastern corner. Oral history links this cabin with shepherders.

The Walls

- Were constructed in way similar to Shepherd's Cabin, including wood slats instead of chinking
- Instead of going into the ground, to make the cabin level, the logs of the northwest corner rest on a foundation of piled rocks.

The Roof

- Has collapsed, but the remains of a central beam is present.
- The amount of soil and rock inside and the bits of tar paper that are still nailed to beams indicate that, like the Shepherd's Cabin, the roof may have been sod.

- The roofing logs that radiated out from the central support were sloped where they crossed the central beam, but not notched where they hit the wall.

Dendrochronology

The dendrochronologic samples taken are in the process of being analyzed. They are Engelmann Spruce, which is a complacent tree, and therefore difficult to work with.



Two Historic Cores

Photo by: Matthew Galloway

Results

The Shepherd's Cabin and Chico's cabin share many common features in addition to oral histories linking both structures with shepherders. They have similar elements of construction, rubbish heaps, and face the same direction. The Meadow Cabin lacked an oral history. Also, even through the decay, it was apparent that the cabin did not share many features with the other two. It was near a water source, and was a log cabin, but that is more or less the extent of the similarities between it and the Shepherd's and Chico's cabins. These cabins, and others like them are valuable archaeological and historical tools and should be preserved.

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