

## Wilderness ranch holds promise, dream for former owner, Jess Taylor

### Editor's note

This article is based on taped interviews with Jess Taylor conducted by Dr. Robert Loveland, M.D. of California in 1971 and Richard Walker and Dr. Floyd Newby of the University of Idaho, in the fall of 1974.

### By Dave Johnson

Jess Taylor was asking \$100,000 for his ranch in 1969 and the University of Idaho bought it. In the contract, Jess was given life-long tenancy rights and the university agreed to manage the facility for wilderness research.

The ups and downs of trying to build the Taylor Ranch to its potential as a center for wilderness research is a story in itself.

But there's a better story and Jess Taylor, a pensive man with a striking resemblance to Dwight Eisenhower, tells it like no one else can. Indeed, it's the story of the Taylor Ranch.

Somewhere there's a piece of paper with a legal description that spells out the metes and bounds of a 65-acre ranch plopped right in the middle of the Idaho Primitive Area's Big Creek drainage. Thirty-two miles from the nearest road there are four log cabins, a hay field, an airstrip, one corral and a lot of colorful stories.

For Jess Taylor, those stories began back in 1934 with another sales agreement. Only that time, he was the buyer.

"Cougar Dave Lewis" came into the country around 1879 and in 1924 he patented a homestead on the 65 acres. In the fall of 1933, Jess Taylor hunted the Big Creek drainage and was attracted by the baying of Lewis' cougar hounds. The two men met, hit it off right away and the aging Lewis promptly accepted \$500 earnest money from Jess for the option to purchase the homestead with its two cabins.

One year later Jess returned to do business and was met by Walt Estep, one of Dave Lewis' ranch administrators. Estep had the proper papers and Jess and Dave "got everything fixed up legal." PRICE: \$1200, minus EARNEST MONEY: \$500, BALANCE: \$700.

Well, unbeknown to Jess, Estep had a running feud going with a man named Lobear who lived in the Mountains along Big Creek. And when Estep left with the legal papers he ran into his enemy. Evidently Lobear elected to put a quick end to the feud.

"I don't know if there had been any argument or not," said Jess, "but when Estep turned to go Lobear shot him in the back of the head with a thirty- thirty. And that kind of stopped the transfer of the legal papers right there."

Lobear, being an honest man of sorts, came down to the ranch and told Dave Lewis and Jess, "I just killed Estep." In due time the sheriff from Cascade was notified and he came in and got the frozen body which, as a matter of record, had its ears chewed off by some hungry critters.

"They put Lobear in the pen for a term," said Jess. Asked the reason for the shooting Jess rationalized, "Oh well, there had been a little trouble and I think Estep was a little attentive to Lobear's wife." At any rate, the sheriff opened Estep's pack, recorded the deed in Cascade and thereby made Jess rightful owner of the Taylor Ranch.

### Link crucial

But in later years Jess Taylor was to become much more than just an owner. At 77, he is now a crucial link in time, his memories documenting the past for posterity, his dreams resting on his ranch and the future of wilderness research at a big university.

"This place means a lot to me, my life is in it," said Jess, "and I sold it to the university for insurance, 'cause if I can't be assured of its future, then remembering the past will be a lot tougher."

It was shortly after acquiring the ranch that Jess began to find out about its history. After selling out, Dave Lewis stayed on with Jess through the winter of 1934-35. And it was in the "upper" log cabin which still stands today, that "Cougar Dave" spent many evenings relating his stories to Jess.

According to a 1908 Idaho Fish and Game license left at the ranch, Dave Lewis was five feet seven inches tall and weighed 130 pounds. There are a few pictures of him and in every one he has a silver-grey beard and a crumpled felt hat atop his head.

One of those pictures somehow appeared in the New York Times on November 13, 1927.



The New York Times ran this picture of Cougar Dave Lewis posing with his dogs.

Under the portrait of Dave Lewis and three of his cougar hounds was the following caption:

Uncle Dave Lewis is 83 years old, with 600 cougar to his credit, who lives alone and spends his winters on Big Creek Idaho near the Battle of the Sheepeater Indian War Days of which he was one of the few survivors.

"Well now," said Jess, "Dave, he was a mild little fellow you know. But he was the type you didn't want to fool with. He'd been probably shot a time or two and he showed me scars all over his arm where a grizzly caught hold of him one day."

But it was true, Dave Lewis did survive the Sheepeater Campaign and that's one of the stories he told Jess on a cold winter night at the Taylor Ranch.

Dave was a veteran of the Civil War. He was at the siege of Vicksburg with Wild Bill Hickock and said old Bill really could shoot, rifle or pistol. During the Indian wars and more specifically the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Dave was scouting for Captain Benteen. He said he missed the action but got there in time to confirm the fact that the Indians did not scalp Custer.

It was around 1875 that some of the Sheepeater Indians from the Big Creek country burned a few haystacks near Yellow Pine, according to Jess, and the Army went in after them. Dave Lewis was in charge of the ammunition train, which consisted of two mules.

"About the time the soldiers got in the middle of Big Creek, not far from the ranch site, the Indians opened up on them" said Jess relating Lewis' story. The Indians had guns by that time and from their vantage point in the rocks along the Big Creek canyon the soldiers were easy targets below.



The Taylor Ranch is nestled on the banks of Big Creek, which runs along the line of fir trees in the foreground. The cabin on the right was built by Jess and Dorothy, while the structure on the left, also with a white roof, was the original cabin.



"The guns were all black powder, of course," said Jess, "and the smoke got so thick that they couldn't see each other anymore, so the Indians pulled out." They wounded two soldiers but Dave Lewis being hampered a bit with the mules and also being a tad smarter, "he held back just a little bit when the fireworks started," said Jess.

Dave Lewis was 93 years old during that winter he spent with Jess at the Taylor Ranch. He couldn't hear much but he had a memory and he liked to talk. Jess liked to listen and after six snowy months holed-up with Dave, Jess came to know the history of the ranch better than any man, aside from Dave Lewis himself.

#### *Lewis dies*

Then came a chapter in the Taylor Ranch history that Jess doesn't like to talk about. It was April, the spring thaw was on and since Dave had sold the ranch he was "gettin restless" to be leaving the country and do some visiting. Jess worried about the old man traveling during the frigid spring run-off on Big Creek and was glad when Dave's horses disappeared in the hills for a spell. Dave couldn't leave without them. Jess had an idea about where they were, but he kept it to himself.

As luck would have it, one morning Dave's horses showed up, leaning against the fence as if impatient to "head on up the river."

"So I caught his horses and put a pack saddle on one, his saddle on another," said Jess. "But before he left," Jess recalled, "I think Dave had a premonition or something, that he wouldn't be back. He said, now if I don't come back, everything that's in this trunk is yours," Jess remembered, "and he gave me a tin trunk." Dave crossed the Big Creek foot bridge to keep dry while Jess forded the stock and the two men bid farewell.

Dave Lewis died of pneumonia shortly after reaching Cascade. Jess still has that tin trunk. It's full of letters from people all over the United States who knew "Uncle Dave Lewis," hunted with him and grew to love the Big Creek country. There are many photos of the mountains, the ranch and the people who visited it dating back to the late 1800's. There are priceless documents, like the original map of the Sheepeater War drawn by a Lieutenant Brown describing the entire campaign.

Realizing the value of that tin box and its contents Jess said, "I'm just waiting to turn it over to the university when they're prepared to take care of it."

Jess Taylor was born in The Cove Oregon in 1898. His father was a railroad contractor and Jess remembers as a small child living in tents near Ritzville, Washington, as the country's railroads moved west. At the age of 18 he was building ships in Texas for National Ship Building and that's where he acquired many of the skills he later used to build the Taylor Ranch to what it is today.

In 1924 Jess started ranching in the Lost River area. Drought set in and he moved to the Pahsimeroi Valley. Then the Taylor Grazing Act became law and "it looked to me that the little fellow had had it," said Jess. When the depression hit, Jess packed up again, went for a "look see" in the Big Creek country and that's when he heard the beckon of Dave Lewis' cougar hounds.

A few months after Dave Lewis died, Jess left the Taylor Ranch, headed for Boise and stayed there. He didn't do anything with the ranch for twelve more years. There was always

someone at the ranch, however, and it was maintained quite well. There are even stories of some lucrative moon-shining associated with the facility.

"I was a building contractor in Boise during that time and one day I decided I'd better go back and do something with the place," said Jess. He had many offers for the ranch including one from a doctor in Iceland. "But I just felt that place belonged to me and it was really right that I should keep it and do something with it."

It was 1948 and with that decision another chapter in the story of the Taylor Ranch was about to begin.

Jess brought all his assets together and put them into a house in Boise, hoping to sell it and move to the ranch. He was 50 years old, quite handsome, and the realty company sent a very attractive middle-aged lady out to list the house.



*Jess Taylor, Born 1898: "The Taylor Ranch is my footprint on the sands of time."*

"Dorothy and I, we rather got interested in each other," said Jess. "She didn't sell the house, I finally had to do that, but I told her I was headed into the ranch to kind of straighten things out." Dorothy seemed interested in that kind of adventure, said Jess; "but I tried to tell her that it wasn't every woman would make the grade. Period.

"I'll be back out in seventeen days," Jess recalled telling Dorothy, "and if you're still of the same mind why, we'll be married." When Jess returned she was waiting at the Floating Feather Airport, they were married and went on their honeymoon to start work on the Taylor Ranch. She made the grade.

Dorothy Taylor is a gregarious lady with eyes that sparkle when she talks about Jess and the ranch and she did make the grade that was demanded of her. Today, she shares many of Jess' memories and most important she shares that dream of ensuring a future for their ranch.

"We had two objectives when we went in there," said Dorothy, "building an airstrip and working on our home."

Not content with the original cabins on the ranch, Jess and Dorothy set out to build a new log cabin.

"We never moved into the old cabins at all," said Jess, "we lived in tents for two years, winter and summer." The winter of 1948 and 49 brought brutal and cold, testing the

Taylor's willingness to endure. "It was heavy snow," said Jess, "and we'd wake up in the mornings and there'd be frost all over the bed around our faces."

It took them one year to build the airstrip, clearing brush, felling trees, dynamiting stumps, moving dirt with a slip scraper pulled behind two 1800 pound horses and smoothing the surface with a birch drag.

Jess used those same two horses to excavate a spot for their home. Built entirely by hand, the four-room cabin is made from logs skidded down from the mountain in back of the ranch. For two years, only the sounds of a thumping ax or a gnawing cross-cut saw could be heard in the woods. The Idaho Primitive Area had already been set aside. Although the ranch was a private land holding, Jess made sure it was operated in accordance with the guidelines set by the Forest Service.

The Taylor Ranch became a base for Jess' outfitting operation. For twenty years small parties of hunters, fishermen and families made reservations to spend time at the ranch and take advantage of the abundant game, beautiful scenery and Jess Taylor's renowned Big Horn Sheep guiding expertise. Towards the end of that period, Jess and Dorothy began to spend less time at the ranch, wintering in Boise and traveling a bit during the summer.

And then one day a man, who's stature reminded Jess of Dave Lewis, knocked at the cabin door. This stranger was a cougar hunter too, only he was hunting for the big cats' secrets, not their pelts. But like the friendship with Dave Lewis over thirty years prior, Jess and Maurice Hornocker, the University of Idaho mountain lion researcher, hit it off right away. Hornocker asked to rent part of the ranch to headquarter his cougar study and Jess agreed.

"After staying with us for a couple years, I think he caught on that we were figuring on selling the place," said Jess, "and I guess the thought had crossed our minds. We were getting up in years."

That's when the idea of a wilderness research center first came up. The decision-makers at the university got together, liked the idea and decided to buy. PRICE: \$100,000, EARNEST MONEY: \$5,000, BALANCE: \$95,000.

"It was something they were buying for research and something that they were going to keep in their educational system just the same as one of their buildings in Moscow," said Jess. "We sold it for research." Seven miles up Big Creek from the Taylor Ranch, another parcel of private land recently sold for 1.4 million dollars.

Maurice Hornocker completed his mountain lion study out of the Taylor Ranch in 1970 and received international acclaim for the effort. Since that time the need for research addressing wilderness has mounted as land agencies scurry to implement management programs on millions of wilderness acres in the United States.

The Idaho Primitive Area itself stretches big, vast and still unknown, much the same as Dave Lewis and Jess Taylor saw it years ago. Yet, the controversy over the proposed exclusion of the Chamberlin Basin from wilderness classification brings home hard that terribly critical decisions are being made based on precious little information.

The University of Idaho has a unique opportunity to be a front runner in supplying that kind of needed information while at the same time making Jess Taylor's dream come true. ❁