

▲ **Man and the myth**

Author sifts through
fact, fiction about
Idaho mountain man

Moscow-Pullman Daily News

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Thursday, January 20, 2005



Tall tales?

Viola author sifts fact from legend in book about Idaho mountain man

BY LAURA PIERCE
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When Idaho mountain man "Cougar Dave" died in 1936, he left a stack of legends nearly as tall as the mountain that state officials later named for him.

For Viola resident Pat Cary Peek, sifting through those stories became a quest that ultimately yielded a book.

But she came across some major surprises in writing "Cougar Dave: Mountain Man of Idaho."

"As I did the research, the only thing that held true was that he died," Peek said of her research into the life of hunter/trapper David Lewis, who apparently had a yen for telling whoppers.

That included explaining to 1910 census workers that he'd been born in Arkansas, in the 1920 census revising that story to say Wales, and in 1930 opting instead for a birthplace in Illinois.

It was only after tracking down Lewis' death certificate, which led her to the funeral home that shipped his remains to Oregon, that Peek ascertained her subject had been born just outside Yoncalla, Ore.

Peek, whose quest to learn the truth about Lewis led her to Oregon and central Idaho, and to scores of people who knew of the wily outdoorsman, isn't completely sure why Lewis told the tales he did.

Bitterness over family relations back home and possibly a need to give his guiding business a more exotic bent might be upris, she noted. But the most apparent

reason Lewis told the stories he did — including several fictitious accounts of fighting in the Civil War — was that he simply could make people believe him.

"He just liked to tell stories and was very smart," Peek said.

Lewis, who lived in the central Idaho wilderness on Big Creek, northeast of McCall, made believers out of a number of influential men during the '20s and '30s.

The charismatic guide/outfitter shared hunting camps with the likes of Idaho Gov. H.C. Baldrige, timber magnate Frederick Weyerhaeuser, Bunker Hill Mine manager Stanley Easton of Kellogg and a number of high-powered lawyers, doctors and magazine editors from across the country.

"Oh, they loved him, all these doctors and lawyers and mucky-mucks," Peek said. "David just charmed them. It was the persona he built."

It was with Lewis that these men marveled at the wilderness surrounding them and discussed how they could preserve the beauty of the land for future generations.

Cougar Dave Lewis, then, for all his embellishments and revisionist history, had a hand in turning one of central Idaho's most wild places into protected wilderness, outside the encroachment of industry and development, Peek said.

"Around David's fire, talk of preserving the vast central Idaho region as a primitive area first took shape, and eventually the primitive area became what is now the 3,678-square mile Frank Church River of



Geoff Crimmins/Daily News
Pat Cary Peek is the author of "Cougar Dave: Mountain Man of Idaho."



Photos courtesy Pat Cary Peek

Top left: Longtime Idaho hunter "Cougar" Dave Lewis poses with his prized team of hunting dogs. Above: Lewis is shown in this undated photo at his cabin in the heart of central Idaho wilderness.

No Return Wilderness, the largest and most isolated wilderness in the lower 48," Peek states in her book.

Peek first encountered stories of the enigmatic outdoorsman while living at the University of Idaho's Taylor Ranch Field Station, which was at Lewis' homestead site.

Peek spent the winter of 1992-93 at the ranch, in addition to other, shorter forays

over the years. Her husband, Jim Peek, at the time a professor of wildlife biology at the UI, was doing research at the ranch and Pat regularly accompanied him.

Her reflections of that one winter

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