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Chena town site presentation with Terrance Cole, Martin Gutoski

March 2014

Fairbanks, Alaska

Presentation during the Alaska Anthropological Meetings. 24 minutes

Recording of program starts while the presentation is in progress. Terrance Cole talked about the town site of Chena. He said the Chena mill was the embodiment of the dream of the town. It was built in 1910 and abandoned in 1916. The mill was later shipped out to Happy Creek. Terrance discusses the reasons the town died. Barnette gave Richardson a valuable piece of property in the town of Fairbanks. There was a flood in 1905 in Fairbanks. Chena was located at the head of navigation on the Tanana River. the main fact of Chena's demise was political. Wickersham was a powerful man at that time and Fairbanks survived.

Martin Gutoski introduces himself. He said he is the director of the Tanana Valley Railroad museum. They completely restored a 1907 steam engine. It runs on the rails at Pioneer Park. He talked about the restoration of the engine and some of the original parts. He talked about the site of Chena. He is a surveyor and likes good maps. He asked what happened to Chena. In 1905 the town was two years old. After five years there were 2,000 people living in the town of Chena. In 1910 the town was still in existence. The quartz mill was built in 1910. He showed aerial photographs showing different images of the Chena River and Tanana River. It was uncontrolled back then. The river took out most of the town site of Chena. He shows older maps of the town of Chena. In 1907 it was surveyed. Currently the maps show only the Chena site. He showed a photograph of various businesses in the town on Front Street. By 1911 it was starting to be abandoned. He asked what destroyed Chena. He said when Wickersham decided to build the courthouse in Fairbanks other governments had offices in Fairbanks, too. Chena died because it didn't have any government offices. Chena had a lot of land disputes. Martin Harris and John Joslin laid out the town. There were a lot of lawsuits. The town was charging for frontage on the river. He showed a Frank Cleary map, a 1904 map of Chena and Fairbanks and a 1908 map done by the Sandborn Fire Insurance. He showed a 1906 map which was when the Tanana Mines Railroad was converted into the Tanana Valley Railroad. He had a 1908 map by the Alaska Engineering Commission map. They later became the Alaska Railroad. He found the original plats for the town. He talked about the tracts that had to be reserved. There was a known survey corner. In 2004 some structures were located by the state historical people. The sites were in the green belt. They used ground penetrating radar. Some fairly large structures were found. There is still potential to find more. He shows a map which is a combination of three maps. He said there are still features left which have not been eroded by the river. He said a lot of logging went on around the town. The power plant, mill and steamboats used a lot of wood. Every hill within twenty miles was stripped bare.

