

"We ascended a precipitous hill"

Soldier Bar and the Sheepeater War
Payette National Forest
Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness
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 By Michael H. Koeppen

Flowing eastward through the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, in Idaho's Payette National Forest, is Big Creek, a small river that empties into the Middle Fork of the Salmon. Although the canyon of Big Creek is quiet today, during the late Pleistocene, approximately seventeen thousand years ago, a massive landslide broke away from high on its south side. As the slide roared across Big Creek, its momentum carried it far up the north side of the canyon, damming the creek to a height of one thousand feet. A large lake resulted, which was to last six thousand years.

Eventually, the lake level reached the top of the natural dam and water began flowing over the debris. Over the next several thousand years, the channeling of the water caused the formation of several outwash spillways as Big Creek cut down to its original bed. One of these features, about five hundred feet above Big Creek on the south side, is the grassy bench known as Soldier Bar.

Located deep in the wilderness, access to Soldier Bar can be gained by using its rough backcountry airstrip, or a steep trail ascending from Big Creek. The trail, however, can only be used during low water, since there is no bridge across Big Creek at Soldier Bar. Soldier Bar itself is waterless, with the soil thin and hard. However, at the east end, just below the main level of the bar, is a spring that generally flows during years with normal precipitation.



The name, Soldier Bar, was derived from an encounter here between the United States Army and Sheepeater Indians (Northern Shoshone) during August of 1879. The army's intent was to capture and remove the Sheepeaters from the wilderness, placing them on a reservation. Leading up to this incident, a few weeks earlier and about eight miles upstream from Soldier Bar, Lieutenant Henry Catley and his 2nd Mounted Infantry were routed by a Sheepeater ambush along Big Creek. Retreating to Vinegar Hill, Catley abandoned most of his equipment before fleeing under the cover of darkness. After being intercepted by other army units, Catley was turned around, and with various other commands, again descended Big Creek in search of the Sheepeaters. This united command included Captain Reuben Bernard, 1st Cavalry, Lieutenant Albert Forse, 1st Cavalry, Lieutenant Catley's 2nd Mounted Infantry, and Lieutenant Edward Farrow's Umatilla scouts, totaling around one hundred and sixty men, which were accompanied by several hundred horses and mules.

On August 19th, several miles above Soldier Bar, Farrow's Indian scouts encountered some Sheepeaters and exchanged gunfire. As the Sheepeaters fled, the scouts pursued them to Soldier Bar, where the Indians fled up the mountainside. The scouts discovered the Sheepeater village near the spring, consisting of ten wickiups. Searching the immediate area around the camp, they located several caches hidden in the rocks above the spring, including much of what the Sheepeaters captured at Vinegar Hill.

While the village was being ransacked, Bernard's main command arrived at the bar. Immediately, Farrow and his scouts departed, pursuing the Sheepeaters up the mountain to the south. After making camp at the bar, Bernard's soldiers burned the village, along with the caches of provisions left by the Indians.

The following morning, on August 20th, Bernard and Forse followed Farrow up the mountain toward what is now known as Eagan Point, while Catley started on the back trail to the South Fork Salmon for supplies. Meanwhile, the two pack trains were left at the bar with a small contingent of guards, seven per train, while the packers finished loading the mules.

Shortly, at 7:30 AM, a number of Sheepeaters, concealed in the rocks above camp, opened fire on the packers and guards. In the ensuing confusion, some troopers scrambled over the embankment towards Big Creek, and some moved towards the hillside, taking cover in the trees and rocks. The soldiers returned the fire, and several of Bernard's men moved to outflank the Indians. Finding themselves in jeopardy, the Indians withdrew, leaving the soldiers on the bar. One of Catley's guards, Pvt. Harry Eagan, Company "C", was shot through both thighs.

In the meantime, hearing the gunfire below, Bernard and Forse's troops descended as quickly as they could back to the camp, with Catley returning from Big Creek. Arriving at the bar, the surgeon, Dr. Pring, operated on Eagan in an attempt to save his life. After putting Eagan out with chloroform, Pring amputated his leg. But, this was to no avail, as Eagan expired a few minutes later at 11:00 AM. They rolled Eagan in a blanket and buried him where the Eagan Monument, erected in 1925, is today. After Catley's group departed around 2:00 PM, the rest of the troops spaced themselves at ten foot intervals in a skirmish

line, prepared for more combat. That night, according to Forse, Indian fires were seen on the mountain and bench above the bar, but the night passed without incident.

The next morning, August 21st, at 6:30 AM, Bernard and Forse again moved out, with their destination being the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Once they departed, quiet again came over the bar, disturbed only briefly when Farrow and Forse, returning from the Middle Fork, passed on their return up Big Creek.



45-70 and 45 Schofield military cartridges from the Soldier Bar skirmish site

As at Vinegar Hill upstream, as the years passed, evidence left by the soldiers vanished from Soldier Bar. Visitors, such as the Taylors who lived upstream at Pioneer Creek, carried off their discoveries. Unfortunately, they did not document the artifacts and over time, with the exception of one canteen, they all disappeared.

Coordinating with and working under the guidance of Forest Archaeologist Larry Kingsbury, I flew to Soldier Bar on September 7, 2010, to begin a systematic and thorough search of the bar. According to the various soldier diaries and accounts, the bar was the scene of the encampments and skirmish, but the actual sites had never been located and documented. My primary assignment was to locate artifacts that could be indisputably

connected to the Sheepeater War, and, as a result, verify the location of the soldier camp and skirmish.

Over the next nine days, I marked off sections of the bar and carefully searched for evidence of the soldier's presence. I quickly discovered that, over the years, the bar had been contaminated with the debris of more recent visitors, and I recovered many rifle casings and assorted "junk" left by hunters, pilots, and packers.

Eventually, though, my fortunes changed when I discovered an old military, Benet-primed, 45-70 rifle cartridge casing. The search area was now narrowed, and over the next several days, I recovered six more 45-70 casings, three loaded 45-70 cartridges, and a 45 Schofield revolver cartridge, also Benet-primed, which was the precursor to the more modern Berdan and Boxer priming systems. A number of the fired casings were clustered together, indicating a firing position during the skirmish. Also, in that spot, a "Model 1859" brass cavalry spur was found, inches from a 45-70 casing.

Distributed throughout the artifact cartridge area were numerous old shoeing nails, worn and broken horse and mule shoes, square nails, and other evidence of farriers at work. Since the soldier accounts clearly indicate the skirmish site and camp were at the same place, the fired casings and spur provided the evidence necessary to definitively mark the location.

Today, except during hunting season and the occasional airplane, Soldier Bar is as windswept, desolate, and rattlesnake infested as in 1879. At the east end of the bar, the Eagan Monument still stands with its white marble tombstone, marking the soldier's passing in 1879. In a sense, the lonely monument marks not only Private Eagan's gravesite, but also the end of the Sheepeater, or Tukudeka culture, a culture that existed from time beyond memory in the canyons of central Idaho.

All of the artifacts recovered from Soldier Bar are now entrusted to the Heritage Program at the Payette National Forest Supervisor's Office in McCall, Idaho.



**Model 1859 Brass Cavalry Spur with Iron Rowel
Penny for Scale**