

HOUSEPITS ON THE MIDDLE FORK OF THE SALMON RIVER

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After making several trips down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in the 1970's, Dr. Max G. Pavesic (1978) wrote,

“One of the outstanding archaeological features of the Middle Fork is the presence of Plateau-like house depressions, referred to as “house-pits” in archaeological parlance. The original construction of the houses consisted of a pit excavated from one to four [feet] below the surface of the ground and covered with a pole frame structure overlaid with mats or sod. Today, the surface configuration is one of circular or oval depressions varying from three to seven meters in diameter. At a few localities, such as the upper terrace at Sheepeater Hotsprings (10-VY-79) and White's Creek camp (10-CR-576), the depressions remain unusually deep... the depressions could record the presence of sweat lodges, storage pits [caches], earth ovens, menstrual huts... Other features such as modern mining activity and fallen trees can also be mistaken for houses by the uninitiated.”

Pavesic was following in the footsteps of one of Idaho's pioneer archaeologist Earl H. Swanson Jr. Swanson had surveyed the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in 1958 locating cultural features along the river recording sites in the area between Indian Creek and the mouth of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Swanson would later (1972) write:

“Along the Middle Fork of the Salmon River are numerous prehistoric camps and villages occupied by people whose relations are uncertain. Many of these [sites] occur in overhangs and are marked by paintings on cliff walls. Others are marked by round rings of stones which once weighed down the edges of tipis. Still others are marked by circular depressions in the ground, some of them up to 25-30 feet in diameter. One or more of these features may occur together in a single location and some sites have 30 or more prehistoric dwellings.”

“In the 19th century the valley of the Middle Fork was occupied by mountain sheep eater Indians called “Tukudeka,” one of a series of groups in eastern Idaho who together formed the Northern Shoshoni. The “Tukudeka” did not use the horse but did hunt big game such as mountain sheep, fished for salmon and steelhead, traveled to Camas Prairie each spring to harvest camas and other roots. The “Tukudeka” may have numbered 600 people throughout their territory which extended beyond the immediate drainage of the Middle Fork. In historic times they used buffalo hide tipis but in earlier times may have used grass houses. These houses of rye grass were set over shallow depressions...”

“Although none of these sites is as it was when native people lived along the Middle Fork, most are in excellent condition for study and interpretation. In a few places some of the camps look as if the ancient inhabitants left only yesterday. In others the toll of increasing travelers can be seen... Tipi rings [stones] have been collected to build modern fireplaces so that in one locality 32 such rock rings have disappeared all together. Some paintings have been covered by carbon from smoke of modern camp fires and some have been deliberately chipped away by collectors. The Middle Fork is important to future generations interested in man’s past because there is an excellent opportunity to preserve the whole record of man in his natural setting. This is a rare chance for the Forest Service, the archaeologist, the [Wilderness] traveler, and the citizen who may never see the valley to cooperate in the management of a fragile, finite resource.”



YOUR ROLE IN PROTECTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Wilderness Archaeologists are currently working to preserve, protect and understand the prehistory of the ancient peoples who lived in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. As this prehistory is discovered and understood, they will share it with the public through educational monographs and other publications. You can help in this effort by leaving artifacts where they lie, and informing Forest Service Wilderness managers of your discovery.

Take pride in our American heritage.

Take nothing but photographs.