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September 7, 1985

Jim and Holly Akenson
Taylor Ranch
Cascade, ID 83611

Dear Jim and Holly:

I'm returning your slides to you after making some duplicates and sending them off to **Country Journal**, which has expressed some serious interest in the story. We'll see how that goes.

Meanwhile, here's a copy of the story I drafted last fall. Please look it over and send me any comments, changes or corrections that occur to you.

Best of luck to you both.

Sincerely,

Michael Hofferber
Michael Hofferber

P.S. The Career World story comes out next month.
I'll make sure you get a copy—

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Proposal: Idaho's Research Ranchers

Idaho sweltered under a mid-August heat wave, even in the high wilderness of the Salmon River Range, but the four scientists huddled on a rocky ledge beside Big Creek worked in cool shade. With trowels and bare fingers they scraped at the thin bed of earth beneath them, digging for artifacts of a lost history. Two twin circles of soft yellow ash had been exposed to the light for the first time in centuries. Here some man, in an earlier day, had warmed himself from the winter's chill or baked his salmon on a spit, or huddled near the cliff wall with a fire blazing between him and the beasts of the night.

Robbin Johnston, a bearded archaeologist from the University of Idaho, sifted buckets of dirt from the dig in a wire-mesh screen, plucking out pieces of bone and charcoal to add to a growing collection of plastic-bagged specimens. These tiny samples represented some the first solid evidence of prehistoric human life in the rugged mountain ranges of central Idaho. On the day before, Johnston had found a button.

Helping with the dig were Jim and Holly Akenson, a biogeographer and an animal biologist respectively. The Akensons are manager-caretakers of the University of Idaho's 65-acre Taylor Ranch, a wilderness research facility tucked away in the middle of the 3.8 million-acre Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness Area. They live year-round, without electricity or engines, more than 40 miles from the nearest road. The ranch is further from a road in any direction than any other in the lower 48 states. It is

used exclusively for scientific research and education.

The fourth member of the party was the cultural resource specialist for the Nez Perce Indian tribe, Jim Lawyer. At the dig he was as much an observer as a participant. He wasted few words and his

Jim Akenson, a sanguine Swede, tall and blond with a redd beard, broke up the somnolent scene when an object in his trowel caught his eye.

"Robbin," he said, "I think I have something here. I'll bet you anything that that's a human tooth."

Johnston crouched beside him, the knees of his jeans caked with dirt, his t-shirt stained with sweat. He fingered the tooth Akenson handed him and nodded thoughtfully. The tooth was definitely a human molar. A tooth like this could mean an Indian burial site, or simply some packrat's treasure.

He looked across the excavation at Lawyer, who was watching him carefully, and said, "I think we had better stop digging right here and go show this to Frank."

Frank Leonhardy, leader of the UI archaeology team at Taylor Ranch, was working at another site further downstream. There, along the banks of the creek, his students were uncovering evidence of an Indian encampment several hundred years old. "You mean they lived here in the wintertime?" visitors asked incredulously when he showed them the site.

When handed the tooth, Leonhardy said, "Yes, it looks like we have a human tooth here, all right. A pre-molar, I'd say, and fairly young. It doesn't show signs of much use."

Leonhardy suggested that the dig continue. "Occasional teeth do happen," he said. "One tooth does not constitute a burial." But Lawyer quickly drew him aside and, after a heated argument,

Leonhardy changed his mind. Digging at the site stopped; the excavation was filled in. Burial or not, research would have to wait for new permits in another season.

"The Indians, you have to understand, are very sensitive about burial sites," Johnston explained. "There have been a lot of sites that have been vandalized and destroyed. I know a car dealer in Boise who bragged to me about this Indian skeleton that he found. Its skull rests on a shelf in his living room for his children to play with. Now, they wouldn't do that with their grandfather's skull, but because it's Indian...."

Who's tooth was uncovered deep in the Idaho wilderness? Surprisingly, there are many possibilities.

Before there were Christians, and even before the Egyptian pyramids were raised, tribes of Shoshoni Indians settled in the Salmon River Mountains of Idaho. These mountain-dwelling Shonshoni were called "Sheepeaters." They were superior furriers, famed for their sheepskin and deerskin garments. For centuries they lived in thatched huts and teepees along riverbanks and survived on berries, roots, game and fish. Hunting parties often camped overnight at cliffside shelters like the one near Taylor Ranch.

A Sheepeater woman, Sacajawea, helped guide Lewis and Clark through the mountain passes, and her people gave horses to the expedition. They befriended white explorers and trappers, but in so doing exposed themselves to diseases which soon decimated their population. By the late 1800s only fragments of the tribe remained.

The tooth in the shelter might have belonged to one of the soldiers who fought in the brief Sheepeater War of 1879. Skirmishes

between settlers and Indians in central Idaho prompted the U.S. government to send a troop of 60 men from the First Cavalry into the Salmon River country that summer to root out the remaining Sheepeaters and escort them to a reservation.

In mid-July a troop under the command of Lieutenant Henry Catley traveled single file down the treacherous Big Creek canyon, a "fastness of almost impregnable haunts," one soldier later recalled. As the troop was crossing Big Creek near the present site of Taylor Ranch, the Sheepeaters opened fire from vantage points in the rocky cliffs above. They severely wounded two of Catley's men.

Shaken by the attack, Catley panicked and led his men up a nearby ridge. He hoped to climb out of the steep canyon, but before his column reached the summit it was attacked from both the front and rear. Catley and his 60 troopers were trapped on a steep hillside under a blazing midsummer's sun for 14 hours. They became so thirsty they drank from a vinegar keg.

Come nightfall the troopers retreated from "Vinegar Hill" to Burgdorf Hot Springs on the Salmon River. There Lt. Catley was relieved of his command and court-martialed.

A week later Captain Reuben Bernard took the harrowed troopers back into the canyon. This time they swept through the territory, capturing 50 Sheepeaters, who then agreed to move to a reservation. The campaign ended and was called a success.

A Civil War veteran, "Cougar" Dave Lewis, was in charge of the ammunition train during the Sheepeater conflict. He returned to the Big Creek drainage after the fighting was over and homesteaded on a site just a few miles downstream from Vinegar Hill. He patented 64.84 acres of land and lived on it until 1935. Shortly before he died he sold his property to a friend named Jess Taylor. The land then became known as the Taylor Ranch.

The original homestead survey for the Taylor Ranch property hangs on a wall of Jim and Holly Akenson's cabin. A nearby window affords a view of a sprawling green pasture hemmed by pine and rocky canyon walls. Across Big Creek, Horse Mountain rears up to its 8,000-foot elevation. Bighorn sheep graze on its flanks. Moments earlier, a black bear sauntered by.

A topographical map of this territory covers a card table next to the window. Little black letters name features of the landscape: Thunder Mountain, Big Hill, Cliff Creek, Canyon Creek, Cave Creek, Spring Creek, Bear Creek, Doe Creek, Sheep Creek, Snake Creek, Soldier Creek, Cabin Creek, Cow Creek, Dave Lewis Peak.

"Jess Taylor sold the ranch to the University of Idaho primarily because of Maurice Hornocker (a UI professor)," Holly Akenson explains. "Hornocker was up here doing his cougar research and he knew that Jess was thinking about selling the place. He convinced him that the university would take the best care of it."

Holly leans back in a padded rocker, her long straight black hair spilling down her shoulders. Her maiden name is Shehan, of Irish ancestry. She is tall, has pale blue eyes, a ruddy complexion and a broad smile. Her husband, Jim, is in the next room preparing dinner. They take turns fixing meals, just as they share all the chores on the ranch.

"Jess said that Hornocker reminded him an awful lot of Dave Lewis," Holly continues. "They even looked alike. That's why he liked Hornocker as soon as he met him."

Ironically, though, both Dave Lewis and Maurice Hornocker became famous cougar experts, but for r
Lewis was a crack mountain lion hunter, killing more than 60
over 30 years and making much of his living from the bounty he could

collect. The New York Times featured him in a November 13, 1927 issue posing with his hunting dogs. Hornocker, on the other hand, put an end to the cougar bounty in Idaho in the late 1960s with painstaking research that demonstrated the mountain lion was no threat to deer and elk herds, but actually helped their populations by weeding out weaker animals and preventing overuse of winter food supplies. He helped save the cougar from extinction, and his research was popularized in a November, 1969 National Geographic article.

"The primitive area was ideal for our study," Hornocker wrote in the article. "Remote and roadless, it sustains a healthy lion population relatively undisturbed by human intrusion, partly because its granite crags and deep-slashed valleys represent the greatest topographical relief in all of Idaho."

During the years of his research, Hornocker had many enemies among the guides and outfitters who worked the Idaho wilderness. They felt the cougar a threat to their livelihood. They blamed the lions for declining game herds. Like Lewis, they had killed the cats for their bounty. In a small bar in the Idaho mountain town of Yellowpine a group of them were gathered the night Hornocker came in for a drink. They called him over to their table. The scientist hesitated a moment, knowing the resentments they had harbored, but if they meant violence he could not escape it for long. He walked up to them and one said, "We just wanted you to know that we think that you're doing a good job." Finally, after years of gathering facts Hornocker had gained their respect.

The scientist also had the respect of Jess Taylor, and when he recommended that the ranch be sold to the University of Idaho the rancher listened.

"This place means a lot to me; my life is in it," Taylor told a UI science writer shortly before he died. "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."

Taylor sold the ranch to UI in 1969 for \$100,000. A decade later a similar ranch just seven miles upstream sold for \$1.4 million.

Hornocker's cougar study ended long ago, but research at Taylor Ranch continues. Last winter Holly Akenson began a study of bighorn sheep habitat in the Big Creek drainage. From December through April she and Jim spend much of their time snowshoeing up and down the canyon watching deer, elk and sheep herds. They observe the condition of the habitat, the size of the herds, the changes that occur over the winter. Holly estimates that 150 to 200 sheep winter in the drainage. She has seen as many as 70 bighorn sheep in a single day.

"This area is an outstanding laboratory for wilderness studies," Jim notes as he sets a table for dinner. "The place is virtually unaffected by man. It's the perfect control studies on the effects of man on the environment. There are a multitude of projects that could be started here."

The Akensons both sit on the board of the UI's Wilderness Research Center. The board makes policy decisions for Taylor Ranch, determining which research projects are most appropriate for the facility.

The board is currently looking for new projects to be stationed at the center, Jim said. Among the projects they are interested in hosting are:

"a fisheries project, anadromous salmon or cutthroat trout..."

"something on recreational use impacts... horse camps... airstrips... river use studies..."

"some sort of extensive botanical study... We are located to some major fires. You could do burn studies, or something on fire ecology...."

The primary factor when considering requests to use the ranch, Jim said, is whether or not the research could be done outside the wilderness. A bobcat study now under way at Taylor Ranch by biologist Gary Kohler is a perfect example of a project that could not be done as well anywhere else in the world, he noted.

Kohler, a trim and intense young man who worked with Hornocker on his cougar study, is gathering fundamental information about the lives of bobcat living in the Big Creek drainage of the River of No Return Wilderness. How do they space themselves? What are the effects of their predation on their prey? What kind of movement patterns do they show? What is their rate of reproduction?

These questions have been asked before, of course, but never about a population of bobcats so unaffected by the activities of man. The Big Creek bobcats are part of a natural balance that wildlife managers want to replicate in other, less remote, areas of the country.

"My hope is that the information we're gathering here can be used as a vehicle for management," said Kohler one summer afternoon as he lounged on the grass outside one of Taylor Ranch's four cabins.

In the late 1960s, after the U.S. signed an international treaty curbing the import of furs of the spotted cats -- leopards, jaguar, cheetas -- furriers started using the spotted belly fur of the North American bobcat and the Canadian lynx for their fur coats instead. A single bobcat hide soared in value to more than \$300.

The animals, native to almost every state, were heavily trapped and populations began to fall. Fearful of the effect all this harvesting was having on the bobcats, Defenders of Wildlife, a conservation organization, sued the Fish and Wildlife Service to provide this information. Since little research had ever been done on bobcats, new studies were quickly commissioned.

"Essentially, that's why we're here," Kohler explained. "A lot of states are now doing bobcat research. Studies similar to this one are being done elsewhere. But what is unique about this project is that we are studying these cats in a wilderness situation. No one else has ever been able to do that."

Kohler's research is financed by such disparate groups as the National Wildlife Federation, the National Rifle Association, the National Geographic Society, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Boone and Crockett Club. All have a stake in its results.

Most of Kohler's field work on the study is done during the winter. Every morning, from December through April, Kohler pushes himself out into the frigid mountain air to walk a 22-mile trap line. Bobcats captured in his traps are drugged, fitted with radio collars, and released again to the wild. The movements of the collared bobcats are then tracked by Kohler, his wife Mona, and one or two assistants with receivers both on the ground and in the air. This is his fourth winter at Taylor Ranch.

"It probably sounds like a real romantic kind of adventure to spend the winter up here," Kohler commented, "but it gets old real fast slogging up and down those trails."

Without Taylor Ranch and its year-round facilities deep in the Idaho wilderness Kohler's study, at least in its present form, would be impossible. Its cabins shelter his research team from storms and sub-zero chills, and the snow-covered landing field, which Jim

Akenson packs down daily with a horse-drawn steel roller, is the only winter access to food and equipment.

Technically, the approach to Taylor Landing Field in the middle of the River of No Return Wilderness is one of the most demanding. No bush pilot, however skilled, would approach it without second thought. Spread on a quarter-mile pasture on the banks of Big Creek at the bottom of a 4,000-foot canyon, the field forgives few mistakes. In summer, a single-engine mail plane lands once each week with letters and supplies. In winter, it slides in on skis every two or three weeks.

Jim and Holly Akenson, both native Oregonians, depend on these flights for trade and transportation, but they are otherwise self-sufficient. Both are competent carpenters, plumbers, horseshoers and ranch hands. In addition to the cabins, they care for five horses, two mules, an irrigation system, a cook house, two storage sheds, one corral, a hay field and a small vegetable garden. Since coming to Taylor Ranch two years ago they have also learned to drive an old McCormick sickle bar mower with their team of mules, pack a train of horses, and thatch a haystack. They split a \$15,000 annual salary and oversee the ranch's \$14,000 operating budget.

Jim met Holly at Eastern Oregon State College in LaGrande. She was his teaching assistant in biology classes. They shared a common interest in animals and open spaces, and a common disinterest in cities and high technology. Neither was a stranger to wilderness. Holly had spent many a night in the woods collecting information about great grey owls for an EOSC Habitat Laboratory study. Jim had hiked hundreds of miles as a wilderness planner for the Bureau of Land Management. And both volunteered for a two-month observation

post in the Sonoran scrubland of Arizona for a study of the habitat needs of nesting southern bald eagles.

The Taylor Ranch manager position was originally advertised for one person, but the Akensons each applied and attached cover letters stating they would be interested in job-sharing.

"The intriguing thing about the job was that it offered professional opportunities for both Holly and I. It was a chance for us to pursue both our career and personal interests. We know we work well together," Jim said.

At the University of Idaho, Ed Krumpe, director of the Wilderness Research Center, was looking for a manager who not only could handle the physical maintenance at the ranch, but who understood scientific research and could adjust to a remote living situation. The Akensons' offer to job-share was attractive. With each working half-time, they would also have time to devote to research, and when one had to leave the field station the other would still be in charge.

Krumpe is bouyantly pleased with the choice he made. "Not only do they take pride in operating the ranch, but they are personally and professionally dedicated to advancing the purposes of the Wilderness Research Center," he said of the Akensons.

"Normally, when you have people working in such a remote setting you worry about them getting fed up and leaving. When Holly and Jim are out visiting, they usually want to know if it is okay if they go back early. That says a lot."

During the long winter, when she isn't counting bighorn sheep or feeding stock or writing research papers, Holly is often tallying points at a cribbage board. The game became a consuming passion for the Akensons last winter, and all summer long Holly out-pegged visiting scientists. Her winning streak was legendary.

"Part of the lifestyle we have is to follow wilderness ideals," Holly explained as she dealt out a hand of cards. Wilderness, according to the U.S. government, is a place where man is always a visitor, and yet she and Jim are year-round residents. They are well aware of how special their situation is. Although Taylor Ranch rests on private land, technically outside of the wilderness, they live without tractors or television or even visitors for most of the year. They communicate across a battery-powered radio with neighbors they have rarely seen; supplies are packed in by mule or flown in at eight cents a pound; entertainment is a deck of cards.

"When Jim and I were married we told our relatives that we didn't want to receive any electric appliances as wedding gifts because we probably wouldn't be able to use them," Holly said. "And so far we haven't. My mother-in-law, of course, thought I was crazy."

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