

“That night, after the moon had got down....”

**Lt. Catley's 1879 Affair on Vinegar Hill
Payette National Forest
Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness
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Deep in the backcountry of central Idaho, in today's Frank Church Wilderness, lies a non-descript, grass-covered ridge. Along this ridgeline, which runs in a south to north direction, is a point marked on the map as Vinegar Hill. To the east of the ridge, and parallel to it, runs Cabin Creek, to the west, Cave Creek, and at the south end of the ridge, the storied Big Creek.

Although the ridge has been quiet with only the wind and elk along it for well over a century, in July of 1879, it was the scene of an encounter between two cultures. This incident, the Battle of Vinegar Hill, was between Lieutenant Henry Catley's 2nd. Mounted Infantry of the United States Army, and a handful of Sheepeater Indians defending their homeland and last stronghold.

Lieutenant Catley, along with Lieutenants E. K. Webster and W.C. Muhlenberg, led forty-eight soldiers from Fort Howard, in Grangeville, Idaho, south and east across the Salmon River and Chamberlain Basin to Big Creek, as part of a multi-pronged plan to capture the Sheepeaters and forcibly place them onto a reservation. Descending Big Creek on July 29th, Catley and his men reached the large, open flat at the mouth of Cabin Creek, from which they descended into the canyon below.



After about two miles, at a narrow, rocky place later known as the "First Crossing," they encountered a fusillade of bullets from Indians concealed in the rocks. Two troopers were wounded, and the soldiers retreated back to the open flat. Regrouping from this rout, Catley chose to camp for the evening at Cabin Creek, a half-mile away. After a tense, but quiet night, the following morning the fateful decision was made to abandon the field and return to camp Howard. Catley picked the ridgeline, "which was alongside our camp to the north," according to Lieutenant Muhlenberg, hoping it was a good escape route to Cold Meadows.



Iron pot from Vinegar Hill

As they moved up the ridge, soldiers observed an Indian riding a horse into their abandoned campsite, and a few shots were fired downwards. Proceeding upward, small groups of troopers under Lieutenant Muhlenberg would move forward, hold a point and provide cover for their comrades, who would then come forward. In this manner, they continued until some Sheepeaters, having ridden up Cabin Creek and the side of the ridge, cut them off.

While riding across a saddle to the next promontory, a shot was fired at scout Dave Monroe, riding just ahead of Catley. Panicked, Catley ordered the men to fall back to the previous point, where they took positions as best they could, in the rocks and behind their baggage. Muhlenberg, though, believed only one Indian was ahead of them at this point.

Trapped here, the men exchanged at least four shots with the Sheepeaters, who, according to Muhlenberg, fired only five shots in return. Subsequently, the Indians lit fires to try to burn the command off the hilltop. Backfires, lit by Sgt. John Sullivan and some of his men, and a change in the wind, saved the soldiers from the ascending flames. Sitting out the rest of the hot afternoon, the soldiers stayed on the hill, and, according to legend, had only vinegar to drink.

During the night, it was decided to abandon the bulk of the equipment and provisions and flee off the ridge to the west. Around 2:00 a.m., and "...after the moon had got down," according to Catley, the soldiers muffled the mule bells and began the steep descent into Cave Creek, reaching the bottom at daybreak, losing sixteen pack mules in the dark. From here, they ascended the ridge to the west and successfully followed the ridgelines north to Cold Meadows.

On their way out of the wilderness, Catley's command was intercepted, combined with Lieutenant Albert Forse's twenty-five men, and turned back to Big Creek to rejoin the campaign.

Although the Sheepeaters took what they wanted of the soldier's gear, much was left on what became known as Vinegar Hill. Over the years, casual visitors to the ridge top carried away items such as boots, saddlebags, and even a few rifles. Some of these items were later lost in a house fire, and some are held in private hands to this day, unavailable for public viewing. As the years went by, remnants of the equipment faded from the hilltop, and even the location was lost in time. By the 1980's it was generally believed that physical evidence of the soldiers no longer existed, and that locating the Vinegar Hill site was no longer possible.

Personally, for many years, I had an interest in the Sheepeater War from boating the nearby Middle Fork of the Salmon River, but knew only what was written in the river guidebook. However, in the spring of 2009, I volunteered for the Payette National Forest Heritage Program, headed by archaeologist Larry Kingsbury. Kingsbury was enthusiastic, and our goal was to search the Vinegar Hill Ridge in an attempt to find the precise location of the 1879 skirmish.

That May, I flew into Cabin Creek to begin the search. Fortunately, a wildfire had burned over parts of the ridge the previous summer, causing fresh erosion down several gullies. It was while ascending one of these gullies, that I came upon part of a broken, three-legged iron pot. Searching further up the slope, I was able to recover several more pieces.

With confirmation of the iron pot's age from Kingsbury, I returned the following March, camping for ten days at the Cabin Creek Airstrip. With my two dogs for company, I began a more detailed examination of the ridge. Initially, nothing was found on Vinegar Hill. Frustrated, I reread the soldier accounts and moved the search to another area.

Soon, on a semi-frozen slope, molten glass fragments, an iron button, and square nails were discovered. They were exciting, but not conclusive evidence of the soldiers. Moving to a nearby, sun-exposed area, I discovered the end of a cartridge case protruding out of the gravelly soil. I picked it up, recognizing immediately what it was - an unfired 45-



Big Creek from Vinegar Hill Ridge

70 military cartridge. Further searching resulted in the recovery of ten cartridges, four having been fired.

Although most artifacts from the soldiers had been removed years ago, enough remained to conclusively mark the location of the Vinegar Hill engagement. Concerned about future visitation, I returned later to carefully and systematically cover the skirmish site a second time, making sure all remaining artifacts were recovered. Today, the Vinegar Hill artifacts are in the care of the Payette National Forest Heritage Program, located at the Supervisor's Office in McCall, Idaho.