

The Big Creek Cannon: Fact or Legend?

1879 Sheepeater War

Payette National Forest Heritage Program

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After the close of the Sheepeater War in the fall of 1879, Indian hostilities ceased, and the U.S. soldiers trailed out of the vast Idaho wilderness. With time, signs of the trails, camps, and skirmish sites returned to nature, so that today evidence is difficult to find, and then only to the hardy wilderness explorer. Much of the scene of this conflict lies within the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, with the only two skirmish sites located in the Big Creek drainage, a tributary of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

For many years rumors and stories have persisted concerning a cannon, more specifically a mountain howitzer, abandoned in the field by the soldiers. The fact that the mountain howitzer could be disassembled and carried by mules, and was available to soldiers at the time, leads to interesting speculation as to the validity of these tales.



Cannon barrel

Carriage

Ammunition

Over the years stories have been told of people finding the lost cannon, refusing to divulge its location, and taking it to the grave with them. One story concerns two brothers who saw the gun, took a photograph of it (which has since disappeared), and told the tale late in life calling it the "Big Creek Cannon." Another rumor has hunters along Big Creek near Taylor Ranch getting lost and stumbling upon the gun, but after getting back to camp being unable to relocate it. Still more rumors of a cannon lying in a meadow in the headwaters of

Disappointment Creek to the north. Another story that there were actually two cannons rather than one. Still another rumor of a cave discovered by a packer in the 1930's which contained crates of rifles and the cannon's carriage. Usually these stories are secondhand, and sometimes third hand. Some stories, obviously false, place the cannon far from where the soldiers traveled.

Is there any evidence that these stories have any foundation in reality? First of all, what do the soldier's diaries from the campaign have to say concerning a cannon? Do any of these accounts mention anything about a mountain howitzer in the possession of the troops? An examination of the writings of the overall field commander Captain Reuben F. Bernard; Lieutenant's W.C. Brown, A.G. Forse, W.C. Muhlenberg, and Henry Catley; Private Edgar Hoffner, and Corporal C.B. Hardin, all participants, should provide clues to this possibility.

Unfortunately for the cannon stories, none of these men ever mention a cannon in the possession of any body of troops in the campaign. In fact there are numerous times when such mention would be appropriate, especially of an item as prestigious as a howitzer, yet nothing is said. Of the troops, they generally were in three main groups, Bernard's 1st Cavalry, Farrow's Umatilla Scouts, and Catley's 2nd Mounted Infantry.

Lt. William Carey Brown, who accompanied Lt. Farrow, wrote one of the most thorough accounts of the campaign (Brown 1879). Brown makes no mention of a cannon, and it is unlikely that Farrow's scouts would be so equipped considering the mobility required of this group, and the fact that most of their members were Native Americans. Farrow had twenty Umatilla Indian scouts along with seven enlisted men, four packers, and twenty pack animals (Brown 1926:29).

Private Edgar Hoffner in Bernard's command wrote an extensive diary, full of details about equipment and life during the campaign (Hoffner 1879). Hoffner stated that when the troops left the Boise Barracks they had thirty pack mules, which carried "blankets, clothing, rations, and ammunition." (Hoffner 1879:1) Again no mention of a cannon is made. Later in Hoffner's diary he mentions other items carried by the soldiers such as blankets, boxes of hardtack, tents, horseshoes, ammunition, picks and shovels, a medicine chest, and horseshoe nails (Hoffner 1879:2,3,5,8,9,14). Why did something as notable as a cannon not catch Hoffner's attention?

While along the Middle Fork numerous written accounts describe pack animals having to jump high logs over the trail (Hoffner 1879:9), mules swimming the river (Hoffner 1879:9), and bridging streams swollen by spring runoff (Hoffner 1879:5,8,14). One of these streams, Loon Creek, was bridged by cutting and falling trees across the water (Hoffner 1879:8, Bernard 1879:18). The horses could swim the creek but the heavily laden mules could not, so the soldiers carried the gear and provisions across the logs. It should have been noteworthy if a heavy cannon was carried across logs bridging raging waters.

Lieutenant Catley's command, after being ambushed on July 29th in Big Creek, retreated to what later became known as Vinegar Hill. When he fled in the middle of the night, much equipment (Catley 1879:158, Brown 1879:3, Lewis 1925:3) was abandoned and later found by casual visitors to the hill in the early 20th century (Gillihan 2010, Martin 1924).

When the Vinegar Hill site was rediscovered in March of 2010, further items abandoned by Catley's forces were recovered (Koeppen 2010). None of these items are connected to, or provide evidence of a mountain howitzer. In contrast, during investigations into the 1874 Red River War in Texas, archaeologists found primers, priming wire, and lead shot associated with a cannon present in the battle (Cruse 2008:204-205).

During the Vinegar Hill, Soldier Bar, and Big Creek surveys (Koeppen 2010), extensive searches were made of likely areas for the cannon to be hidden, all with negative results. In addition, although numerous artifacts were discovered at Soldier Bar related to the Sheepeater Campaign, none of them as at Vinegar Hill provided clues of a cannon being present. Since some of the cannon stories feature a gun placed in a cave or rock shelter, rocky areas on Vinegar Hill, Soldier Bar, and between Taylor Ranch and Soldier Bar were examined during the surveys.

After considering the lack of evidence provided by the soldier's accounts written by Bernard, Hoffner, Brown, Catley, Muhlenburg, Forse, Lewis, and Hardin, and from field investigations, it is the author's opinion that it is unlikely that the soldiers possessed a cannon during the campaign of 1879. So until such a time that more evidence comes to light, the stories of the "Big Creek Cannon," while tantalizing, must be considered only legends.



Photo courtesy of the National Park Service

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