

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

POOR COYOTE [CABIN], 1855-1915

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Pacific Northwest Region
Westin Building, Room 1920
2001 Sixth Avenue
Seattle, WA 98121

Dear Stephanie:

Some additional information about Poor Coyote (1845-1915) will be helpful in dating his cabin. He lived there from 1895 to November 9, 1915, when he was 70 years old. He was married in 1880, and his wife was living with him there in 1910, when census returns provided most of this information. This material is consistent with what we already understood.

Sincerely,

Merle W. Wells
State Historian

Poor Coyote's Cabin: An historic property report.

1. Abstract: Built on or near Coyote Gulch sometime after 1880, this cabin was occupied by Poor Coyote (or possibly by some other Nez Perce Indian) before it was moved several miles to Spalding for local museum purposes in 1936. After an unfortunate Clearwater flood in 1965, a second move left it under an abandoned highway overpass a short distance farther west. There it has been relatively well protected in a somewhat incongruous setting. With compromised integrity resulting from deterioration and a move in which logs were numbered for identification but reassembled improperly, this structure retains substantial historic interest as an important, but rare, surviving example of Nez Perce acculturation. An appropriate management or disposal plan should provide for preservation of historic material and perhaps for interpretation at some suitable location not far from its present location.

2. Context and documentation: Significance of this structure must be established in a context of (1) regional log construction; (2) Nez Perce acculturation and tradition; (3) local history of Coyote Gulch and Lapwai Creek; and (4) Spalding area museum development. In Nez Perce cultural history, log cabins were recognized sufficiently to justify a special term (translated as wooden house, but applied only to log cabins), so their use by individual Indians needs to be established. Log cabins were introduced to that area no later than 1836, and possibly as early as 1812. Only a few have been inventoried as surviving in Nez Perce County, and Indian examples are much more scarce. Early twentieth-century Nez Perce construction shifted from log cabins to stud frame and box construction. Not too many Nez Perce cabins had been built by then, and scarcely any others (if any at all) are extant. Poor Coyote's Cabin, on that account, documents an aspect of Nez Perce history for which detailed information can be obtained from almost no other source.

It ought not to be discarded, but it does not necessarily have to be preserved in its current location below an underpass. It has been a museum display at Spalding prior to 1965. During that time, a lot of fanciful embellishment distorted this cabin's story. (Because of her exceptional talent for providing highly imaginative information concerning local museum artifacts and structures, nothing credited to Mrs. Joseph Evans can be accepted as factual without convincing independent corroboration.) Poor Coyote's association with this cabin, for which Jeanette Wilson--one of his relatives by marriage--identifies him as builder, has local historical as well as Nez Perce ethnographic interest.

Some alternate suggestions for origins of this cabin are available. Sam Watters regards it as built and inhabited by an Anglo trapper before Poor Coyote (or perhaps another Nez Perce occupant) took over. He prefers an original Clearwater site not

far above Coyote Gulch closer to its present park location. Other informants might be induced to provide additional variations, all of which could be subject to ethnological evaluation and analysis. A limited amount of historical documentation, most likely associated with Joe Evans' activities, might also turn up, although thorough research most likely would provide marginal results at best.

The log building known as Poor Coyote's Cabin may be the only log building surviving that is associated with the Nez Perce. The building's context in the Nez Perce and the white architecture of Idaho, however, is ambiguous. While no sources indicate a strong tradition among the Nez Perce of using horizontal log construction, the Nez Perce people do possess a word for "log building," and photographs taken by Jane Gay during the late nineteenth-century period of reservation land allotment depict Nez Perce people in front of or alongside log buildings of different sorts. The major studies, however, both of Nez Perce traditions and of the Nez Perce peoples' partial adoption of white culture, are silent on the problem of whether the Nez Perce made use of log construction. Jane Gay, Deward Walker, Allan Marshall, Sven Liljeblad, Herbert Spinden, Allen Slickpoo, David Chance, and Alvin Josephy do not deal with a log building tradition among the Nez Perce.

We do know that the Nez Perce were shown log building techniques as early as 1836 by the Spaldings at their first Lapwai Creek mission. Later, treaties between the Nez Perce and the United States called for houses to be built for the Nez Perce head chiefs, but those promises, which also involved the establishment of sawmills (suggesting frame construction), had not been honored by 1861, when B. F. Kendall, newly appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Washington Territory, visited the Nez Perce Reservation. An observer of 1871, Vinther Colyer, wrote that only two houses had been built for the Nez Perce at Lapwai, one for Chief Lawyer, who told Colyer that there were Nez Perce who would prefer to live in log or frame houses, were they shown how to construct them. During her travels around the Nez Perce Reservation during 1889-92, Jane Gay wrote about the reuse of "six heavy logs from the mill where they had lain for years, waiting to be cut by the Government miller into boards for the Indians' use in building their little cabins," (page 101) apparently referring to some kind of frame construction. The logs were being reused for a frame-constructed Presbyterian Church building. An acute observer of domestic details, Gay does refer to at least one frame house built by a Nez Perce family and several other "board cabins." Nowhere does she write about horizontal log construction by or for the Nez Perce.

The current surveys on Nez Perce Reservation lands, on National Forest lands, and on private lands in the four-county area around Coyote Gulch (Latah, Lewis, Clearwater, and Nez Perce counties) have turned up no examples of Nez Perce-associated log

buildings. Those log buildings that have been noted are white miners' or homesteaders' houses and outbuildings located in upper elevations, where timber sale surveys have been conducted and where twentieth century development has disturbed fewer late nineteenth-century sites than is the case in the river valleys. The Nez Perce planner for cultural resources and anthropologists familiar with reservation and surrounding lands report never having encountered a Nez Perce log building, although David Chance reports having heard of at least one extant log building and he thinks that more may survive in unsurveyed areas. There is also the possibility that log buildings covered with clapboards exist in the areas surveyed and have been recognized only as frame buildings. A construction that does occur in Idaho, the clapboard-sided log building is a very different construction from that of Poor Coyote's Cabin. Allen Slickpoo, presenting Nez Perce culture from his people's point of view depicts the typical home of the Nez Perce who adopted white men's ways as a frame building, shown pictured in his We, The Nez Perces.

Given current survey data and current knowledge of Nez Perce and white building traditions, then, what is the context for the building known as Poor Coyote's Cabin? The sole source for the Nez Perce context is the Jane Gay Photograph Collection. In that collection eight photographs depict log buildings in association with Nez Perce people. Five of the photographs show buildings similar in construction to Poor Coyote's Cabin. One is an outbuilding, one is identified as Nine Pipes' house, and of the remaining three, two are probably dwellings. These five buildings share several features in common: the use of round or minimally shaped logs, a projection of the logs beyond the corner notch, round or square corner timbering, a gable roof supported by log purlins parallel to a log ridgepole, and log gables. Two of the buildings, like Poor Coyote's Cabin, have gable fronts, one of them Nine Pipes' house and one an outbuilding. The Gay collection also includes three hewn-log buildings, all of them apparently dwellings. These buildings are characterized by a more laborious log construction tradition that involves cutting log ends flush with the corner timbering and using dovetailed or square notches. These buildings also exhibit a purlin roof structure. While the evidence of the Gay collection is suggestive that Poor Coyote's Cabin has some construction features found elsewhere in buildings on the Nez Perce lands of 1889-92, the small number of photographs depicting log buildings is an insufficient sample on which to base any general conclusions about Nez Perce use of horizontal log construction.

Within the context of white log buildings, however, Poor Coyote's Cabin is similar to buildings found all over Idaho. Clearly, even if the building was erected by Poor Coyote, its construction represents a complete borrowing from white culture.

In the four-county area around Coyote Gulch, 47 log buildings

have been found in Latah County, none in Lewis County, 10 in Nez Perce County, and 62 in Clearwater County. Located primarily in upper elevations, the buildings surveyed chiefly represent the round-log tradition described above.

A log building tradition among the Nez Perce is not entirely unlikely. The Nez Perce, who adopted many other cultural artifacts from then white trappers, settlers, and missionaries, easily could have, like the Colville Valley peoples to the northwest, adopted the log building. Our current evidence suggests that if the log building was used by the Nez Perce, it was a transitional form between the use of native longhouses, tipis, and pithouses, and the use of frame construction beginning in the early twentieth century.

Whether of Anglo or Nez Perce origin, Poor Coyote's Cabin should be regarded as a fairly typical source for regional ethnic and social history. As such, it represents a valuable resource that should not be overlooked because of partial impairment. In any event, physical documentation of cabins of Poor Coyote's era normally is rare and somewhat deteriorated at best. Most other structures surviving in this region represent a later era of cultural history, and practically all of them have a very different environment. Little or no evidence at all of this phase of social history can be adduced unless allowance is made for less than perfect examples for investigation and analysis. Historians generally are reluctant to discard their documentation after an initial study, and often discount or disregard reports from which evidence has not been preserved. That consideration remains part of any plausible context for a responsible management and disposal arrangement. In any event, its usefulness for regional vernacular architectural history and in Nez Perce ethnography indicates that it either should be displayed eventually on another, more appropriate site (a move requiring disassembly, which would enable a more accurate reassembly there), or that it should be preserved in an historic archaeological collection of important cultural materials under appropriate curatorial conditions.

Aside from having regional value as an example of log construction, Poor Coyote's Cabin survived for as much as a century or so in an especially important locality. As an ancient Nez Perce activity center and their primary early missionary site, Lapwai and vicinity is well known for historic and ethnological importance. (A great deal of information is readily available concerning this aspect of local cultural history.) Log structures in this area take on added significance in social history on that account. An additional function for Poor Coyote's Cabin comes from its importance in local museum and park history there prior to 1965. This aspect of state cultural history relates to one of Idaho's earlier state park developments, and should not be ignored.

Sources of information for historical and architectural context:

- Idaho State Historic Sites Inventory. Idaho State Historical Society (hereafter ISHS).
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- Jane Gay Photograph Collection. ISHS.
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- Gay, Jane E. With the Nez Perce. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981.
- Slickpoo, Allen P., Sr. We, The Nez Perce. Nez Perce Tribe of Idaho, 1973.
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- Liljeblad, Sven. The Idaho Indians in Transition, 1805-1960. Idaho State University Museum, 1972.
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- Chance, David. Influences of the Hudson's Bay Co. on the Native Cultures of Colville District. Northwest. Northwest Anthropological Research Notes, 7, 2. Moscow: 1973.
- Chance, David. "Archaeological Reconnaissance of Tibmer Sales Tracts..." August, 1981. On file at Idaho State Historic Preservation Office, Archaeology.
- Telephone conversations with Haruo Aoki, David Chance, Jim

Lawyer, Rick Sprague.

3. Architectural description: This structure does not sit on a foundation. A set of log skids with braces carries the building.

The logs of the cabin exhibit a quaint inconsistency in character. Some are heavily hewn, almost squared. Others are slightly hewn. Those closest to the ground are de-barked only. On close visual inspection, faint numerals can be seen painted on the logs, lower value at the bottom of the structure, proceeding higher in sequence up through the gable. Numbers are missing on one or two sill logs and the spandrels. The logs without numbers show no sign of hewing. The chinking between the logs is a soft lime mortar with insets of highly colored stone, up to 2" in diameter. The roof is a purlin system with direct gable bearing.

Over the purlins is a layer of 1" x 12" sheathing boards running perpendicular, covered with a layer of tar paper, and a surface of 30" cedar barn shakes. On the underneath side of the roof, 2" blocking between purlins allows cedar shakes to be nailed. These are painted a light color. four collar beams (one is missing) cross the structure parallel to the gables at plate height. The interior walls are finished with cedar shakes over corrugated cardboard nailed to the logs with wire nails.

It appears almost certain that at least the sill logs and some of the lower wall logs have been replaced. These clean peeled logs contrast readily with the weathered, raised-grain logs of the rest of the cabin. Lack of any numbers strongly suggests that they were installed during cabin reconstruction. The numbers obviously indicate that the building was dismantled for moving. During dismantling and reconstruction, various materials are certain to be lost. Chinking, sill logs, and roof covering usually do not survive, essentially from impracticality, deterioration, and, too often, expediency. Chinking cannot be recovered due to its physical nature. Roofing material is subject to early deterioration in an unmaintained log structure due to its role as prime moisture protection. Lying next to the ground (and often in or on it) sill and spandrel logs normally exhibit accelerated deterioration. In examination of the present roof, all members above the purlins (shakes, sheathing, and tar paper) are attached with wire nails. A working transition date of 1890 to 1895 can be established for cut nails (often called square) to wire nails for this area of Idaho. The wood blocking between the purlins on the inside, plus the nails of the interior shakes indicates work probably done after 1895. If a date of 1880 is taken for original construction, the present roof fabric appears non-original. Secondary evidence would suggest the chinking is also not original. the use of large stone in the chinking is not apparent in any of Jane Gay's photographs of log buildings. Its only other identified use was on the Agency Log Building after 1930. No readily apparent numbering sequence can be located on the purlins or ridge pole from the exterior ends,

which are painted over on the inside. They evidently are more recent. Only one other area of the structure appears to be original. The casings of the openings are secured with cut nails, which could date from the 1880's period. The current windows are modern.

Based solely on a visual inspection of the structure, only the upper wall logs, gable logs, and window casings appear compatible with a construction date of 1880. The sill logs, roof covering, window sash, chinking, interior surface, and probably the purlins doubtless represent later additions and alterations.

4. Historic significance: Representing a transitional stage in Nez Perce acculturation, log cabins used by members of treaty bands document a significant aspect of nineteenth century development. Nez Perce Indians had enough exposure to log cabins to justify a special name for them in their language, and an unidentified number of treaty Indians used them as dwellings. Nine Pipes, who had a cabin, was a prominent treaty Indian, and this kind of acculturation may have been more typical of Nez Perce people who accommodated more flexibly to white settlement and tradition. As typical of non-Indian cabins in that part of North Idaho, this structure is important for indicating how Nez Perce adaption to white contact proceeded. In any event, structural elements and materials from this cabin should not be discarded because of their documentary and informational value. A National Register nomination may be inappropriate while Poor Coyote's Cabin is parked under an overpass, although its informational value as documentation may be as good or better there than anywhere else. In that event, it might be considered for National Register recognition regardless of its less than usual physical setting. A great deal of progress will be made in analysis and interpretation of physical documentation of material culture, and Poor Coyote's Cabin will provide an excellent problem for future investigation with new technology that can furnish information currently unavailable.