

[register](#) | [log in](#) | [e-mail news](#) | [help](#)

ALASKA'S NEWSPAPER



NEWS

BY EMAIL

- Breaking News
- Fishing
- Obituaries
- Outdoor
- PM B
- & Mo

SIGN UP HERE

Anchorage Daily News



Alaska Newsreader

All Alaska in one click -- news, blogs, videos and more.



58

forecast

Daylight : 5:33 a

[Subscribe](#) | [manage subscription](#) | [E-Edition](#)

Search in **All**



for

[find](#) »

[News](#)

[Sports](#)

[Outdoors](#)

[Features](#)

[Money](#)

[Entertainment](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Home](#) | [Alaska Newsreader](#) | [Obituaries](#) | [Archives](#)

[Movies](#) | [Music](#) | [Restaurants](#) | [Submit an Event](#)

Inholders clear 13 miles of park

BULLDOZED: Family needed access, cited old law and often missed mark.

By TOM KIZZIA
Anchorage Daily News

Published: June 19, 2003

Last Modified: November 28, 2003 at 02:57 PM

God brought the Pilgrim family to Alaska and delivered Papa Pilgrim, Mother Country Rose and their 15 children last year to a mining claim in the remote heart of the Wrangell Mountains. But when the devout, tight-knit family set out for the nearest town on a bulldozer last fall, all hell broke loose.

Story tools

[E-mail a friend](#)
[Print](#)
[Digg this](#)
[Seed Newsvine](#)
[Send link via AIM](#)

Font size : A | A | A

The problem was that the Pilgrims had just bulldozed a trail across 13 miles of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. It was the kind of action environmentalists, land-rights activists and state and federal bureaucrats had been bracing for ever since 1980, when Congress transformed Alaska by creating 104 million acres of parks and wildlife refuges here.

Recent weeks have seen an escalating U.S. Justice Department investigation, high-level political negotiations and Internet warnings to property-rights groups of a potential "Ruby Ridge confrontation" that officials have been scrambling to defuse.

The family's 62-year-old patriarch, who goes by the name of Pilgrim, professed surprise this week at the furor.



Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News archive 2002

[enlarge](#)

Some of the Pilgrim family sing at an Anchorage Folk Festival event in January of 2002. From left are Jerusalem, Elizabeth, Hosanna, their father, Pilgrim, and Joshua.

More top stories »

[Pebble mine project gets a big-bucks backer](#)
[Pathologist describes findings, cause of death, at Lawson trial](#)
[Family says they feared man found with woman's body](#)
[Bear gobbles up food collected for homeless, trashes van](#)
[Still a hot commodity 9:11 a.m. AKST](#)

"We're not a political family," he said by telephone from the town of McCarthy, his voice still carrying a slight drawl from his Texas youth. "We knew this land was in the middle of a national park, but that just meant to us our neighbors would be few and far between."

Some of those new neighbors were national park rangers. The rangers ordered the settlers not to use motorized vehicles on the new route. The Pilgrims told the rangers not to trespass and to quit scaring their goats with surveillance helicopters. Until the past few weeks, the two sides were communicating only through fliers nailed up on trees.

The National Park Service was anxious in part because the bulldozed trail followed a historic mining road, giving the Pilgrims a faint legal toehold under an arcane, century-old law with potential repercussions across Alaska.

"We're worried that if inholders in other parks see them get away with this, they'll start doing it too," said Jim Stratton, Alaska director for the National Parks Conservation Association, an environmental group.

As a U.S. senator, Frank Murkowski fulminated against federal efforts to block access, complaining it was like "waking up one morning to find that the federal government has declared your yard a national park and refused you access across your driveway."

But as governor, Murkowski has not sprung to the Pilgrims' defense, in part because the state is being careful how it approaches the legal and political issues of access across federal lands.

State officials are scheduled to meet with McCarthy residents today to discuss the lengthy process necessary to establish legal access for park inholdings.

Officials also hope to reduce tensions among some local residents, who have fanned the Internet recently with warnings of a confrontation brewing between the Park Service and the pacifist Pilgrims. The Park Service dropped plans to send armed rangers along with surveyors this month to assess damage along the old mining road.

"You know these things bring out people with extreme views. Who knows what would have happened?" said Rick Kenyon, publisher of the McCarthy-based Wrangell St. Elias News, who said he was outraged by what he saw as heavy-handed park tactics.

The bigger issue involves an obscure federal law known as Revised Statute 2477, derived from the Mining Act of 1866.

That law, which allowed access across unused federal land, was repealed a century later, but hundreds of right-of-way claims made under the old law were left standing. The state of Alaska has a list of 659 rights of way claimed under RS 2477. The old mining road up McCarthy Creek to the Mother Lode Mine is one of them.

The last time Congress debated the rules for resolving such claims, in 1997, environmentalists staged a demonstration outside the Capitol using a bulldozer as a prop.

Nobody could have imagined the blade being pushed by one of the Pilgrims, a born-again family whose children range in age from 7 months to 27 years. With their flowing tresses, homespun garb and biblical phrasing, the assembled family have a striking presence -- "a real nice countenance," in the words of the senior Pilgrim.

His legal name is Robert Hale. He says God told him to marry Country Rose. Most of their

children bear biblical names such as Noah and Abraham, though some of the older ones, such as Sunstar and Butterfly, have names from their parents' pre-Jesus hippie days.

"We're just modest, simple folk, not some strange religion," the senior Pilgrim said.

The family lived an isolated subsistence-farming life in the mountains of New Mexico before heading to Alaska in 1998. After trying several towns, they heard about McCarthy while performing bluegrass music at the Anchorage Folk Festival. They bought 420 remote acres with several buildings from a retired miner, at first visiting by snowmachine and bush plane. The land was one of several remote copper mines active through the 1920s in the area.

"We said, 'Lord, thank you for bringing us home,' " Pilgrim said.

They turned to the bulldozer because the plane flights were too expensive, he said. A swift political education followed.

"This road is the example of what a 2477 right of way should be," Pilgrim said.

Federal and state officials say there's more to securing legal access than putting a bulldozer into gear.

The process for resolving RS 2477 claims is still being negotiated between Alaska and other states and the Department of the Interior. Pressing a single claim in court can cost the state more than \$200,000, according to the state Department of Natural Resources. State officials say funding for such efforts has increased next year, despite extensive budget cuts elsewhere in state government.

Even if the old mining road qualifies, the track bulldozed last September probably veers off the 100-foot-wide route into the park, the Park Service says. The original road had 17 bridges and two tunnels, all washed away or inaccessible, and the creek bed has shifted.

Park officials say they are required to provide reasonable access to inholdings, but that could mean snowmachines or airplanes.

"When you buy a piece of remote property, you should really consider how you're going to get there," said Wrangell-St. Elias superintendent Gary Candelaria.

Even a valid state right of way is subject to federal park permits, Murkowski aide Jack Phelps noted in a letter to Kenyon, the publisher. And a private individual can't make improvements on a state right of way without permits, he said.

The Pilgrims' route crosses several private parcels as well as the national park, federal officials say. Indeed, pushing RS 2477 access can be a double-edged sword for property-rights advocates. A state effort several years ago to map such routes in the Mat-Su area raised protests from property owners who perceived a sudden cloud on their land titles.

With such a sensitive subject, state officials say they are being careful about how to approach the federal government. The environmentalist nightmare of a free-lance bulldozer cutting across a national park -- even one driven by simple, God-fearing folk -- may not be the place to begin talks.

"We would choose the less emotionally charged cases to work on to establish procedures and policies," said Bob Loeffler, director of the state's Division of Mining, Land and Water.

Stratton, of the park conservation group, said it's important to minimize roads to preserve the park's original wilderness values.

"Just to take access into your own hands and say, 'I've got a God-given right to punch a road where I think a road used to be,' that's just going to get you in trouble," he said.

For now, things seem to be cooling off. The Pilgrims have bought draft horses and are building a wagon in McCarthy that they hope will be able to travel up the old road.

Meanwhile, back at the Mother Lode, federal employees are surveying the Pilgrim homestead this week to be sure that land-clearing hasn't crossed the line into the park. Pilgrim family members are helping haul survey equipment on horseback and are providing lunch.

Reporter Tom Kizzia can be reached at tkizzia@adn.com or in Homer at 1-907-235-4244.

Top stories »	Most read	Most e-mailed	Most-viewed galleries
Pebble mine project gets a big-bucks backer	Family says they feared man found with woman's body	Blaze leaves village without electricity	adn.com photo report stevens
Pathologist describes findings, cause of death, at Lawson trial	Probe is expanding	Mortgage defaults expected to rise	Bear sightings
Family says they feared man found with woman's body	Pathologist describes findings, cause of death, at Lawson trial	340-pounder takes Valdez derby lead	Fur Bikini Contest 2007 at Chilkoot Charlie's
Bear gobbles up food collected for homeless, trashes van	Bear gobbles up food collected for homeless, trashes van	Man stopped with corpse in car has a murderous history	Mr./Miss/Ms. Gay Anchorage Pageant at Bernie's Bungalow Lounge, June 23 (26 photos)
Still a hot commodity 9:11 a.m. AKST	Mortgage defaults are expected to grow in Mat-Su borough	Fish company will pay ship pollution fines	Wild Cheerleaders - Pre-game Glacier Photographic Gallery



Important warning about e-mails purporting to be from the adn.com sta

© Copyright 2007, The Anchorage Daily News, a subsidiary of The McClatchy C
[Contact Us](#) | [Newsroom Contacts](#) | [Communication Forms](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Advertisi](#)
[Daily News Jobs](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [ADN Store](#) | [Newspapers in Education](#) | [Privacy](#)

A member of the
Real Cities Network