

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SITE REPORT - CHAMBERLAIN BASIN-BARGAMIN CREEK

Number 648

Revised December 1994

Historic-site reports contain information designed to assist in two preservation functions. One is preservation planning at the local level. The other is the work of federal agencies in carrying out their responsibilities to comply with historic-preservation requirements prescribed by federal statutes and regulations. These reports summarize local archaeological, historical, and geographical contexts; existing surveys of historic sites; architectural, engineering, industrial; and other cultural resources; and available maps and literature concerning each area. Natural geographical, rather than governmental, boundaries have been used to identify seventy-two areas that vary greatly in size. Site reports reflect a broad cultural and geographical disparity characteristic of diverse regional components found in Idaho, but the areas are designed to incorporate cultural elements of immediate local significance that need to be taken into account for preservation planning.

1. Geographical context: Salmon River Canyon separates Chamberlain Basin from upper Bargamin Creek by a deep gorge that could not be navigated until 1832. Exceeding 6,000 feet in depth, this barrier surpasses Colorado River's Grand Canyon in that regard.

Between Salmon River's middle and south forks, Chamberlain Basin occupies a high plateau above deep river canyons, while Bargamin Creek drains a substantial northside section in that wild river area. Elevations rise from about 2,200 feet above Mackay Bar to 8,490 feet on Sheepeater Mountain and 8,882 feet on Waugh Mountain. A narrow upper Bargamin Forest Service road (adapted from an older Nez Perce Trail Salmon-Clearwater divide route) penetrates a portion of this wilderness. Higher elevations and shaded ridges are forested, while lower exposed slopes are arid. Mineral resources are limited to Salmon River bars. Recreation, including Salmon River rafting and boating, are important.

2. Prehistory and significant archaeological sites: A significant border zone between Nez Perce and Mountain Shoshoni peoples, this area has developed as a center of peaceful contact between them. With a long tradition of dependence upon mountain sheep for hunting, many local Shoshoni inhabitants continued that

economy and retained their ancient homeland, along with their living customs, long after most other Northern Shoshoni bands shifted to a much more migratory way of life. Some Mountain Shoshoni also accepted that change. A band later identified as Lemhi Shoshoni began to employ horses to go buffalo hunting into nearby plains territory. Sacajawea became by far their most noted member, and their contribution to Lewis and Clark's success gained them international recognition. Farther west, a mounted Weiser band of Mountain Shoshoni emerged to travel with horses into surrounding plains. In between those peoples, a much more culturally conservative assembly of Mountain Shoshoni rejected such innovation. Their homeland included this study area. Major archaeological sites that contribute to an understanding of their prehistory, however, are found in adjacent lands.

3. Cultural resource surveys and archaeological literature: Except for western (upper) Chamberlain Basin (T23N, R9E; T24N, R9-10E) and upper Sabe Creek (T26N, R12E), most of this cultural resource unit has had at least some archaeological survey. Approximately 275 sites have been recorded. Idaho's State Historic Preservation Office retains information concerning them. Old trails, such as one along this unit's northern boundary from Salmon Mountain to Waugh Mountain and Square Top, also are of archaeological interest. Similarly, an abandoned trail from Square Top to Horse Creek Butte is one of many examples important in this area's earlier history. Abandoned Forest Service guard stations, ranger stations, administrative sites, and lookouts also have archaeological interest.

4. Historical summary: Major historical episodes include

1. Exploration, 1832-1898
2. Salmon River navigation, 1898-
3. Forest Service administration, 1906-
4. Wild River investigation and wilderness management, 1968-

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark wanted to come down Salmon River and explore this area in 1805. Clark, in fact, came down Salmon River far enough to see some of it and to learn why they would have to try another route to avoid hazards of operating canoes there. Beaver hunters who trapped most Idaho mountain areas after 1808 were smart enough to avoid this region until 1832, when four experienced Hudson's Bay Company trappers decided to check out Salmon River Canyon. Expert French Canadian canoeemen, they got past this area, but did not find many beaver.

In 1835, Samuel Parker followed an old Indian route--Nez Perce

Trail--from Nez Perce Pass to Elk City, so he explored upper Bargamin Creek on his way.

Traffic up and down Salmon River canyon resumed after fabulous gold discoveries brought miners to that section in 1862.

Within a year, a rush to later Montana brought a lot of pack trains and saddle trains to upper Missouri gold camps that were in Idaho from March 4, 1863 to May 26, 1864. All that Nez Perce Trail traffic came by upper Bargamin Creek. During Idaho's gold rush era, primarily through 1869, with several periods of later resurgence, prospectors investigated about every remote, inaccessible area, including Chamberlain Basin. Early gold production in this area, however, was limited mostly to Salmon River bars. Many of them could be reached only with great difficulty, and in contrast to a total production of about \$2,000,000 for Salmon River, this segment failed to contribute a significant share.

Salmon River Canyon, however, did not discourage Walter W. DeLacy's Northern Pacific Railway surveyors in 1872. Obstacles that had turned back Lewis and Clark appeared less formidable to DeLacy. Except for their inability to get through cliffs where Salmon and Snake rivers join in a gorge many miles west of Chamberlain Basin, DeLacy preferred to locate a transcontinental rail line there. (It finally wound up north of Lake Pend d'Oreille instead.) Other Salmon River Mountain districts, though, showed more promise. Some of that mining activity set off military expeditions that finally led to an 1879 Sheepeater campaign against a small band of Mountain Shoshoni based on Big Creek. One of several of those army expeditions came through Chamberlain Basin in search of those elusive people, only to meet up with an unexpected defeat, July 29, 1879, when two energetic Shoshoni warriors routed Lieutenant Henry Catley's military force on Big Creek below Cabin Creek and at Vinegar Hill. After an annoying series of additional military operations, a small band of fourteen Mountain Shoshoni warriors (who went to great effort to avoid fighting anyone) were persuaded to move to Fort Hall because their winter supplies were destroyed. From then on, occasional settlers felt more free to move into Chamberlain Basin. About all they could do was some hunting and trapping. Commercial ranching in such a remote area had very limited marketing possibilities until new Big Creek mining development around Alton after 1885 brought more activity to that area. Henry Catley's 1879 trail to Chamberlain Basin opened a new era that reached its early climax with a wild gold rush to Thunder Mountain after 1900. Before 1890, John Ramey, who had been active in that area before 1880, had spent some of his time in an old cabin in Chamberlain Basin, where John Chamberlain also settled before 1890. Harry Donahue and W. A. Stonebraker followed in 1898. By that time, Salmon River traffic (which floated only downstream) was becoming regular through that area. so when a large volume of supplies and a host of eager miners

came by way of Campbell's Ferry to Thunder Mountain after 1900, Chamberlain Basin (which is on that route) profited from all that activity. A limited amount of mining in Chamberlain Basin came in 1899 when some Ohio and Utah prospectors spent two weeks recovering \$1,876 from a rich outcrop there.

An attractive hunting area because of its isolation, Chamberlain Basin gained additional prominence as a dude ranch area. By 1922, hunters were gaining access there by plane, and regular flights were available by 1928. Albert Campbell, a prominent rancher from New Meadows, acquired an old Chamberlain Basin ranch suitable for a hunting base, and sold almost 160 acres to Wallace Beery in 1936. Beery made it an attractive base for wealthy hunting parties who flew in from Hollywood at a time when Sun Valley Lodge also was becoming a notable resort at Ketchum.

Even though Chamberlain Basin gained high status as a recreational and resort area, important features of its isolation continued to enhance its attraction. A phone line had reached that far into central Idaho's wilderness in 1904-1905, but nearby gold rush traffic had not led to road connections to supply stations in places like Elk City and Dixie. Responding to a movement that had commenced in New Mexico in 1924, Senator William E. Borah and Governor H. C. Baldrige endorsed a Forest Service designation of that region as a Primitive Area in 1930. A forerunner of Wilderness Area protection, that decision--adopted a year later--guaranteed that no roads would be constructed on Forest Service lands. Access was restricted to pack trails and airports.

Any road project through Salmon River Canyon remained unlikely anyway, and although Idaho's legislature had chartered a toll road from Elk City through upper Bargamin Creek to Nez Perce Pass, December 22, 1864, no such transportation improvement was undertaken. Even phone service along that Nez Perce Trail route did not materialize until 1915, and a road through that segment came only with a Civilian Conservation Corps project, 1934-1936.

After 1952, jet boats in Salmon River Canyon finally transformed water transportation there, and a pioneer Wild River study that commenced in 1968 led to congressional classification of that canyon for Wild River protection. Finally in 1980, Senator Frank Church got congressional approval of a wilderness act that included Chamberlain Basin. Except for a Nez Perce Trail corridor, all of this area emerged as a northern segment of a 2,300,000-acre wilderness protected by federal law.

5. Historical documentation and literature: Aside from Sheepeater campaign and extensive Thunder Mountain gold rush publications, local history materials are compiled primarily in M. Alfreda Elsonsohn's two volume *Pioneer Days in Idaho County* (Caldwell, 1947-1951) that is very thorough. Margaret Fuller, *Trails of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness*

(Edmonds, Washington, 1987) covers this area very well. For Salmon River Canyon, Robert G. Bailey, *River of No Return* (Lewiston, 1935), and Johnny Carrey and Cort Conley, *River of No Return* (Cambridge, Idaho, 1978), are appropriate. LeRoy Ashby and Rod Gramer, *Fighting the Odds: The Life of Senator Frank Church* (Pullman, Washington, 1994), deals with wilderness preservation and legislation.

6. Historic sites inventory:

Nez Perce Trail segment
 Jim Moore Ranch
 William Campbell's Ferry
 Thunder Mountain Trail segments
 W. A. Stonebraker Ranch
 Chamberlain airport
 Chamberlain ranger station
 Wallace Beery Ranch

(More sites need to be added to this list.)

7. Industrial archaeological and engineering sites summary:
 Surface evidence of placer mining in this area offers opportunities for study of industrial procedures utilized in historic production. Hydraulic pits, patterns of dredging operations, or tailings that distinguish hill claims from stream claims--or that identify Chinese services--provide information of historic importance. Prospector's pits disclose gravels that were searched unsuccessfully for gold. Ditches, flumes, stream diversions, and similar evidence of water sources also are important.

Lode mining operations left a variety of indications, many of them relatively permanent in nature. Disturbance of surface outcrops includes trenches and exploratory shafts. In other places, tunnels and raises or stopes that reached surface outlets reveal important aspects of mining activity. If accessible, underground workings have still greater importance for industrial archaeology and engineering analysis. Abandoned tools and equipment, along with items like timbering in tunnels and stopes, add to this record.

Salmon River pack bridge near Campbell's Ferry
 Forest Service lookouts

8. Architectural resources: Survey of the Chamberlain Basin-Bargamin Creek study area is needed. Some Forest Service structures and some isolated cabins survive in this region.

Two sites of architectural interest have been recorded on Five-Mile Creek and in Chamberlain Basin. All parts of the study area deserve further attention.

National Register sites of architectural significance include the following:

T25N, R9E, Sections 22 and 27: More, Jim, Place

One site of architectural interest has been recorded at California Bar in the Leesburg vicinity.

The area has no sites of architectural significance listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

9. United States Geological Survey Maps:

Allison Creek	1962	Leesburg (15')	1950
Bird Creek	1966	Lem Peak	1962
Blackbird Mtn. (15')	1950	Long Tom Mtn.	1962
Black Mountain	1963	Mt. McGuire	
Challis (15')	1956	Opal Lake	1963
Degan Mtn.	1962	Salmon (15')	1950
Duck Creek Point	1963	Shoup (15')	1960
Goldburg Ridge	1962	Taylor Mtn.	1963
Hat Creek	1963	Ulysses Mtn. (15')	1960
Hoodoo Meadows	1962	Wards Butte	1963

10. Cultural resource management recommendations:

(This information has not been edited.)