

“Cougar Dave” Lewis and The Idaho Primitive Area

By Pat Cary Peek

Pat Cary Peek is author of the book One Winter in the Wilderness, published by the University of Idaho Press (1-800-847-7377) in 1998. The book was the Idaho Book of the Year; the second edition has recently been published in paperback. This excerpt is from her second unpublished book, Cougar Dave, Mountain Man of Idaho.

How did one little old man, a miner, hunter and blacksmith, influence the future of the State of Idaho? David Lewis was a loner, some would say recluse, who lived near the Middle Fork of the Salmon River from about 1910 until his death in 1936. He trusted his dogs and his horses more than people, yet he loved children and became fast friends with some of the movers and shakers on the Idaho scene in the 1920's.

He had a passion for the rugged Salmon Mountains and shared this passion with the men who helped shape Idaho. It was around his fire that the idea of the Idaho Primitive Area was explored and it eventually bloomed into what is now the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. At 3,678 square miles it's the largest intact wilderness in the lower forty-eight states, larger than Delaware or Rhode Island.

“Uncle Dave” as some called him, was a wiry man with mutton chop whiskers and piercing blue eyes. He was a reader who subscribed to *National Geographic* and cut out poems to paste in his scrapbook. He also seldom bathed. In September, 1908, he described himself on an application for a fish and game license as light complexioned, with gray hair, blue eyes, five feet nine inches tall and weighing one hundred thirty pounds. He said he was sixty three years of age. He was actually fifty-three at the time, but that's another story.

He first became acquainted with the Big Creek area, which is a major tributary to the Middle Fork of the Salmon, in 1879 when he was hired as a civilian packer during the Sheepeater War. After the war he mined for gold, did some blacksmithing and worked on a horse ranch. He was a forest guard for a time and worked as a bounty hunter. Wherever he roamed, his heart was always in the wild country and he sided with the animals. He is quoted as saying “Anyone who claims he's been et by a wolf or a lion is a liar!”

Lewis eventually settled on a piece of land along Big Creek seven miles from the Middle Fork of the Salmon on what is now the University of Idaho Taylor Ranch Field Station. He made his living hunting cougar and trapping small game such as mink, red fox and bobcat for their fur and the bounty.

If David Lewis had been a true recluse his name and his story would have long ago been lost in the sagebrush and rocks of central Idaho. He decided, however, to start a guide-outfitting business in the early twenties and in doing so he left an important mark on Idaho and the country.

His guiding business flourished. He had just the right combination of skills, temperament and crusty individualism that big game hunters from Idaho as well as from states as far away as Minnesota, Illinois and New York loved. He was a colorful character who never let truth stand in the way of a good story. He told tales of his exploits in the Civil War and daring Indian raids, but he never divulged his real background and never mentioned his family. The hunters who came over a hundred miles by pack train into the mountains and stayed for weeks at a time ate his stories up with the same gusto as they ate their beans.

Across the country ideas of conservation and natural resource protection blew in with the winds of the new century. Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent sportsman and naturalist, advocated policies for preserving wild lands for future generations. The conservation movement expanded through the 1910's with leaders like Bob Marshall, Aldo Leopold, Arthur Carhart and others. National forests were established and the National Park Service Act was passed in 1916.

In Idaho, leaders and sportsmen were also thinking along those lines. An orchard farmer who lived along the border of Idaho and Washington, Frederick G. Ransom, advocated establishing a primitive area he called the Tukuarika Primitive Area after the Sheepeater Indians. He had broached the subject to Senator Borah and to Governor Clarence Baldrige but nothing was done.

David Lewis met Harry Shellworth during this time. Shellworth, from Boise, was an impressive man, a little less than six feet tall and of stocky build. He was known as "the Dean of Idaho Forestry" in later years. A timber executive with the Boise-Payette Lumber Company, he was an active Idaho Republican who never held public office but worked behind the scenes to advise at least three governors on matters of public land and forestry issues.



Lewis and Harry Shellworth at Lewis' homestead about 1926.

Shellworth, a strong outdoorsman with heavy jowls and a gruff demeanor, had been in the Klondike Gold Rush in 1896 and traveled the world with the U.S. Army Transport Service. He was an avid conservationist and sportsman who had a passion for hunting and horse packing into the wilderness. On one of his trips he met the little old mountain man and they became fast friends. To him, Lewis was the backcountry personified and Harry was responsible for bringing scores of influential outdoorsmen into the Idaho wilderness and to the door of Dave's little cabin. It was mostly due to Shellworth's friendship and promotion that Lewis' fame spread.

It was also probably through Harry that David joined the American Forestry Association, an organization still alive today that is a "citizens conservation organization working to advance the intelligent management and use of forests, soil, water, wildlife and all other natural resources." They said in a letter to him dated October 26, 1926:

"Our forestry educational work is growing by leaps and bounds, particularly in the juvenile field. More and more material is being made available for the public schools, the boy and girl camps, etc."

By now Dave was famous throughout Idaho and among big game hunters across the nation. Dozens of stories and articles appeared in magazines and newspapers from the *Boise Statesman* to the *Denver Post* and the *New York Times*.

The April 17, 1927 *Sunday Oregonian* in Portland, Oregon, had an article inviting President Coolidge to come to "The Matterhorn of America" in the Sawtooth Mountains and meet Dave Lewis:

Idaho claims here the last big natural fastness of the nation, the most rugged of the rugged. Here she has lakes literally alive with cutthroats, rainbows, Dolly Varden and brook trout – deer, elk, bear, goats and mountain sheep that have never seen man ... In this vicinity Shellworth would have the president meet strange characters. There would be old Uncle Dave Lewis, now 85, who warred with Colonel Barnard against the Sheepeater Indians back in '79. Uncle Dave ranches a little, operates his traps in the winter, and takes his pay dirt from his placer mines in summer ...

The Idaho Statesman September 18, 1927 featured him in a long article titled "Old Trapper Says Warrens Getting Too crowded For Him" It said in part:

"Uncle" Dave Lewis, one of the picturesque characters still remaining in the state, made his first visit in 20 years to McCall last week for the purpose of proving up on his homestead on Big Creek beyond Warrens. Uncle Dave is 83 years of age and challenges anyone to excel him in mountain climbing. Incidentally, he is to act as guide for Judge J.E. Reynolds of Shreveport, La., who presides over the Louisiana state court of appeals, and Elmer D. Davies, attorney of Nashville, Tenn., in a big game hunt this week ... Uncle Dave confided to McCall friends that the country around Warrens is getting too crowded for him and he thinks some of moving to Alaska and taking the top of Mount McKinley.

The judge's hunting party came as planned and the hunt was a raging success. They had a fantastic experience in "the Matterhorn of America."

The *Nashville Banner* November 27, 1927, had a long article about the hunt. A photo with the piece showed Dave standing hatless with his rifle beside him along with one of his dogs. It read:

Eighty-three year old guide, Uncle Dave Lewis, who gets around like a sixteen-year-old. He has killed two hundred mountain lions and was recently commissioned as a predatory animal hunter by the state of Idaho. He says he is going to hunt seventeen more years and then retire.

Fall is a magical time of year in mountain country especially to the hunter and outdoorsman. Days get shorter, nights turn cold and frost etches each blade of grass with crystal. Aspen and cottonwood trees along the creeks blaze gold and yellow. Mountain mahogany leaves turn gradually to rust. With the first snows the deer and elk in high meadows gather and start to move down to the bottoms of the canyons. Bears stuff themselves with huckleberries and roots to prepare for their long sleep.

It was a busy fall for Lewis. In addition to the Judge Reynolds group, in November Shellworth came in. It was Harry's twentieth trip into the Middle Fork country and probably his most important, because the Governor of Idaho was one of his guests.

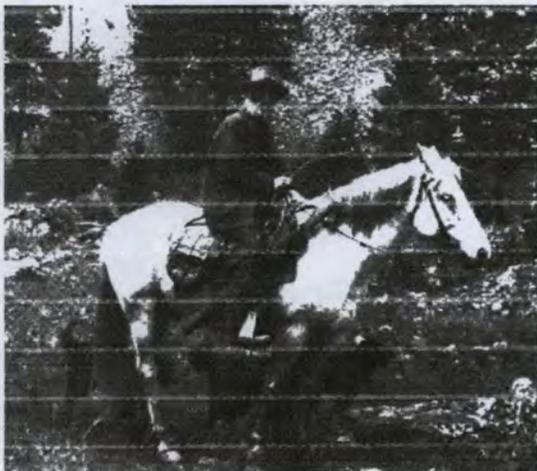
Governor H. Clarence Baldrige must have looked like a pear atop a rolling barrel on his horse as he and the others of his hunting party rode up to Dave's cabin. He sported a large cowboy hat, furry chaps and a holster with a pistol strapped around his ample middle. He looked a little like Teddy Roosevelt.

Dave met them as they dismounted and the wranglers took the horses to the corral.

Shellworth introduced him to the governor. Dave had the quiet dignity of a person who had lived his life on his own terms. He treated everyone the same and the Governor of the state was the same as one of the wranglers or any other man; the old man was friendly but not awed.

The party was an illustrious one. In addition to Governor Baldrige, others in the group were the General Manager of the Bunker Hill and Sullivan Mining company, Stanley A. Easton, Kellogg Idaho; District Forester R.H. Rutledge, Ogden, Utah; Deputy Game Warden, Al Laws, Cascade, Idaho; Jess Hawley, Boise; Boise photographer Ansgar Johnson; and Chester Stevens, McCall, along with Shellworth. The guides included Andy Casner, Billy Moore and "Dead Shot" Reed along with Dave.

The hunt was reported in *The Idaho Statesman* on November 7, 1927 and Ansgar Johnson's photographs appeared in *The New York Times* rotogravure picture section November 13, 1927. One picture, of Lewis with his dogs, was titled "A Famous Cougar Hunter of the West: Uncle Dave Lewis, 83



"Cougar Dave" on his 90th birthday.

years old, with 600 cougars to his credit, who lives alone and spends his winters on Big Creek, Idaho." The other, of the pack string with Governor Baldrige, was titled "The Long Long Trail in Idaho: Governor H.C. Baldrige rides in the Lead of a Hunting Party Among the Mountains of Idaho".

Bacon and eggs sizzled in a large skillet in the cook tent when the men assembled the next morning. A skiff of snow covered the ground and the temperature had dipped below freezing during the night. After breakfast the dudes were paired up with guides and plans for the day were made. The men split up to go in different directions depending on

the game they were after. Some headed down river toward the Middle Fork of the Salmon to hunt goats. Another group probably went to the high country across the creek in search of elk, and others spent the day hunting deer along the creek.

The company reassembled at camp each evening. The first group of hunters straggled in as the sun set over the distant mountains, others wouldn't find their way back until long after dark. After washing up they walked across the pasture to the main cook tent on the flat near David's cabin.

The large cook tent was the hub of activity. Outfitted with a tin box stove that had been packed in on the mules, it was the only warm spot in camp besides Dave's cabin. A table and benches made of rough boards had been hauled in and several lanterns provided a mellow light. The warmth and light drew the weary hunters like moths to a flame.

Stanley Easton had killed a six point buck that day and probably related the story with relish as he removed his gloves and warmed his hands by the stove. A former miner, he was a large imposing man who moved with an air of authority. They had bootleg whiskey even though the Volstead Act was still on the books, and tin cups of hooch were passed around as they shared the day's events. Soon Shellworth ducked in to the warm tent followed by Governor Baldrige and others.

The men nodded to the portly governor and probably offered him a drink, which he refused. Governor Baldrige, a religious man, never touched the stuff but he was a garrulous sort who loved the camaraderie of the hunting camp. His eyes surely sparkled with enthusiasm for the country and the wildlife he'd seen. Previous visitors had compared it to the Yellowstone country in its spectacular beauty and abundant animals. He must have agreed.

Whether it was the Governor or others who first broached the subject of preserving the area is lost in history, but we do know the idea was discussed. The men worried that the articles on David Lewis and the publicity about the fantastic wild country would bring hoards of people and eventually the land would be developed and spoiled.

That area along Big Creek is prime winter range for bighorn sheep, elk and deer and in the winter the herds mingle and travel along the trails in every direction. Each day the men rode over the high grassy slopes where they could see nothing but mountains for a hundred miles. Bighorn sheep scampered across the ridges, then stopped and stared as the pack strings passed. The hunters came upon mule deer grazing on wind-swept slopes and saw signs of the coyote, cougar and bobcat. They saw bears on their way to winter hibernation and herds of stately elk as they moved down the slopes to the crystal clear frigid river. In the river sleek otters splashed and dove for fish.

The pack strings were mere dots in that vast country, and steep mountains rose for thousands of feet above their heads. Above the jagged ridge tops of the snow-capped peaks, golden eagles soared. It was indeed a mountain paradise.

The stars were as brilliant as spotlights in the night sky as the men ate supper in the evenings. The subject of preservation wove itself in and out around the stories and descriptions of the hunt, the trail, and wild experiences with the mules, horses and wildlife. They talked about what it would take to preserve the region. They hashed over ideas and dreamed of the time that the country would be set aside as a game preserve or primitive area.

The spark that gained fuel around David's fire did not die, but like a coal carried from one small fire to a village, it spread. When the men returned to their offices across the state the concept that would become the Idaho Primitive Area and eventually the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness gained momentum.

Would this have happened if David Lewis hadn't introduced the world to the central Idaho wilderness? We will never know, but we do know he loved "his" sheep and he was concerned with preservation. In David Lewis' camp these men, all leaders in the extractive industries of Idaho, supported the idea of wild land set aside for the preservation of wildlife.

The Governor, Shellworth and District Forester Rutledge remembered their discussions and began the process that would eventually make the dream voiced around David's campfire a reality. As a consequence of their influence, as well as many others, in July 1929 a legal provision was in place through which the Forest Service could preserve wild lands.

The *Idaho Sunday Statesman* on December 28, 1930, printed a three-page article about the proposed primitive area. It said in part:

One of the main reasons for restricting development in the section is that not another place in the United States offers so great a variety of big game and in such great numbers. All kinds of

big game are represented – it is probably the outstanding hunters' paradise in the nation. The purpose (of the primitive area) is: To conserve primitive conditions of environment, habitation, subsistence and transportation for the enjoyment of those who cherish the early traditions and history of this country and desire to keep in some degree the traits, qualities, and characteristics upon which this nation was founded, and to afford unique opportunities for physical mental and spiritual recreation or regeneration.

A committee was appointed by the Governor to study the issue and draw up a plan. Harry Shellworth was chairman and the illustrious group included Cowles Andrus, father of future Idaho Governor Cecil Andrus and several other prominent Idaho businessmen. On March 17, 1931, the Idaho Primitive Area was born, and David Lewis, mountain man and loner but certainly not a recluse, lived to see it.

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