

## Vinegar Hill Historic District

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Extending from Vinegar Hill and Cabin Creek down Big Creek as far as Soldier Bar, Vinegar Hill Historic District represents the development of the Salmon River wilderness from prehistoric times to the present. As a center for aboriginal activity, this area has an archaeological dimension beyond the scope of this statement. Activities of early prospectors along that part of Big Creek cannot be documented because of an absence of significant mineral prospects there. Gold discoveries on Loon Creek in 1869 brought miners to that general region, and a decade later the last of Idaho's Indian military campaigns brought national notice to Vinegar Hill and Soldier Bar. Military scouts searching for Indians examined this district thoroughly in 1879 after a Loon Creek Chinese massacre, February 12, and set off a series of retaliatory expeditions. Local Indians disclaimed any connection with the Chinese disaster, but they could not be consulted regarding that event until after the campaign. In the meantime, the army had a terrible time trying to operate all summer in difficult terrain remote from military posts. A misadventure at Vinegar Hill got their initial venture down Big Creek off to a decidedly bad start. Then the rest of their search did not go too much better.

Identified by the country involved, rather than by reluctant Indian participants, the Sheepeater campaign affected very few natives. Some Sheepeaters were thought to have been included in the small group for which the army searched. But Eagle Eye's Sheepeater band escaped that affair, and the Indians camped along Big Creek appear to have been refugees from the Bannock War of 1878.

A great deal of confusion has grown out of this situation. Prior to 1879, settlers acquainted with the Sheepeaters--who had cultural antecedents extending more than 8000 years in the Salmon River mountains (among other places), but who had specialized in big game hunting there rather than in traveling on horseback over a much-larger seasonal migratory cycle--regarded them as particularly mild and inoffensive. Culturally very conservative, the Sheepeaters possessed unusual skills that enabled them to live in country not ordinarily seen by the whites. But after 1879, because of confusion with Bannock war refugees who had sought shelter in the Sheepeater country, they received a lot of undeserved (and libelous) derision that may not have been applied properly to the other Indians either. In any event, the disparaging notice they received from that 1879 campaign had little or no actual connection with most of the

Sheepeters.

Military operations against Indians camped along Big Creek in the summer of 1879 came from two widely separated bases: Grangeville and Boise. Henry Catley's Grangeville expedition, impeded by late-melting snow in the higher country finally located an Indian band in a flat (where one of the scouts--Dave Lewis--later established a ranch) below Rush and Cliff creek. Gorges along Big Creek (below Cabin Creek on the west and above Soldier Bar farther down) protected their secluded shelter from military operations from either direction. When Lieutenant Catley's column tried to descend Big Creek along an Indian trail, his force was ambushed in a gorge below Cabin Creek on July 29, after which an enterprising Indian managed to pin down his entire command on Vinegar Hill. Catley abandoned his camp and provisions, but on August 20, Captain Reuben F. Bernard descended Big Creek in a second attempt to find the Indians. His men got past the original Indian camp, but lost a pack train guard (Harry Eagan) at Soldier Bar, August 20, where the Indians had abandoned a camp the day before. After well over a thousand-mile campaign, Bernard returned to Fort Boise. Eventually E. S. Farrow and W. C. Brown returned with some scouts, got in contact with the Indians on September 25, and arranged to escort them out to Grangeville and Lapwai on October 1. By that time, enough Indian supplies had been destroyed during military engagements along Big Creek that provisions were needed for them to get through the winter. Twelve to fifteen warriors (out of a total of fifty-one Indians) agreed to settle at Fort Hall Reservation. Although they were camped north of Soldier Bar at the conclusion of the campaign, most Indian and military operations occurred in the Vinegar Hill Historic District.

After 1879, lower Big Creek returned to obscurity. Although Eagle Eye's Sheepeter band had avoided the 1879 campaign and had not retired to the Fort Hall reservation with the Rush Creek-Soldier Bar groups, his people rarely were noticed for a time. Eventually (some time prior to 1888) they settled in Dry Buck Valley near Timber Butte. That move left the Vinegar Hill district unoccupied, although a gold excitement farther up Big Creek at Alton brought miners to the general area again. Finally in 1894, Ben (A. B.) and Lew (L. G.) Caswell moved from Volinia, Michigan, to Cabin Creek and Rush Creek. There they established an isolated ranch, located primarily for superlative hunting, fishing, and trapping. To provide a little cash income, they began placering gold in scattered wilderness areas in 1895, although they had no previous mining experience. Eventually on August 10, 1897, they came out to Boise with a sizable accumulation of coarse placer gold. Cabin Creek thus became the base for a modest mining, as well as ranching, hunting, and fishing operation. By 1902 Idaho's last major gold rush brought a host of prospectors to Thunder Mountain--by far the most significant of the Caswell mineral

discoveries. On Monumental Creek west of Cabin Creek, Thunder Mountain excitement remained reasonably remote from the Caswell's Cabin and Rush creeks ranch.

Thunder Mountain mining provided a basis for additional settlement from Cabin Creek to Soldier Bar. Just before the Thunder Mountain gold rush, David Lewis (an army scout in 1879 who had come to Idaho in 1867 from Wales and finally Arkansas) started a ranch on a Big Creek flat below Rush Creek--an establishment later referred to as Taylor's ranch. Like the Caswells, he depended mostly on hunting and fishing; as a commercial bounty hunter for the state Fish and Game Department before the bounty system was recognized as misguided and counter-productive, he gained a well-deserved reputation as Cougar Dave. Except for a temporary stay in Whitebird (1908-1910) following the decline of Thunder Mountain, Lewis never left Big Creek until 1922. He continued his hunting career until the depression, when he retired to Boise. A number of other ranchers came to the area: four homesteads on Cabin Creek make up part of this complex growing out of the Thunder Mountain era.

Remote from other settlements, Lewis' ranch and the Cabin Creek homesteads (patented from 1918 to 1930) were included in the center of a roadless area that Governor H. C. Baldrige proposed in 1930 for Forest Service administration as a primitive area. After landing strips on Cabin Creek, Lewis' ranch, and Soldier Bar made these outposts more readily accessible, dude ranches and commercial recreational hunting became more practical. The dude ranch era continued until the University of Idaho acquired Dave Lewis' ranch and the U.S. Forest Service purchased Rex Lanham's Cabin Creek complex (a consolidation of the four homesteads there in 1953 to 1973) as part of a program to reduce private land holdings in the Idaho primitive area. During the dude ranch period, a number of substantial buildings were erected and a surprising amount of heavy equipment, including a caterpillar tractor for road construction and land leveling, was brought in. Altogether, commercial outfitters and guides operated in the district during the dude ranch era that lasted no longer than the earlier episode of subsistence hunting and ranching. New trends in wilderness administration recognize research and habitat protection in place of bounty systems for fish and game development.

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