

UI Anthropologist Tracks Idaho's Shadowy People

by Jane Pritchett



Jim Akenson

Looking east toward Taylor Ranch and the Bighorn Crags in the distance.

caretaker of the ranch (by this time, Jess and Dorothy had begun spending their winters in Boise).

Jess now was in his late sixties, and to ensure a comfortable retirement for Dorothy and him, he reluctantly decided to sell Taylor Ranch. He listed the property with a Boise realtor.

"He had it sold twice," said Hornocker. "Both times he got the earnest money, but both buyers reneged."

Fortunate for the UI that they did and that Hornocker was on the scene. He proposed that Jess sell to the UI. "I thought, why shouldn't the university in the state with the largest wilderness area outside Alaska show an interest by purchasing wilderness for research," said Hornocker.

Hornocker had a broader vision, too. He saw in Taylor Ranch the possibility of what he called a wilderness research institute, administered by the university and dedicated to understanding wilderness ecosystems.

Jess was agreeable to selling the ranch to the university. Would the university buy?

Hornocker broached the idea to Ken Dick, then UI vice president for financial affairs. Dick liked the idea and took the possibility to President Ernest Hartung.

"Ken Dick was probably the key figure in the purchase of the ranch," said Hornocker.

Dick—at that time professor of accounting and vice president emeritus—said, "President Hartung was very definitely enthusiastic. He and I flew in to take a look and meet the Taylors. And we both agreed: It was a unique property, practically undisturbed by man. That's why we pushed for its purchase."

In the remote mountains and canyons of the central Idaho wilderness, colorful rock art, house pit depressions, hunting and fishing blinds, and vision quest sites betray the former presence of prehistoric native people.

Anthropologists know that humans have inhabited the area for about 8,000 years, moving in sometime after the glaciers retreated. University of Idaho anthropologist Frank Leonhardy is studying the last millenia of the native people's occupation through his research at UI's Taylor Ranch Field Station.

"Very little is known about the people we call the Sheep Eater Indians, Shoshoni-speakers who called themselves 'tukudeka,'" Leonhardy said. So little is known about the tukudeka that Leonhardy likes to call them "Idaho's shadowy people."

Leonhardy, an associate professor, is attempting to determine the settlement patterns and food sources that allowed the small bands of people to survive in the Big Creek area. His research has been funded by grants from the National Geographic Society, University of Idaho Research Council, U.S. Forest Service, and the Idaho State Historical Society.

Taylor Ranch has served as Leonhardy's base camp for four summers, giving him access to hundreds of miles of archeological treasure troves. Few anthropologists use pack trains any more, but Leonhardy and his students have hiked and packed hundreds of miles, roaming through canyon bottoms, climbing ridgelines, and surveying river and lake shores.

"This research is the closest thing in America today to an old-time expedition," Leonhardy said. Taylor Ranch is accessible only by airplane or a 37-mile, two-day hike or horseback trip.

The first summer was spent in a "geological reconnaissance" designed to locate potential field sites. The next three summers were spent mapping sites, excavating pit houses, and sampling a study area of nearly 118 square miles.

"We have discovered 56 prehistoric archaeological sites and have surveyed in minute detail about one square mile," Leonhardy said. "That's only about one percent of the study area, but then that's most of the flat land available."

The studies have led Leonhardy to estimate that about 15 to 20 people periodically lived in the Big Creek area feeding on plants and wild game in the summer, fishing whenever possible, and hunting bighorn sheep in the cold months.

The Sheep Eaters lived in balance with their moun-

continued on page 21



Terry Maurer

Sheep Eater pictographs in Big Creek Gorge.



Frank Leonhardy

Packing supplies and equipment from base camp at Taylor Ranch to an archeological site in the high country.

tainous environment. Leonhardy believes they knew how far they could reduce a herd without endangering it. "They could have easily hunted a herd to extinction, but they didn't. They moved and let it regenerate."

Wintertime and the number of sheep available limited the number of people. The most difficult time for them was probably in March or April before spring "green up." But during the summer months? "Hell, even I could probably survive most of the rest of the year because there is so much food there," said Leonhardy.

To add to knowledge about possible food sources in the area, two outside experts assisted Leonhardy. Lucile Housley, an Oregon botanist who specializes in edible plants, visited Taylor Ranch and estimated the abundance of all the food plants in the area.

"Her work told us there was a lot of plant food available, especially carbohydrates, that would help meet the people's nutritional needs," Leonhardy explained.

Another specialist who visited the area was Bill Alexander, a forest ecologist and high school teacher from Athena, Oregon. He identified and mapped plant habitat types in the study area. His work provides the environmental framework for the project.

"The use of scientists from other disciplines is a requirement for good archaeological studies," Leonhardy said. The isolated Taylor Ranch setting lends itself to sharing interdisciplinary findings. "You're isolated, protected, and it's nice because you have time to sit around and talk over ideas and share theories. Sometimes in the academic world we don't have enough time to share this in-depth kind of interdisciplinary discussion."

It was his talks with Gary Koehler, a UI wildlife biologist studying the habitat and range of the bobcat in the area, that helped Leonhardy settle on the reason the prehistoric people spent their winters in the Big Creek area near Taylor Ranch.

"The talks with Gary led us to the basic thesis that the people were specialized predators whose winter survival depended on the bighorn sheep." The evidence suggests that the people wintered down in the canyon on the same habitat as the sheep, "smack in the middle of the

sheep's winter range," said Leonhardy. "The winter settlements are tightly clustered in the canyon, summer sites are all over the place."

Leonhardy's studies help challenge early accounts that depict the Sheep Eaters as savages of inferior intelligence that attacked whites in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. "A helluva mythology started about them during the Sheep Eater Campaign. They were blamed for a lot of killings they probably had nothing to do with."

Leonhardy's research indicates the tukudeka were most likely occupied with their subsistence activities—plant gathering, salmon fishing, mountain sheep hunting. In addition, they were excellent furriers; their products were valuable as trade goods. They made efficient winter clothing and snowshoes, which made them mobile in the winter.

Their isolated existence kept them protected from most enemies until the discovery of gold in the Boise Basin and the Salmon River. The tukudeka's fishing sites were seen as prime mining areas.

The remote location still shelters numerous rust-colored pictographs along Big Creek and rock cairns that mark what are thought to be vision quest sites. But much information about the tukudeka may be lost forever in the Idaho wilderness.

"Compared to what we knew four years ago, we've learned a lot," said Leonhardy. "But compared to what there is to learn, we're just getting started."

As long as someone asks, the Taylor Ranch Field Station will continue to give scientists like Frank Leonhardy access—if not the answer—to the mysteries of Idaho's "shadowy people." ❁

Jane Pritchett is an editor in the College of Forestry.



Frank Leonhardy

Duncan Leonhardy digs in one section of a house pit site.