

Archaeology of Crail Ranch

Like Working a Puzzle in Reverse

By Anne Marie Mistretta

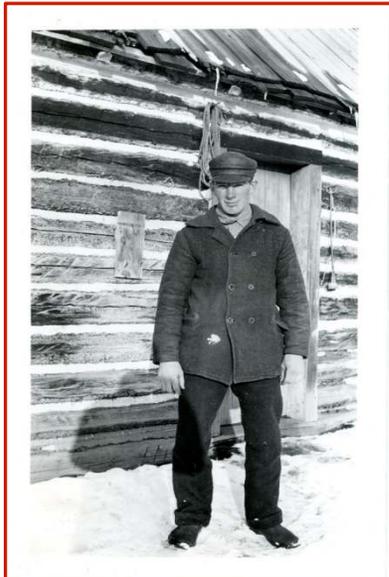
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"When I was in the fourth grade, a family friend worked on the Aswan Dam. On his return, he regaled us with stories of archaeological finds. He inspired me toward archaeology," recounts archaeologist/historian Scott Carpenter. "After that I was fortunate to accompany him on many projects."

A consultant with the Historic Crail Ranch Conservators, Carpenter, who sometimes uncannily plays reenactment of Augustus Franklin Crail himself, speaks with a jovial voice, full of optimism. "When I was an undergrad, I was able to work for the Mesa Verde Research Center on archaeological excavations and surveys," Carpenter shares excitedly. As a graduate student, he worked at the Smithsonian Institution. Armed with these experiences and his degrees from University of Colorado and George Washington University, Carpenter began working with the National Park Service.



Scott Carpenter bears a strong resemblance to homesteader AF Crail



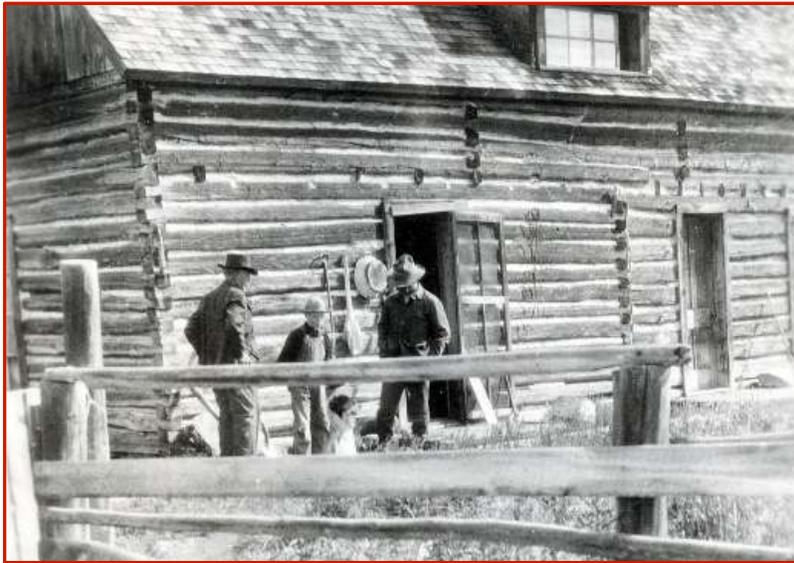
Unidentified man outside main cabin. Note that the second story has not yet been added.

Since 1991, his Bozeman-based company, InteResources Planning, Inc., has studied sites throughout Montana and the U.S. He has worked on hundreds of projects involving the treatment and preservation of historic properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places. During the summer of 2013, his team investigated now vacant lots in Virginia City that previously housed some of the town's oldest buildings, dating back to the Alder Creek gold discovery.

Carpenter describes a current project to develop a comprehensive historic preservation plan for Butte, MT. "In Butte, the largest national historic landmark district in the country with over 6000 historic buildings, we face the real challenges of crafting a preservation plan in a community with declining population and an economy that is a mere shadow of its former pinnacle," says Carpenter.

Locally, Carpenter has worked with Historic Crail Ranch Conservators since 2008, when he led the group in the preparation of a Master Plan. His first major project at Crail Ranch was the creation of a Historic Structures Report, which helps

Conservators make decisions on building preservation and maintenance. After five summers of study, Carpenter will deliver the report this spring. Carpenter says his main message is, “Crail Ranch is an historic property. We don’t want to recreate Crail Ranch with modern materials. We want to retain as much of the original structures as possible.”



By identifying people in the photos and their ages, we are able to determine the approximate date of the structures also captured in the photo. This helps Conservators understand the condition of the structures at varying points in time.

Although study of the two remaining Crail Ranch structures and the property has been hampered by snow-bound winters, Conservators acted quickly when Carpenter alerted them to critical findings. Subsidence and foundation deterioration were discovered at the eastern end of the main home. Ultimately, Carpenter used a fiber optic camera under the floor to determine foundation

conditions. He recommended improved water drainage to prevent further damage rather than reconstructing the

foundation at this time. “We knew we had to intrude, but as little as possible, on the original architectural fabric. We recommended a system of drainage away from the structure,” says Carpenter.

For documenting construction history and subsequent alterations, Conservators delivered to Carpenter hundreds of original ranch photos and documents, donated by the Crail family.

The ages of family members in photos provide approximate dates of completion and, when paired with architectural information, reveal three phases of construction. This information is further supported by dates in newspaper insulation, deeds, maps, and homestead records. “It’s like working a puzzle in reverse. We can see the finished product, but we need to understand the stages of construction to make correct preservation decisions.”

“It’s amazing that a lightly maintained hand-made log building from another century still stands near a creek in Big Sky,” quips Carpenter.

After installing period-appropriate rain gutters and re-grading the landscape, Conservators expect the main home to stand beside that creek for another hundred years, testifying to Big Sky’s ranching past.