

Benjamin and Miranda Shreve Homestead  
North of County Road 25  
Decker Vicinity  
Big Horn County  
Montana

HABS No. MT-106

HABS

MT-106

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

**HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY**  
Intermountain Support Office - Denver  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### BENJAMIN AND MIRANDA SHREVE HOMESTEAD

HABS No. MT-106

#### I. INTRODUCTION

**Location:** The Benjamin and Miranda Shreve Homestead is in Big Horn County, Montana, in the south-central portion of the state. The homestead site is in the upper Tongue River Valley, and near the eastern shore of Tongue River Reservoir. Access is via Otter Creek Road (County Road 25), which heads eastward from Montana Secondary Highway 314, just above the southern end of the reservoir. Within one mile, a private mine haul road branches north from the county route, and accesses an unimproved two-track lane leading to the site. The homestead is about 1¾ miles northeast of the Highway 314 junction, and is approximately 3½ air miles north of the Wyoming border.

**Quad:** Decker

**UTM:** Zone: 13; Easting 358040; Northing 4989350

**Date of Construction:** ca. 1886-1920

**Present Owners:** Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation  
1520 E. 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Helena, Montana 59620

**Present Use:** Abandoned

**Significance:** The Benjamin and Miranda Shreve Homestead is significant for its important association with the historic development of the upper Tongue River Valley. It was among the first homesteads established during the region's period of initial Euro-American settlement in the 1880s, and continued to function as a successful cattle ranch for some fifty years. The Shreve operation was in many ways typical of the area's early ranch properties, combining tracts of arid grazing land with a smaller area of fertile, well-watered bottomlands for hay and crop production. The resultant farmstead was largely self-sufficient, an important characteristic during the region's earliest years. The members of the extended Shreve family were also well-regarded among the scattered Decker community, and this farmstead hosted the Decker post office for a time.

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Although in a deteriorated condition, the homestead also retains examples of a variety of vernacular building forms which are characteristic of the region's historic rural architecture. Perhaps most significant are the ice house and blacksmith building, which are good representations of the high-quality stonework for which the area is noted. The homestead cabin is a fine example of well-crafted nineteenth-century log construction, and the cow shed and granary also clearly reflect local historic design and construction techniques.

Historian: Mark Hufstetler  
Renewable Technologies, Inc.  
Butte, Montana  
March 1999

## II. HISTORY

### A. INTRODUCTION

The Benjamin and Miranda Shreve Homestead is located in the upper Tongue River Valley of south-central Montana (figure 1). The Tongue River has its headwaters in the Big Horn Mountains, in northern Wyoming; from there, the river follows a meandering northeasterly course into Montana, finally emptying into the Yellowstone River at Miles City, Montana. The region traversed by the river is generally arid, and is very lightly populated. The upper reaches of the river pass through a succession of low valleys and narrow, steep canyons; the landscape becomes more open farther downstream, and the lower portions of the river valley are wide and shallow. Small population centers exist at Miles City and along the base of the Big Horns, but there are no other incorporated communities along the river.

Much of the Tongue River area saw historic occupation by the Sioux, Crow and Northern Cheyenne tribes, and a central stretch of the river today forms the eastern boundary of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. The dry and broken landscape surrounding the river, however, has helped isolate the area from concentrated Euro-American activity and settlement. Homesteaders settled along the Tongue River beginning in the 1870s and 1880s, joining a small number of open-range cattle operations in the area. These original farms were consolidated over the years, and the survivors continue to operate along the valley today. Most of the present-day ranches combine areas of irrigated river bottomland with larger tracts of arid grazing range. Many are operated by descendants of the original homesteaders, and numerous examples of historic farm and ranch architecture remain in the area. The valley sees few other intrusions; its only transportation route is a single, largely unpaved road paralleling the river.

### B. SETTLEMENT OF THE UPPER TONGUE RIVER VALLEY

The Tongue River Valley, in common with much of southeastern Montana, probably received its first Euro-American visitors during the early years of the nineteenth century. Captain William Clark's travels down the Yellowstone River in 1806 were followed by short-lived trading posts and other early incursions into the area, some of which may have included the Tongue River. Such occupations were generally brief and transitory, however, largely because the region was recognized as Native American territory which was closed to white use. This situation began to change in the early 1860s, with the establishment of the Bozeman Trail travel corridor along the eastern flank of the Big Horns. The Trail, which crossed the upper Tongue River near present-day Dayton, Wyoming, probably brought the first significant Euro-American attention to the upper Tongue River Valley. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 saw the closure of the trail and the reaffirmation of Indian custody of the Tongue River area, but Euro-American interest in the region continued to grow.<sup>1</sup>

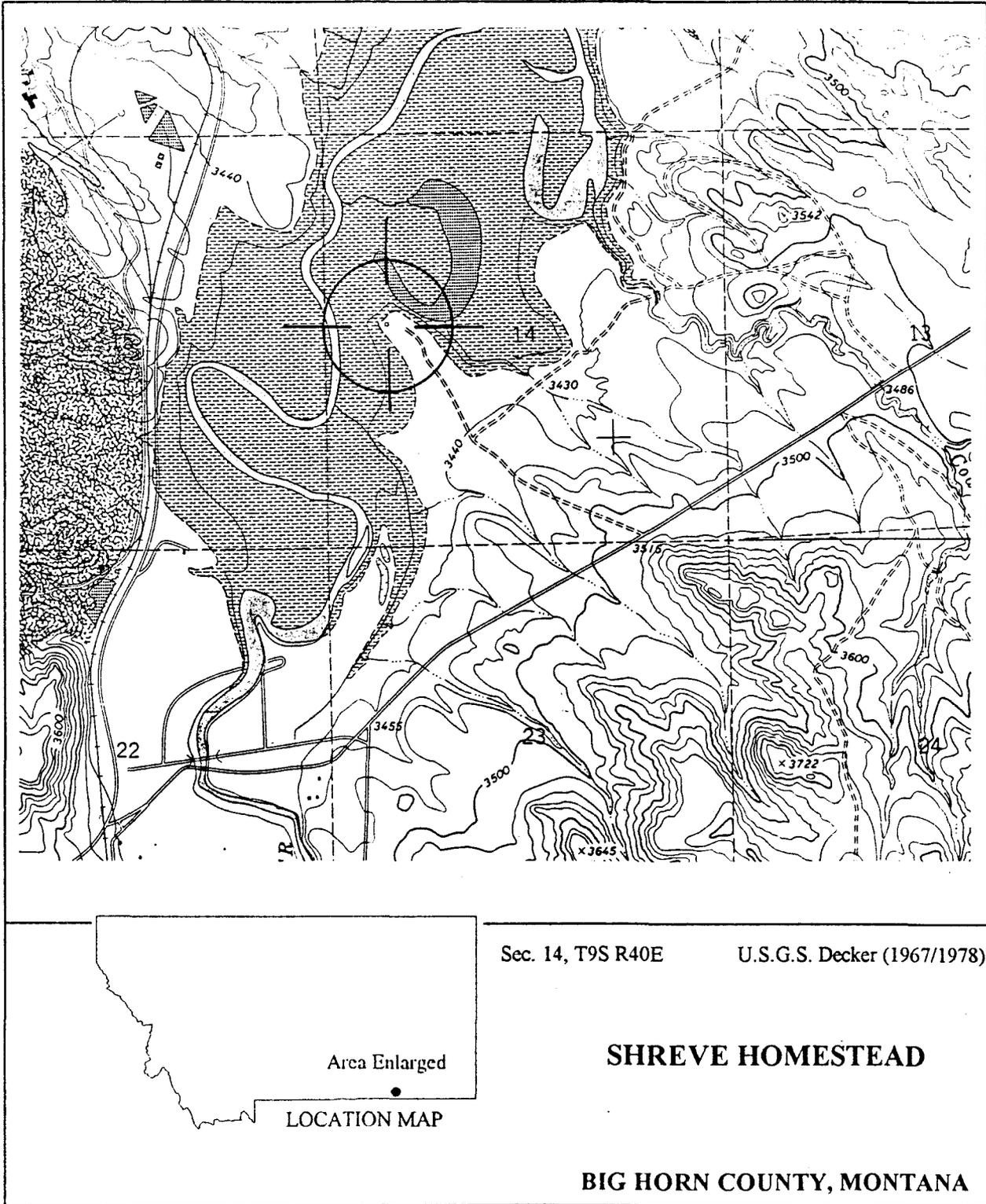


Figure 1. Portion of topographic map showing location of Shreve Homestead in relation to area landmarks.

A series of events during the middle years of the 1870s marked the first steps in the region's transformation from Native American homeland to Euro-American frontier. The Black Hills gold rush was accompanied by increasing numbers of other white incursions; this in turn helped precipitate the military campaigns highlighted by the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. The ultimate result was that, by the end of the decade, the Indian "threat" in southeastern Montana was effectively eliminated, and whites began entering the valleys of the Yellowstone, Powder, Bighorn, and Tongue Rivers in ever-increasing numbers.<sup>2</sup>

Along the Montana-Wyoming border in the upper Tongue River Valley, the initial phase of this Euro-American occupation was well under way by 1880 or so. The area's first arrivals were almost exclusively livestock operators, who took advantage of the region's vast tracts of open rangeland to develop cattle operations that often became large and prosperous. Cattle grazing often represented the only economically viable use for the arid, hilly land surrounding the Tongue River Valley, but the relatively small tracts of fertile bottomland adjacent to the river itself were soon recognized as locations with good agricultural potential. The first hopeful farmers settled along the Tongue River during the early 1880s, even though the land remained unsurveyed and thus unavailable for homestead entry. In the Montana portion of the upper Tongue River Valley, the requisite land survey was completed in 1885, and the area opened for land entry. This event brought an immediate increase in the number of new settlers to the area, and within a few years most of the Tongue River bottomlands had been homesteaded. Most of the area's nineteenth-century homesteads were filed under the terms of the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed for 160-acre agricultural land claims that could be patented after five years of settlement.<sup>3</sup>

New settlers continued to arrive in the upper Tongue River region at least through the decade of the 1910s. In the township of land containing the Shreve homestead, a total of fourteen final homestead patents were issued during the 1890s, including five to members of the extended Shreve family. These patents, concentrated in the river valley itself, largely reflect the settlement activity of the late 1880s. Between 1900 and 1920, however, a total of 51 homestead patents were granted in the township. These patents, along with an additional 23 land entries approved during the 1920s, reflect the expansion of settlement activity into the arid grazing land in the hills east and west of the river. Many of the area's twentieth-century homestead entries were also larger, taking advantage of that era's more-generous homestead programs, including the Enlarged Homestead Act (1909) and the Stock-Raising Homestead Law (1916).<sup>4</sup> While some of these later homestead entries certainly reflect additional settlement in the region, other homesteads were filed by relatives of existing landholders who wanted to expand their family ranch to a more economically-viable size.

As in many newly-opened frontier regions, the first white settlers along the upper Tongue River led lives characterized by isolation. In the 1880s, the region's only transportation route was a single, unimproved dirt track paralleling portions of the Tongue River; for most of the settlers,

the nearest town or railhead was several day's travel away. Consequently, the valley's early homesteaders probably lived a largely subsistence lifestyle, with few opportunities to either purchase consumer goods or market their agricultural products.<sup>5</sup>

This circumstance began a significant change in 1892, however, when the tracks of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad arrived in Sheridan, Wyoming, just south of the Tongue River's upper reaches. (The railway was extended across the Tongue and into Montana two years later.) The coming of the railroad profoundly impacted the region's cultural landscape. Additional settlers were attracted to the area, and small urban centers began to develop. Manufactured consumer goods became more readily available. Tongue River farmers and ranchers were also able, for the first time, to easily ship their products to distant markets. Finally, several commercial coal mines opened in the upper Tongue River area, making wage jobs available for farmers and others in need of additional income. In combination, these developments greatly eased the region's sense of isolation, and helped create a market economy to supplant the earlier subsistence lifestyle.<sup>6</sup>

For the upper Tongue River Valley, the first third of the twentieth century was a period of evolution, rather than upheaval. The region's original homesteads were gradually consolidated over the years into a smaller number of larger farms and ranches; most emphasized livestock production, but also maintained some irrigated hay or crop lands. A network of one-room rural schools was developed and maintained, and a skeletal network of maintained gravel roads began to appear. The scattered, loose-knit community of farms in the vicinity of the Shreve homestead—known as “Decker,” after a local settler—had been awarded a post office in 1893 and also boasted a store and country school. Both the post office and store were located on individual farmsteads, and their locations changed several times over the years.<sup>7</sup>

The years of relative stability were interrupted during the late 1930s, as both the physical and cultural landscape of the Decker area saw dramatic changes as a result of the construction of the Tongue River Dam. The dam was built in 1937-39 by the Montana State Water Conservation Board as a New Deal project, and was intended to provide additional irrigation water for downstream farmers. The new Tongue River Reservoir, however, inundated large tracts of the upper valley's prime agricultural bottomlands, forcing a number of families to leave the area. Benjamin and Miranda Shreve were among those who lost much of their best land to the reservoir project, and then moved away.<sup>8</sup>

A second, equally significant, period of transformation for the region began in the 1970s with the resurgence of the region's coal industry. A rail spur was constructed into the Decker region from Sheridan, Wyoming, and three vast, open-pit mines were soon opened in the area. A number of Decker's remaining ranchers sold out to the coal operators, and the mine operations themselves caused tremendous amounts of ground disturbance.

Today, the landscape of the Decker region is clearly dominated by the recent intrusions of mines and reservoir. A few active ranches still remain in the area, however, and other abandoned clusters of farmstead buildings still dot the landscape. Beyond the Decker area, though, far less has changed, and the valleys and hills of the Tongue river area continue to host isolated ranching operations that have been little-changed for generations.

### C. VERNACULAR BUILDING FORMS OF THE REGION

As a group, the built environment of the farms and ranches in the Tongue River region are noteworthy for both the variety of architectural forms and materials present, and for the relatively high quality of much of that architecture. The rural building forms surviving there today reflect a number of influences, including the availability of various construction materials, the aptitudes of local builders, and the local need for a diverse assortment of building forms.

Throughout the American West, the earliest buildings to be constructed in a frontier area were almost always hand-built structures utilizing native materials found nearby. In Montana and Wyoming, homesteaders arriving in areas near available timber resources usually began by building simple, unhewn log cabins; by necessity, those in treeless locales resorted to sod construction methods. The Tongue River area, however, clearly fit into neither of these categories. While some of the surrounding hillsides were thinly wooded, as a whole timber was scarce, and the predominant species—Rocky Mountain juniper—was ill-suited to cabin building. Simultaneously, the area's thin, rocky soils were largely inappropriate for the earth-walled construction techniques common in the American Midwest.

Given these conditions, and the early difficulties of transporting building materials into the region, settlers in the Tongue River area were often forced to use more labor-intensive construction techniques. A number of early homesteaders utilized the massive cottonwood trees found along the riverbanks for their initial construction projects. Since these logs were generally large and crooked, they often required very heavy axe work prior to use. The surviving cabin at the Shreve farmstead is a strong example of such a building, with hewn interior and exterior log faces, full-dovetail notching, and other signs of careful, high-quality logwork. This contrasts sharply with typical period log construction techniques found in much of the frontier west, which utilized thinner logs displaying less axe work and simpler notching forms.

Relatively early in the region's settlement, other homesteaders recognized the suitability of local stone for certain building projects. Sandstone slabs were easily obtained from local outcroppings; they were often used for building foundations and could be stacked to make simple, dry-laid walls. Soon, however, local settlers were collecting or quarrying larger stone blocks for use in their construction undertakings. By the early twentieth century, many—if not most—of the valley's farms and ranches boasted one or more examples of cut-stone architecture. Most were of quarried sandstone, roughly squared and with an ashlar exterior face. Houses, barns, coops, and a

variety of other outbuildings were all constructed locally with the material. Many of the buildings display signs of careful attention to visual detail, including quoins, projecting stone sills, water tables, and other architectural elements. Considering the isolated, rural nature of the region, the number of local stone buildings is remarkably high and their collective level of craftsmanship is extraordinary. The presence of these buildings reflects an impressive use of indigenous building materials, and also suggests that a number of highly talented stonemasons lived and worked in the area. The Shreve homestead includes two relatively minor examples of this characteristic local building form.

As the area's relative isolation ended during the early twentieth century, and its period of population growth ceased, the need to use local building materials lessened. A few buildings from that era were constructed utilizing sawn lumber, which by the twentieth century was available both from lumberyards and local sawmills. These buildings, and their modern successors, generally lack the visual distinction of the valley's stone and cottonwood architecture, and fail to display the strong local associations that came from the use of indigenous building materials.

#### D. BENJAMIN AND MIRANDA SHREVE HOMESTEAD

The origin of the Benjamin and Miranda Shreve homestead followed a pattern reflective of much of the nineteenth-century settlement activity in the upper Tongue River Valley. Fleeing crop failures and other hardships in Kansas, the Shreves traveled by covered wagon to Sheridan, Wyoming during 1886, and then continued into the Tongue River region in search of homestead land. That summer, the family selected its homestead site along the river's east bank. In choosing to settle along the river, the Shreves joined several other members of their extended family in the Tongue River vicinity; all were among the earliest homesteaders in the region.<sup>9</sup>

During the fall of 1886, the Shreve family constructed a small cabin at the homestead site, presumably near the site of the surviving farm buildings. A reminiscence prepared years later by one of the Shreves' daughters describes the house as "a one-room log cabin, with a dirt roof and floor. The floor was made by wetting and pounding the ground until it was packed and hard. Then they ripped up their tent, stretched it tightly over the packed earth, and pegged it down."<sup>10</sup>

The Shreves continued developing the property over the next few years, and the application for a homestead patent on the farm was formally approved on October 24, 1893. Benjamin Shreve's testimony in support of the homestead claim briefly describes the improvements made at the farm during its first seven years:

In August and September 1886, I established actual residence about Oct 1<sup>st</sup> 1886; Log House 14 x 34, 2 log stables 14 x 20 each, Cow shed 16 x 40, corral 50 feet across, ice house, store room 10 x 10, Root cellar, chicken house, all fenced with wire-ditch partially made, value \$600.00.<sup>11</sup>

Although unconfirmed, it is possible that some of the above-listed improvements—such as the root cellar, cow shed, and part of the house—coincide with the ruins remaining at the Shreve place in 1999.

In common with many new arrivals to the frontier West, the Shreves' first years were reportedly difficult. The family arrived in Montana just in time for the infamous "Hard Winter" of 1886-87, and the hardship was compounded by feelings of isolation. Miranda Shreve, at the cabin with her two small children, did not see another woman from December to May. When food supplies ran short in April 1887, Benjamin made a pack-horse trip to Sheridan, which took four days because of the deep snows. For the first few years, Benjamin also supplemented the farm's limited income by working as a freighter from Miles City, Montana to Sheridan and Buffalo, Wyoming.<sup>12</sup>

The family's situation apparently improved markedly within a few years, however. Additional settlers (including several Shreve family members) arrived to ease the sense of isolation, and the ranch was improved and expanded. The bottomlands were cleared and irrigated, and grazing land was acquired in the hills, substituting for the rapidly-disappearing open range. The ranch eventually included grazing tracts in Big Horn, Rosebud, and Custer Counties, Montana. The Shreve family raised seven children on the farm, and Benjamin Shreve served as the Decker postmaster for a time. (The post office itself was located at the ranch during that period.) Benjamin also served as a local brand inspector and a county commissioner. The Shreve operation was locally regarded as a successful cattle ranch, and the family was well-respected within the small Decker community.<sup>13</sup>

The Shreve family remained at its homestead for over 50 years, until the property was condemned for the Tongue River Reservoir project. The farmstead was vacated in the late 1930s, and some of its buildings removed. The site has been abandoned since. Benjamin and Miranda Shreve bought a house in Sheridan and moved into town. Benjamin died in 1941 at the age of 78, and Miranda died in 1948 at the age of 86.<sup>14</sup>

## II. DESCRIPTION OF THE BENJAMIN AND MIRANDA SHREVE HOMESTEAD

The group of buildings and former building locations comprising the Shreve Homestead rests on a shallow rise just east of an elbow in the former Tongue River channel. The river channel, and the lowlands immediately surrounding it, are now within the high-water pool of the Tongue River Reservoir. (When at capacity, the reservoir pool encroaches on areas of the Shreve building group, as well.) An irregular, broken band of cottonwood trees and other vegetation helps demarcate the edge of the homestead area along the reservoir shore. Other vegetation in the area is relatively sparse, and includes sagebrush as well as native and non-native grasses and shrubs.

The river channel and reservoir bed occupy portions of the south, west, and north boundaries of the Shreve site. Consequently, both the historic and current land access routes to the property come from the east. The original dirt road leading to the site has been largely obliterated by the development of a large open-pit coal mine east of the old homestead; a mine overburden dump now dominates the view to the east. The current road leading to the Shreve place—a rough, unimproved two-track lane—skirts the southerly end of the overburden dump and enters the site from the east-southeast.

The access lane peters out near the center of the former Shreve farmyard. The buildings and building sites at the complex are scattered around the edges of this area in a rough, irregular U-shaped arrangement (figure 2). Although some former building uses remain speculative, in general the features at the homestead were apparently sited in groups according to their historic function. The largest of these groupings is to the south, where a cluster of features centered around the cabin (MT-106-A) appear to have been used largely for domestic purposes. In addition to the house, this area also includes an ice house (MT-106-B), a well, and three presumed building sites now marked only by foundation remnants and/or minor ground disturbances (one is probably a former outhouse). A length of concrete sidewalk and a number of domestic tree plantings complete this area.

To the north, almost opposite the house area, a second group of buildings comprised a small maintenance/repair area. This portion of the farmyard includes the blacksmith building (MT-106-E), a ground depression (the site of a former coal shed), and a three-sided foundation which probably once supported a farm equipment machine shed. Finally, the western and northwestern portions of the farmyard include buildings and features associated with animal husbandry and grain production. These include the cow shed (MT-106-C), the granary (MT-106-D), and one building foundation. Numerous fenceposts outlining a former corral area also remain in place here.

In all, 12 features have been located and recorded at the site; all date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, traces of several fencelines remain, along with domestic tree plantings and a small amount of scattered historic debris.

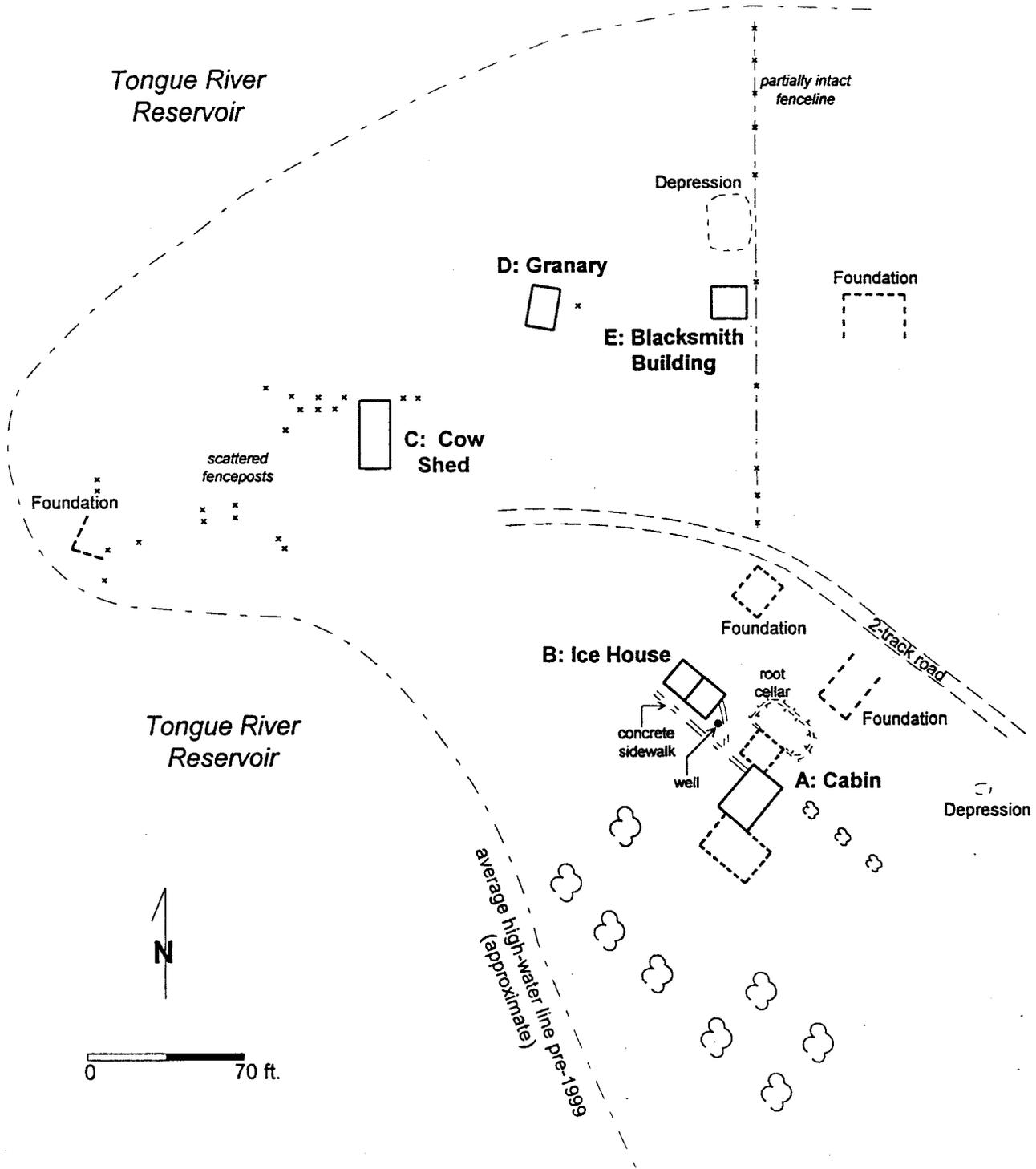


Figure 2. Site map for the Shreve Homestead.

### III. FUTURE OF THE PROPERTY

Since the completion of the Tongue River Dam project in 1939, the shoreline of the Tongue River Reservoir has encroached on the periphery of the Shreve homestead area. (Portions of the site are inundated when the reservoir is completely full.) In 1994, plans were formalized for the partial rebuilding of Tongue River Dam, and for raising the structure to increase the capacity of its reservoir. This project, which is now nearing completion, will allow the high water level of the reservoir to raise four feet. This will result in at least the intermittent inundation of virtually the entire Shreve homestead site. The United States Bureau of Reclamation has sponsored this Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation of the site to partially mitigate the adverse effects caused by this project.

### IV. ENDNOTES

1. For basic information on the region's mid-nineteenth century history and related Native American issues, see Chapter 6 of Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976, revised 1991). Also see T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 25-35.
2. Ibid. Also see L. Peterson, et al., "Cultural Resource Investigations of the Tongue River Dam Project, Big Horn County, Montana" (unpublished report prepared for the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, 1995), 3.31-3.33.
3. "Cultural Resource Investigations of the Tongue River Dam Project," 3.38-3.40. In addition to the Homestead Act, other local land entries were made under the terms of the Desert Land Act of 1877; most (or all) of these claims, however, were later canceled by the federal government.
4. "Cultural Resource Investigations of the Tongue River Dam Project," 3.40-3.44.
5. Ibid., 3.39-3.40.
6. Mark Hufstetler, "Determination of Eligibility for Burlington Northern Railroad Company Bridge Number 739.11, Near Wyola, Montana" (unpublished report prepared for the Burlington Northern Railroad, 1992), 5-7. For additional general historical background on the region, see Big Horn County Historical Society, *Lookin' Back: Big Horn County* (Hardin, Montana: the Society, 1976).
7. Mitzi Rossillon, et al. "Additional Cultural Resource Investigations for the Tongue River Dam Project, Big Horn County, Montana" (unpublished report prepared for the United States Bureau of Reclamation, 1999).
8. "Cultural Resource Investigations of the Tongue River Dam Project," 3.56-3.58.
9. "Cultural Resource Investigations of the Tongue River Dam Project," 5.234; *Lookin' Back: Big Horn County*, 226.

10. *Lookin' Back: Big Horn County*, 226.

11. General Land Office, Miles City, Montana. "Final Certificate No. 291, Homestead Application No. 506: Benjamin F. Shreve," October 1893. On file, General Land Office Records Group, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

12. *Lookin' Back: Big Horn County*, 226.

13. *Ibid.*, 227.

14. *Ibid.*

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