

Very rough draft
Oct. 30, 1985

Trying to shed some light on Idaho's prehistoric "shadowy people" is the patient task of University of Idaho anthropologist Frank Leonhardy, who has taken his quest for knowledge into the remote canyons and rocky slopes of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.

"Very, very little is known about these people that we know ethnographically as the Sheep Eater Indians, the Shoshoni, or as they called themselves the Tekedūka," Leonhardy said. "About all we know is that they occupied the Salmon River Canyon for over 2500 years and they spoke Shoshoni and ate bighorn sheep."

Leonhardy and many of his students have roamed through canyon bottoms, climbed ridgelines and surveyed riverside and lake shores trying to find more clues to the habits and food resources of the small bands of people who lived in the Canyon from about 450 to 1780 A.D.

Leonhardy's studies have been funded by \$20,000 from the National Geographic Society, \$3,000 from the University of Idaho Research Council, about \$2,000 from the U.S. Forest Service, and ^{he} lived at the University's Taylor Ranch Research Station located on Big Creek, ^{in the River of No Return Wilderness} a three-day hike from the nearest Ranger Station or a ³⁰⁻⁴⁰ ~~110~~-mile trip from Cascade, Idaho, in a small plane.

The funding has enabled Leonhardy, four students and two consultants to labor for parts of three summer field seasons in the rugged mountains of the central Idaho wilderness area. The first year was spent in a "geological reconnaissance" designed to locate potential field sites by gauging the age of ^{the} terraces, sand bars and alluvial formations that often portend archaeological sites. The next two summers were spent mapping sites, excavating "depressions" and sampling an area of nearly 118 square miles along a ^{30 miles?} ~~three-mile~~ stretch of Big Creek, which runs into the Salmon River.

"We have worked about 45 archaeological sites, but have really only surveyed about one square mile in total, or about 1 percent of the study area," Leonhardy said.

The studies have led Leonhardy to theorize that "no more than 30 and probably closer to 15 to 20" Indians lived in the Big Creek area, feeding on bighorn sheep, deer, elk and many plants indigenous to the rocky area. Other researchers have estimated a low of about 200 persons to a high of about 800 lived in the ^{entire} ~~whole~~ River of No Return Wilderness, but Leonhardy said that was based on the number of elk living in the area ^{today} and how many persons their meat might have supported.

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"The real limit is the wintertime," he said, "and how many persons could winter on the game that was found in the area. I'm convinced these people, who were hunters and gathers, were extraordinary environmentalists because they seemed to follow the plants as they ripened into fruit and knew how many game animals to kill without endangering their food source."

Two outside experts have confirmed Leonhardy's research. Lucile (cq) Housley, a Boulder, Colo., botanist who specializes in the study of Native American food plants, visited Taylor Ranch and developed a list of all the food plants that occurred in the area, their occurrence and developed some ideas on the abundance of food ^{there} ~~in the area~~.

"Her work told us that there was a lot of plant food available in the area, especially carbohydrates, that would meet the people's nutritional needs," Leonhardy said. "She also established that many of the foods could be easily stored for the winter."

Another specialist who ^{visited} many of the sites developed information on the plant communities that existed in the area. Bill Alexander, a high school teacher ^{and consultant} in Sweet Home, Ore., who is a habitat expert, identified and mapped the plant and habitat types that probably grew in the canyon centuries ago.

"The use of scientists from other disciplines is nearly a requirement for good archaeological studies," Leonhardy said. And the isolated Taylor Ranch setting lends itself to sharing interdisciplinary findings.

"You're kind of stranded down there and it's kind of nice because it gives you time to sit around and talk over ideas and share theories," Leonhardy said. "Sometimes we don't have enough time ^{in the academic world} to share this kind of interdisciplinary approach."

In fact, it was his discussion with another UI scientist working at Taylor Ranch, Gary Koehler, who is studying the habitat and range of the cougar ^{bobcat and} in the same area, that helped Leonhardy focus on the reasons the Sheep Eaters spent their winters in the Big Creek area.

"We talked and determined that they must have spent their winters where the bighorn sheep did and all the evidence says they ^{Sheep Eaters} depended on the bighorn sheep," he said. "There is really very limited evidence that they ate many ^{deer or} elk. In fact, our excavations of bones seem to indicate that for every deer they ate, they ate a minimum of three sheep."

Besides the difficulty in piecing together the scientific evidence of the Sheep Eaters existence due to the passage of centuries since they lived in the canyon, there is difficulty in finding funding to do the long-term research necessary to yield the clues archeologists need to discover the artifacts, remains of houses and to study the terrain long enough to spawn the hunches that often lead to more discoveries.

"It costs about \$7,000 to fund one nine-week field season in the wilderness," Leonhardy said. "And if it weren't for Taylor Ranch I wouldn't be here."
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shadowy people 3-3-3

as a field station for the Wilderness Research Center

The University acquired Taylor Ranch in 1969 from Jess Taylor who bought the land in 1934 from pioneer homesteader "Cougar Dave Lewis" who came into the country in 1879 and patented a homestead there on 65 acres in 1924.

Leonhardy said there were really two reasons for choosing Taylor Ranch as the site for his studies. "First, there was a variety of landforms that make the site appropriate from a scientific point of view," he said, "since there are slopes, hieroglyphics and river areas. And second, Taylor Ranch is here."

Several archaeological sites are right on the property owned by the University and another major site is only a quarter mile downstream on Big Creek. Other sites are ^{within} ~~at~~ hiking or horseback distance.

One site that remains a puzzle is high atop a mountain ridge where it appears the people lived in late summer or early fall. "My hypothesis, really the only economic reason for them to be up there was to gather whitebark pine nuts," Leonhardy said. "Although there could have been religious reasons, too."

It is widely believed that the Sheep Eaters worshipped the sun and used high mountain sites for perches where they sang their songs of praise and worship.

One reason the Sheep Eaters remain as a "shadowy people" is because much of what could have been learned about them was lost in Idaho history when "a helluva mythology started about them during the Sheep Eater Campaign," Leonhardy said.

((I have to develop some historical background here--Jane))

Another reason for the mystery has been the lack of archaeologists studying them.

"Right now there are probably only six professional archaeologists in academics in the state of Idaho," Leonhardy said. "And that's actually an improvement--20 years ago there were three."

The lack of scientists and research funding may leave unanswered such questions as the meaning of some of the hieroglyphics painted on the canyon walls in red-orange paint and the intricacies of their religion.

But archaeologists do know that the most difficult months they probably faced were in March and April before the spring "green up" occurs and food is scarce. But during the other months? "Heck, even I could probably survive very well most of the year because there is so much food down there," Leonhardy said.

However, many of the mysteries of Idaho's "shadowy people" may never be known.

"I call them the shadowy people because so very little is known about them," Leonhardy added. "But our research at Taylor Ranch is adding more to our knowledge."

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pictographs*

is this correct?