

**STEAM DONKEY ENGINE
FRANK CHURCH - RIVER OF NO RETURN WILDERNESS
USDA FOREST SERVICE
PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST
HERITAGE PROGRAM
Kathleen Eld 2004**

Along the banks of Smith Creek just up the hill from its confluence with Big Creek stands an old rusted steam powered, donkey engine with a winch and cable still attached. Nestled in the shade of the forest it stands as a monument to the determination and ingenuity of those hearty souls the early miners. The only enduring sign of their toil is the scattered piles of stones and fragments of mining equipment that they used daily to try and scrape a small fortune from the soil.

We don't know exactly when this machine arrived in the woods but we do know that it must have been some time between 1910 and 1940. The big gold rushes in the west around the turn of the century sparked mining activity in the Big Creek drainage for decades. The steam donkey is located approximately two of miles northeast of where the small settlement of Edwardsburg at Big Creek was established around 1903. It was the natural supply point for this district and the region lying between it and the Salmon River to the north. Big Creek Ranger Station, Big Creek Hotel and store were centrally located for miners and ranchers along Big Creek to get supplies, collect mail, and to exchange news. The area was active through the 1920s. Even during the Great Depression of the 1930s many people came to the area to mine because the government was buying even small amounts of gold dust. Interest in mining declined with the commencement of World War II in the 1940s.

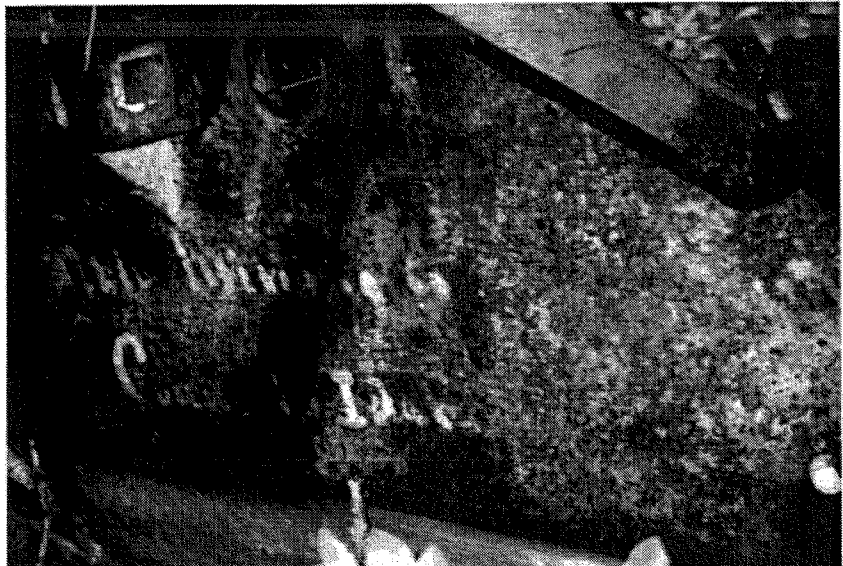


John Dolbeer invented the donkey engine in August 1881. The machine changed the existing logging system from the use of mules and oxen to steam and gas powered engines. This engine was connected to a horizontal capstan mounted together on log or metal skids. By wrapping cables around the capstan, the engine can pull large heavy loads that would otherwise require animal power. The engine is moved using its own power by attaching the cable to a solid tree or rock and pulling it along on its skids.

Located just inside the Frank Church - River Of No Return Wilderness, this engine was used as a mechanical scoop for removing sediments at and below the confluence of Big and Smith Creeks. It rests on metal skids. There is a cable attached to the engine that dragged a large rectangular scoop. The scoop is now lodged in the creek bottom sediments. At the confluence of Smith and Big Creeks you can see an accumulation of rocks that appear to have been piled during the mining operation. There are various scattered riveted pipes and mining debris in the area that attest to the activity that happened there.

This site is a one of a kind cultural resource on the Payette National Forest. There is no other industrial mining machine like it anywhere within or adjacent to the Payette Unit of the Frank Church - River Of No Return Wilderness.

Inscribed on the frame of the steam donkey are the words "M Mining, Council Idaho".



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