

Taylor Ranch

by Michael Frome

A PAIR OF HUNTERS RODE THEIR HORSES across Big Creek onto the grounds of the station. Jim and I met them at the pasture, where they dismounted and opened the dialogue. They appeared worn, but determined. Plainly they were searching for a clue to the whereabouts of bighorn sheep, the prized prey of the Idaho mountains.

"Do you do any guiding?" the taller of the two asked Jim. It was a question they rephrased and repeated, first one and then the other, fishing for a lead to the bighorn, finding it hard to be turned aside.

"Well, what kind of place is this?"

I myself was a mere bystander in the conversation, but I couldn't blame them for wondering about this well-tended facility in the midst of wilderness.

"This is a field research station of the University of Idaho," explained Jim.

"Oh, is that all it is?"

"That's *what* it is," Jim answered firmly, after which the tone of things changed considerably.

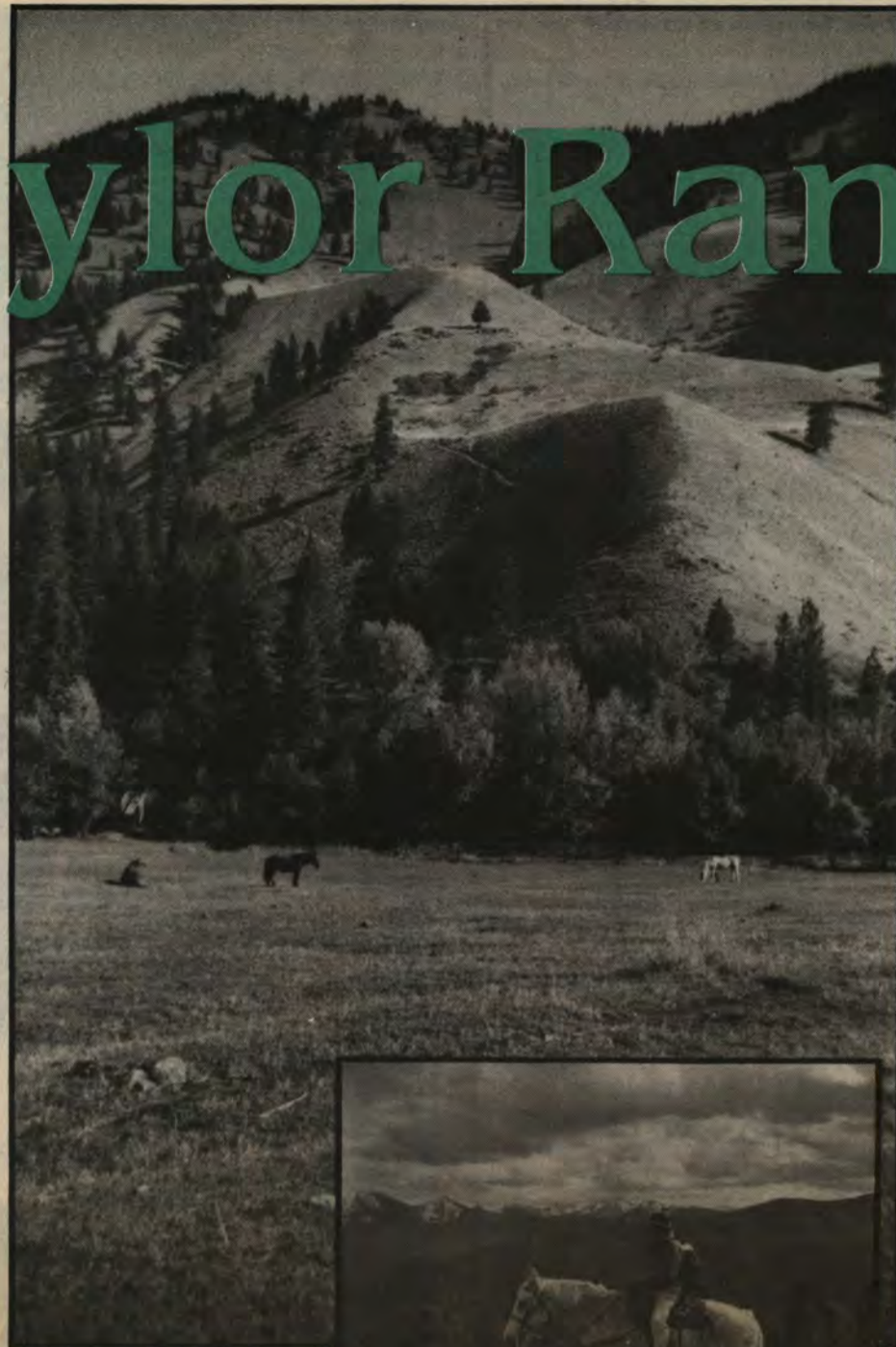
The talk continued, but I ignored it, being struck with an overpowering idea: Other universities are enriched by assorted resources for learning, including marvelous museum collections of natural history, but only the University of Idaho, of all the higher education institutions in America, is endowed with such a center of field study as the Taylor Ranch, surrounded by abundant living wild nature.

By the same token, though Idaho can hardly compete with other states for crowds or commerce, and may sometimes be confused with Iowa, there is no confusing the grandeur and glory of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, which completely envelops the Taylor Ranch. Covering more than 2.35 million acres, it's the largest unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System outside of Alaska. And there's more still: the Selway-Bitterroot and Gospel Hump, abutting the River of No Return in central Idaho; the Sawtooth Wilderness, above Ketchum and Sun Valley; plus eight million acres of *de facto* wilderness, choice roadless areas of the national forests like Long Canyon, Mallard-Larkins, Great Burn and the White Clouds.

It's the treasure of wild country, despoiled and destroyed elsewhere, that gives to Idaho its special quality and character. The truth is that we hardly know the benefits of wild country to humankind; we are scratching at the surface, just beginning to learn, or *how* to learn, even two decades after passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964. This to me makes the Taylor Ranch a research and educational facility of world-class potential.

The ranch, or more properly research station, occupies sixty-five acres of private land, a former homestead, in the heart of the Salmon River Mountains east of McCall. It lies along Big Creek, a stream of clear, dancing waters that somewhere else would be called a river. Big Creek actually is the major tributary of the Middle Fork of the Salmon, which it joins six miles below the Taylor Ranch after winding through narrow, steep canyons.

Jim Akenson, age 29, and his wife, Holly, 27, have been the managers of the ranch for three years. Their role is not to be confused with caretaking, though they do their share of heavy duty, including working with a half-dozen horses and mules to mow hay, haul firewood and



Top, looking across the pasture to the surrounding hills.

Above, the author at Rush Point, 3500 feet above the ranch, with the Bighorn Crags in the distance.

Left, Holly and Golda.
photos by Michael Frome

maintain the field station's private airstrip. Jim and Holly, both native Oregonians, are a tall, attractive couple, energetic resource professionals (he holds a master's degree in geography from Oregon State University, while Holly is working on her master's in wildlife—a study of bighorn sheep behavior at U of I).

They are clearly committed to wilderness research and to living in harmony with the earth around them. They come out now and then, but are glad to get back to simple living and back to work: converting the oldest cabin into a field laboratory; organizing the herbarium collection of indigenous plants; helping researchers, as well as hikers and hunters passing through; and exploring the country to understand its soil, water, wildlife and vegetation. They are people who earn respect by what they do. I observed this in the response of the two hunters on learning that Holly and Jim had spent three consecutive, self-sufficient winters in the wilderness.

The Taylor Ranch is administered as a part of the Wilderness Research Center, which in the past three years has significantly expanded its activities, thanks in no small measure to the diligence of its director, Edwin E. Krumpke, my friend and colleague in the Department of Wildland Recreation Management.

Involvement in wilderness protection and research is logical and historical, for both the university and the state. Places, personalities and events have a way of meeting for common purpose. While on my first visit to the Taylor Ranch early in 1984, I came across a fascinating set of documents. They began with minutes of a meeting of the Governor's Committee on what was then the proposed Idaho Primitive Area, conducted at Boise on December 20, 1930. Governor H. Clarence Baldrige recalled how he and members of the committee three years earlier had visited the area in central Idaho, headquartered at the Uncle Dave Lewis Ranch (later to become the Jess Taylor Ranch).

Uncle Dave, or "Cougar Dave," came into the country, according to reports, in 1879. History, or legend, records him as a Civil War veteran (at the siege of Vicksburg with Wild Bill Hickok); a scout at the Battle of Little Big Horn, who managed to miss the scalping of Custer and troops; and one of the few survivors of the Sheepeater Indian Campaign fought in the Big Creek canyon. He lived alone with his cougar hounds and is credited with killing no less than 600 cougars.

Governor Baldrige mentioned at the 1930 Boise meeting that the last time Uncle Dave had left his ranch for a trip outside was five years before the visit of the com-

mittee. The governor stated this was the wildest country he had ever seen and urged that it be "perpetuated as nearly in its natural state as possible for future generations." The idea was well received by committee members, representing the interests of sportsmen, wool growers, agricultural and timber industries, and the Forest Service. They may have had their differences, yet all agreed this special place deserved special treatment. Thus, on February 2, 1931, Chief Forester Robert Y. Stuart approved establishment of the Idaho Primitive Area covering more than one million acres.

Three years later Jess Taylor appeared on the scene and bought the ranch, complete with four log cabins, hayfield, air strip and corral, from aging Uncle Dave. In due course Jess and his wife, Dorothy, settled in, developing an outfitting operation catering to sportsmen come to take advantage of the abundant game and inspiring scenery.

In the mid-sixties a young hunter, Maurice G. Hornocker, arrived at the Taylor Ranch. He was after cougar, but not quite for their hides. A native of Iowa, Hornocker was a graduate in wildlife biology from the University of Montana, where he had studied under John Craighead (and had done field work on grizzly bears in Yellowstone as a member of the Craighead team). He explained to Taylor that he wanted to rent part of the ranch as the base for his Ph.D. study of mountain lions.

Over a period of five years, from 1964 to 1969, Hornocker and his assistant, Wilbur Wiles, an intrepid local man of the mountains, operating from the Taylor Ranch tranquilized, weighed, marked and released almost fifty lions, some repeatedly. They traveled on foot and on snowshoes working traplines between the ranch and campsites in the field, depending on fly-ins for winter supplies and research gear.

Hornocker's findings contributed significantly to public thought and public policy on predation. He reported that cougars, solitary travelers of wild country, almost always kill the young and very old of their prey. They cull the poorest specimens of elk, those suffering nutritional deficiency, often in advance of winter die-off; they keep the herds alert and moving, benefitting holistic nature in diverse ways.

In 1972, the Idaho legislature reclassified the cougar, from predator to game species, enabling the Department of Fish and Game to regulate the harvest for the first time. The River of No Return is still the stronghold, but the cougar currently is widely distributed in Idaho and many sportsmen are eager to pay \$2,500 for outfitter fees, plus the cost of license, tag and transportation, for the chance to bring one home.

In the late sixties I was writing in defense of predators (including a book for young readers called *The Varmints—Our Unwanted Wildlife*) and had my first communication with Maurice Hornocker, little expecting that I would come to Idaho to know him as colleague and friend. He sparks enthusiasm and ideas. In 1968 he was appointed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as Leader of the Idaho

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