

AN HISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY ON CABIN CREEK RANCH

by

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Roderick Sprague, University of Idaho, and Mitzi Rossillon, Washington State University, conducted historic archaeological site survey at the Cabin Creek Ranch from 7 to 9 August 1978. Our research was in conjunction with the Middle Fork Reconnaissance Project which is sponsored by the Challis National Forest, the Idaho State Historical Society, Washington State University, and the University of Idaho. (The Payette National Forest Big Creek District provided logistical support for the survey on Cabin Creek.)

The selection of Cabin Creek for survey was partially in response to the Forest Service's current plans to return the ranch to wilderness since the drainage is within the Idaho Primitive Area. These plans call for the destruction of buildings and the burial of trash. However, the preservation of structures and other features of historical and archaeological significance is not in conflict with wilderness designations (Lipe 1975:8). In order to determine which features were of historical value and should be left intact and which were not of value, a historic archaeological survey was necessary. Since homesteads are of interest to the Middle Fork project in general, we concluded that both programs would benefit from such a survey.

Cabin Creek is a north-to-south flowing tributary of Big Creek, the largest west-to-east flowing tributary of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River (Fig. 1). The mouth of Cabin Creek is approximately 15 mi. from the Middle Fork. The Cabin Creek valley is narrow, generally about 200 m wide, but in relation to surrounding rugged terrain it is one of the larger flat areas to be found. There are several tributaries which drain into Cabin Creek but most are intermittent.

The valley is covered with lush vegetation, partially due to the system of irrigation ditches. The vegetation is largely grasses, willows, ponderosa pine, and other conifers. On the steep hillsides to the east and west of Cabin Creek the soil is considerably drier and vegetation is correspondingly less dense. Bitterbrush, sagebrush, and rabbitbrush are the dominant species.

At the mouth of Cabin Creek is a wide terrace covered with a dense growth of grass. Until recently this terrace was actually a marsh with willows being the dominant plant, but bulldozing and ditch construction made the area available for grazing (Kathy Gillihan, personal communication).

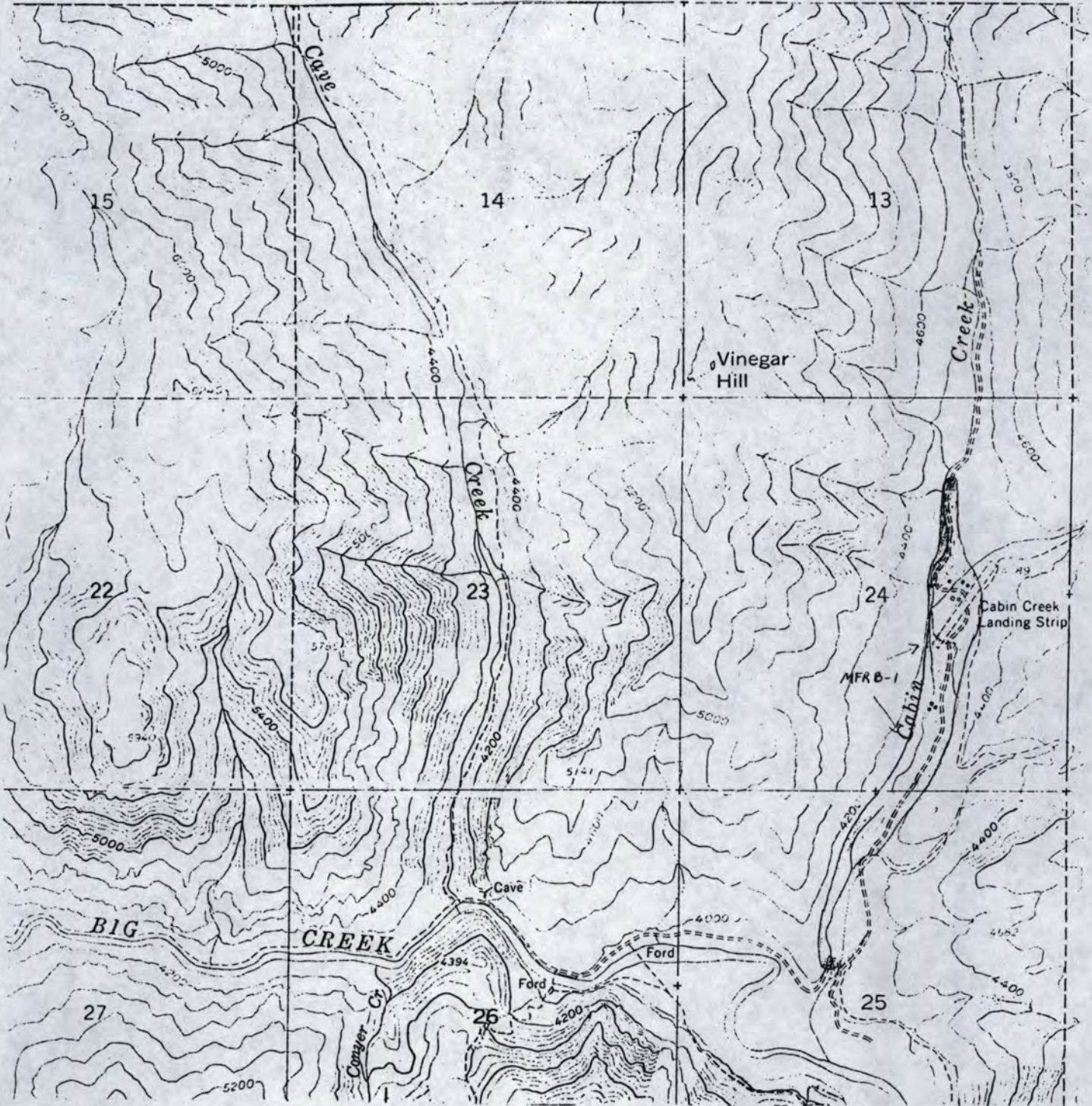


Fig. 1. Map of site location on Cabin Creek. From USGS Vinegar Hill 7.5' map, 1962.

Several prehistoric sites have been found in the immediate area (Dahlstrom 1972). Of the three sites known at Cabin Creek, all are lithic scatters. While at first glance one would suspect that the wide terrace at the mouth of Cabin Creek may have been the location of a winter village, heavy vegetation prevented adequate survey. Also, disturbance from cultivation and creek channeling has been extensive.

During our short survey we relocated one site, 10-VY-49, on the second terrace above the mouth. No new prehistoric sites were discovered, however, we surveyed Cabin Creek exclusively to locate and evaluate historic features; no evaluation of prehistoric cultural resources was made.

The history of Cabin Creek is interesting, and also important in the understanding of historic land use patterns along Big Creek. Carrey (1968), Parke (1955), and Hartung (1978) provide summaries of activity at Cabin Creek; these works should be referred to for specific details.

Undoubtedly the area saw some action in 1879 during the Sheepstealer Campaign when the Sheepstealer Indians ambushed members of the U. S. Army Cavalry along Big Creek and forced them to retreat to Vinegar Hill, 1800 ft. above and west of, Cabin Creek (Carrey and Conley 1977:118). The earliest known occupation of a more permanent nature dates to the 1890s when two men lived there. Their length of stay, occupations, and improvements on the land are no longer remembered (Parke 1955:29). Later (1895 and possibly earlier) the Caswell brothers, locators of the Dewey Mine on Thunder Mountain, lived at Cabin Creek mainly during the winter and spring. When not at Cabin Creek, the Caswells prospected on Marble Creek (Thunder Mountain) or stayed at their place on Rush Creek, possibly at what is presently known as the Taylor Ranch (Caswell 1895-1902). During the gold rush to Thunder Mountain John Conyers raised cattle at Cabin Creek. In 1910 John Routson and Orlando Mell Able (Able) bought the property, Routson staying there with his family for one year and Able staying until he was murdered at the ranch in 1920 (Correy 1968:52-53). A total of four homesteads were patented along Cabin Creek (Fig. 2). Several owners came and went in the drainage following the early patents, including the Wallaces, L. K. Hollenbeck, and Rex Lanham (Valley County Deed Records). Between 1963 and 1973 Rex Lanham owned all of the property on Cabin Creek and ran the place as a hunting/outfitter ranch. In 1973 the U. S. Forest Service bought the property in their ongoing efforts to secure all private holdings in the Idaho Primitive Area.

Archaeological evidence of each of those occupations may or may not be present today. Due to the short amount of time which was spent in the field and also due to the very dense vegetation along Cabin Creek, our efforts to record historic features were generally limited to those buildings which the Forest Service caretakers, Al and Rita Romaine, brought to our attention. Since these include all of the features which may be disassembled and buried, there will be no danger to historic features potentially of value yet not found during our reconnaissance.

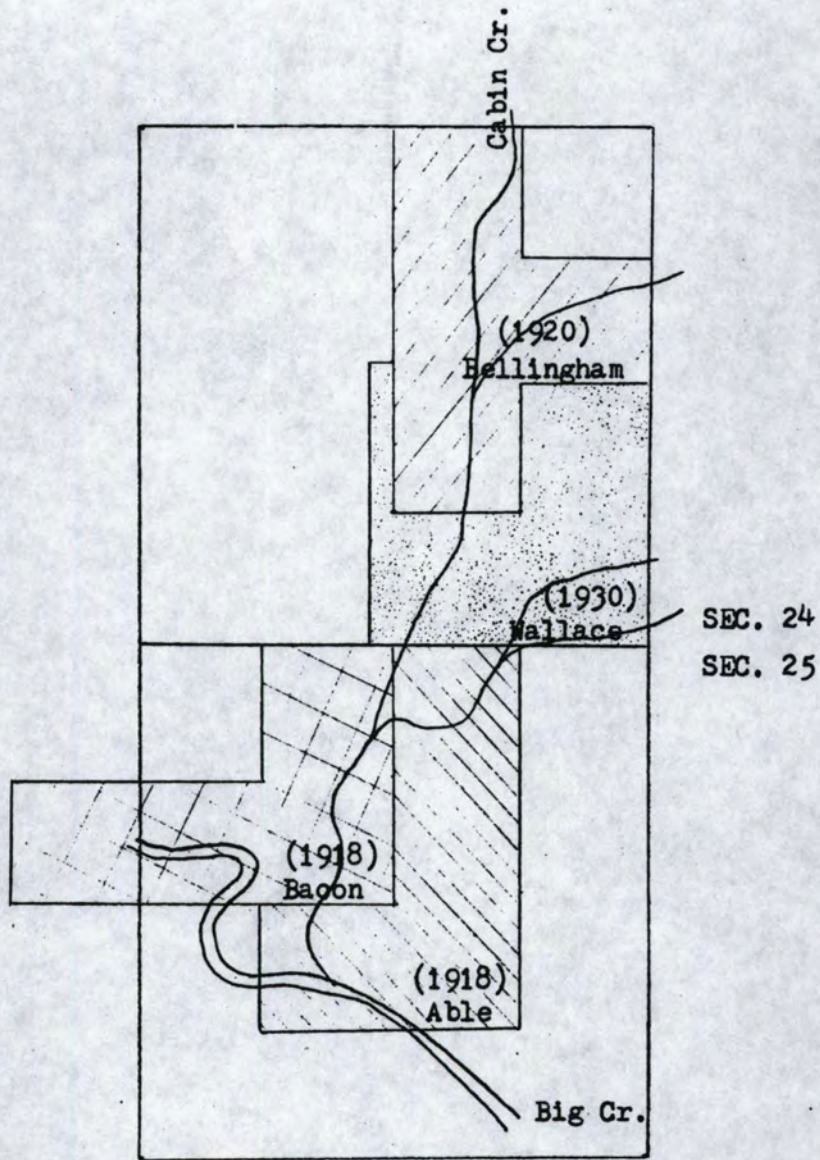


Fig. 2. Map of survey area showing homestead boundaries, patent dates, and names of homesteaders. From Land Status Record T21N, R12E, Payette National Forest.

The survey was conducted on foot with detailed forms completed for each structure and feature. The structure form includes data on: building dimensions, roof style, siding, construction techniques, type of foundation, approximate date of construction, present use and condition, and other details of relevance. Black and white and color photographs were also taken of each structure and feature.

How do the recorded features correspond with our knowledge of the history of Cabin Creek as revealed through documents? (Refer to the map in Figs. 3, 4, and 5, and the building number identification list in Table 1 throughout this section.)

While Hartung (1978:76) attributed Buildings 32, 33, and 34 at Cabin Creek to the Caswell occupation, his conclusions are based on local legend and therefore may not be correct. Artifacts associated with those buildings are scarce and are also not diagnostic of a very specific time period. Nevertheless it is clear from the location of the structures, their present condition, and some of the artifacts associated that these are some of the earliest historic remains recorded during our survey. The buildings may have been built by the Caswell brothers; however, they may have belonged to the Archie Bacon family on whose homestead they were situated.

Buildings 30 and 31, in the same general area as Nos. 32-34, have few artifacts which indicate the date of occupation. Furthermore, most of those artifacts may possibly be attributed to reuse of the structures. Nevertheless the condition of the buildings would suggest that they are older than 50 years.

John Conyers' cabin was located west of Cabin Creek (General Land Office surveyor's map 1910). Because we concentrated our efforts on features which were recognized by the Romaines, our survey on the west bank in that general vicinity was limited to the area of Buildings 32-34. Therefore we did not locate the Conyers cabin although the foundation and associated artifacts may still exist.

No structures were recorded for the area of Able's homestead, yet to comply with Homestead Act regulations the rancher must have constructed improvements. Once again, our survey did not cover all areas encompassed by the original homesteads, so perhaps remains of those improvements were in areas not surveyed.

Building 29 has the "feel" of an older structure, but the few artifacts which are associated give little indication of the time of occupation. It is within the Bacon homestead and may be associated with that family, but it may also be of a later date.

All of the recorded buildings and features which are north of Building 29 apparently are less than 50 years old. In fact the majority were constructed during the 1950s and 1960s. One exception is Building 20 which dates back to the 1930s and possibly earlier (Kathy Gillihan, personal communication). This structure has been reused innumerable times and diagnostic artifacts from

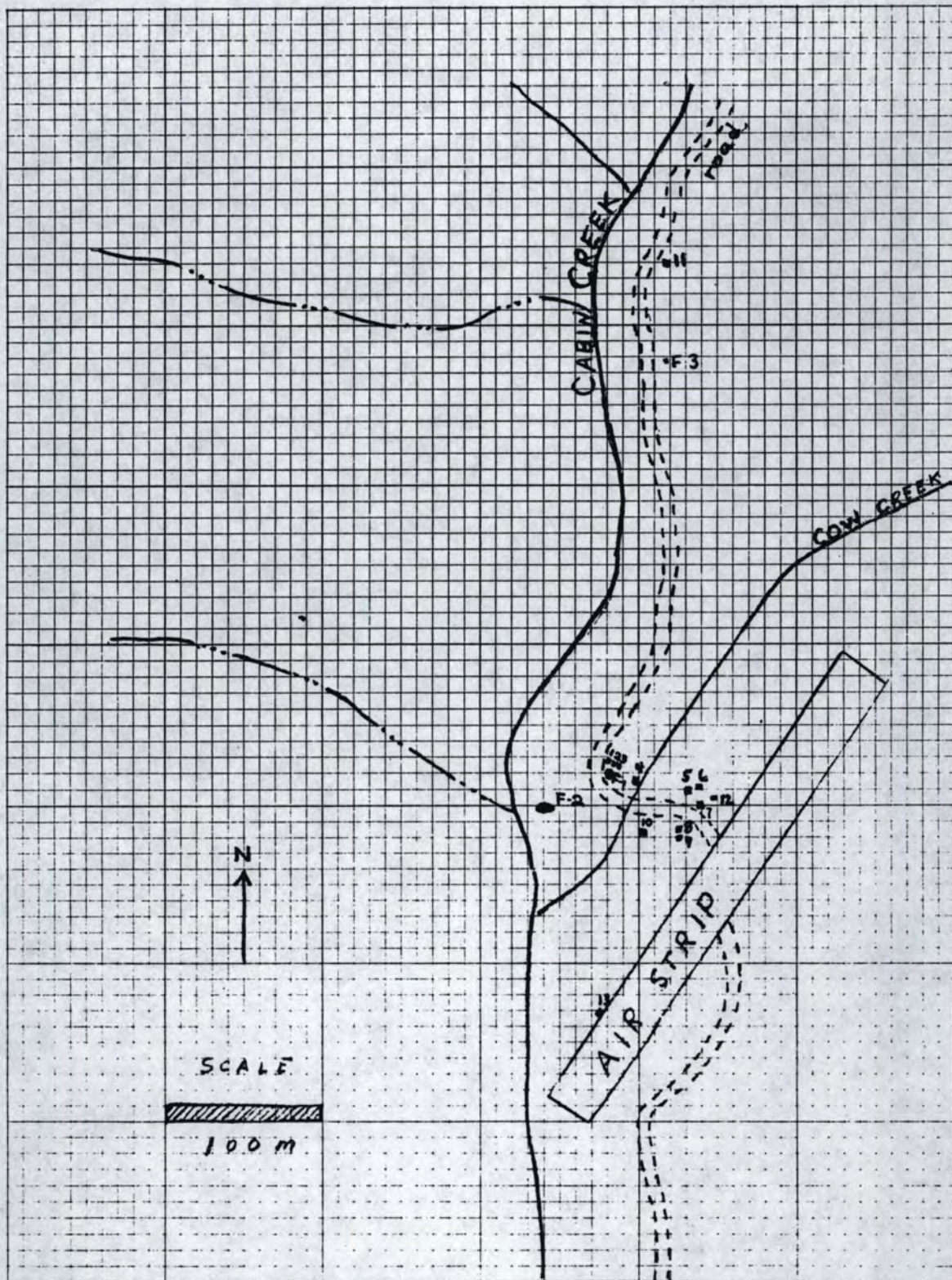


Fig. 3. Field sketch map of survey area, northern portion.

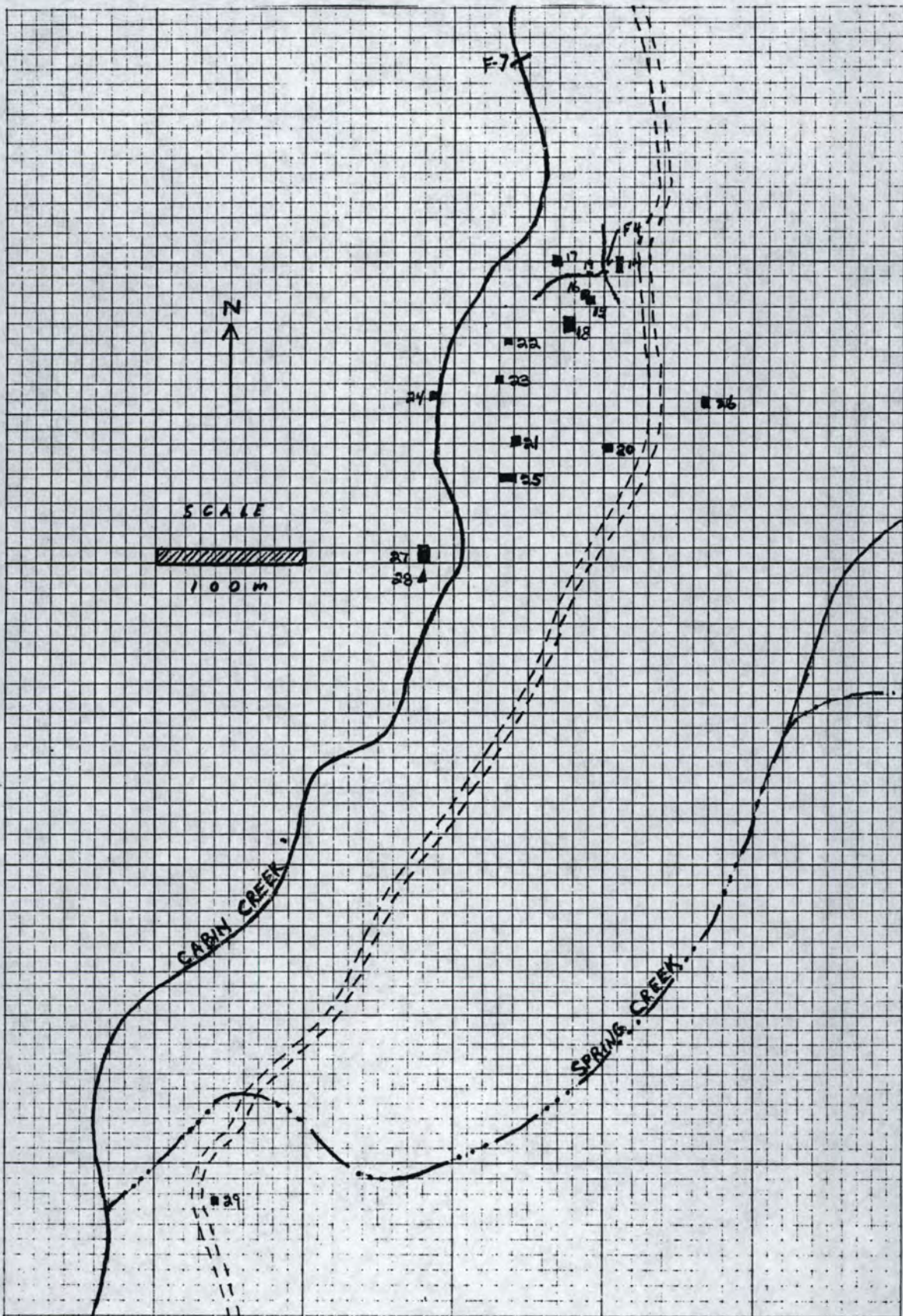


Fig. 4. Field sketch map of survey area, central portion.

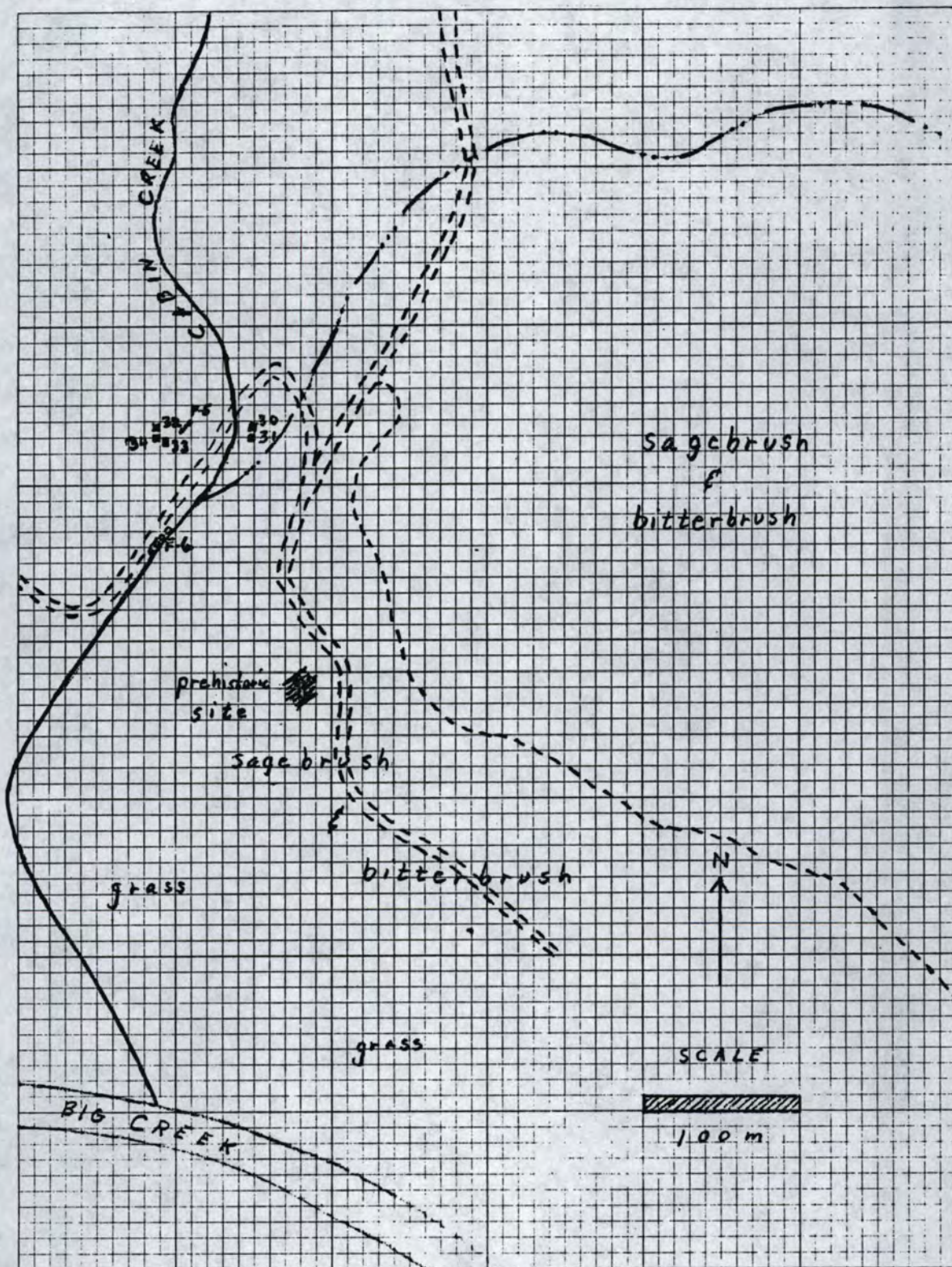


Fig. 5. Field sketch map of survey area, southern portion.

TABLE 1: Building Number Identification List

Building Number	Description
1	hunter's cabin with log and shingle walls
2	wood shed which was recently torn down
3	stable made of poles with tarpaper roof
4	old lodge constructed by the Wallaces
5	red cabin with antlers over entrance
6	wood shed stone and mortar foundation
7	grey cabin
8	hanger
9	skinning house/power plant shed
10	upper horse barn
11	saw mill
12	outhouse
13	shop (most recent structure at site)
14	duplex
15	bunkhouse (was Wallace's house)
16	laundry room
17	manager's house
18	lodge
19	spring house
20	post office
21	small cabin tool storage
22	upper 2 hole outhouse
23	lower 2 hole outhouse
24	powerhouse
25	Rex Lanham home
26	cellar
27	lower barn
28	hay derrick
29	alfalfa field cabin
30	blacksmith shop
31	cabin with rosebushes
32	large cellar with stone walls
33	large stone foundation to dwelling
34	smaller cellar

Feature Number	Description
1	large dumping area of cans and assorted trash
2	old saw mill
3	small, square, cement foundation
4	divider gate in ditch system
5	line of rocks
6	stone wall for road stabilization?
7	dam

the original occupations are long since buried or gone. It appears that rebuilding, clean-up operations, etc., conducted by more recent owners have eliminated all evidence of earlier occupations at the northern end of the site. Buildings 1-28, with the exception of No. 20, have no apparent historical or archaeological significance at this time.

After recording and evaluating 34 buildings and 7 features on the Cabin Creek Ranch, we make the following recommendations in regard to Forest Service clean-up operations at the site. All "features" are less than 50 years old and are of no historical or archaeological significance at this time. They may be destroyed and/or buried if such is seen fit for the area's return to wilderness. Buildings 1-28, except No. 20, are likewise of no value and may be removed. Buildings 20 and 29-34 are obviously older than the others at the ranch and are probably more than 50 years old. While the people who inhabited them are of historical interest, the structures themselves are of little or no historical value. Architecturally Buildings 20, 29, 30, and 31 are not unique and so are not of particular value in that respect. The artifacts in and surrounding Buildings 20, 29, 30, and 31 generally appear to belong to periods of reuse -- not the times of original occupation. Those artifacts are of no archaeological interest at this time. Therefore Buildings 20, 29, 30, and 31 may be razed if such is deemed necessary. However, the ground surface must not be disturbed should these buildings be removed. Historical artifacts of archaeological interest may be present below the surface and these should be conserved for future reference and study.

Building and feature removal should be limited to those structures discussed in this report. Any project elsewhere should be first cleared by an archaeologist. Further, if any artifacts or foundations of apparent antiquity are uncovered during clean-up at the ranch, work must stop immediately and an archaeologist consulted for evaluation of the materials.

Soon after the Forest Service acquired the Cabin Creek property, Tom Green, the state archaeologist, visited the site to check two clean-up dumping holes for archaeological sites. Trash and dismantled structures will be buried in these holes as part of the clean-up. He found no sites at either of the areas and gave a clearance for their use. No other dumping holes should be dug and used unless they also are cleared by an archaeologist.

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