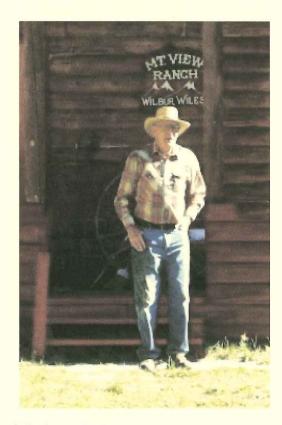
WILBUR WILES MASTER OF THE RIVER OF NO RETURN WILDERNESS

BY RICHARD HOLM JR.



(Wilbur Wiles fall of 2006 looking onward from his home in Edwardsburg)

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I had heard many stories about Wilbur Wiles, and one fall afternoon on my way back from a fishing trip on Big Creek I decided to finally stop and meet him. Knowing that he was still an avid outdoorsman, I was surprised to catch him at his home. Wiles was cleaning his yard and stacking firewood when I pulled into his driveway. I introduced myself and told him that I would like to record some of his knowledge of the greater Big Creek area as well as his own history, which I found go hand in hand. Wiles, a thin well built man, wearing a plaid button-down shirt, jeans, and work boots, looked half his age and welcomed me in for a cup of coffee and the two of us sat down in his living room. The cabin perched above Edwardsburg offered great vistas of the fall colors and the freshly fallen snow on the tops of Logan and Goat Mountains. The view served as the perfect backdrop since the surrounding country I was looking at was as much a part of the conversation as Wilbur. Over the course of the fall I stopped by several more times to share a cup of coffee, enjoy the view, and most importantly hear one of the most understated men I have met tell of his amazing experiences living in some of the most remote and rugged areas in the U.S. What follows is an attempt to put in writing some of those late fall morning conversations.

Wilbur Wiles Master of the River of No Return Wilderness

Wiles grew up on a farm in Goodale, Iowa with his older brother and two younger sisters, and learned to trap at a young age. He remembers that the first animal he caught at age four or five on his own was a weasel. From that point on Wiles would set trap lines in the morning and then walk three miles to school. After school he would work the line before he went home. He caught a little of everything, but mainly muskrat and mink. The trapping business allowed him to buy a few extra items such as a Model T Ford, which he drove to Idaho after graduating from high school in 1934. Wilbur Wiles chose to move west because he had heard stories about the Idaho and Wyoming region of the Tetons from a cousin.

After Wiles arrived in Idaho he left his automobile in Marysville, and trapped for the winter and did pretty well. After the season ended he traveled in his Model T to Los Angles and then to Mexico for about two months, doing some logging in various places. He was then hired by Nevada Construction Company, which was building a dam at Henry's Lake near Yellowstone. His main job at the dam project was clearing and cutting timber. By 1935 he worked his way south of Yellowstone as a logger, and the following year found himself logging for a month at Scotts Valley near Cascade, Idaho. During his brief stay in Valley County in 1936 he spent time exploring the country. One trip led him to the Salmon River area near Riggins where his was one of the first cars to drive on the newly built Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) road down to French Creek. There was one car in front of him that pulled off on the shoulder of the road and just as Wiles passed, the shoulder gave way and the other car fell off the road. The sole occupant jumped out uninjured as his car slid down the steep slope. Wiles stopped and gave the driver of the vehicle a ride to Riggins.

After his summer adventures he traveled north to Mullen, Idaho, near Kellogg, looking for a job as a miner. After one look at the operation he decided that it was not for him and took up with Nevada Construction again, clearing forests for a dam project on the Mississippi River in Wisconsin. While on the job he and his Norwegian friend, Carl, heard about well paying jobs out west in the area of Spokane, Washington. So they packed up all their worldly possessions and went to Spokane only to arrive during a large labor strike. Wiles and Carl were not discouraged yet, for they only wanted enough money to make it to Alaska so they could really get rich. After several odd jobs in Washington state, Wiles wanted to go where he could begin trapping again. Concluding that the dream of Alaska was not feasible, he mentioned to Carl a place he had heard about while living in Idaho -- Big Creek. After Wiles' description, Carl gave him a funny look and replied, "Sounds too remote for me." At the age of twenty-two Wiles moved to the Big Creek area, eager to carve out a life in the beautiful, wild, and open region that was rich with possibilities.

Wiles reached Big Creek for the first time in August of 1938 not knowing he would call the area his home from then on. He drove his 1921 Dodge laundry truck with twenty-one inch wheels through Edwardsburg and passed Big Creek headed toward Monumental Creek and drove until he could go no farther. A locked chain gate hung across the road and Wiles decided he had traveled far

enough for one day so he set up camp. A few days later a truck came in from Big Creek. The driver, Enmon, was an apple grower from Washington state who not only invested money in the Snowshoe mine, but also had a contract running supplies in, and ore out of the mine. To get to the Snowshoe, Enmon had to drive across Mr. Miner's mining claim (now called Miners Hill) and in return Enmon paid him by supplying him with groceries. The gated off area known as the Transfer Station was located between the bottom of Smith Creek and Beaver Creek. On this particular day Enmon did not have any groceries to give him and Mr. Miner was not happy. Begrudgingly he did open the gate. Once they arrived at the Snowshoe, Wiles wanted to get the lay of the land and he went on a camping trip as far as Cold Meadows Guard Station where he met Tom Coski, the Cold Meadows Guard. Coski gave him some general information about the area and told him of some people to talk to for living arrangements. On the way back to his camping spot Wiles met the Jensen brothers who told him about a cabin on Monumental Creek that was built by Bert McCoy in 1925 and had not been used for five years. After a few days back at camp he got up one morning to discover the chain gate left unlocked. Eager to reach the cabin the Jensens told him about he loaded his supplies on the truck, drove as far as he could, hiked to the cabin, and moved in. After getting settled Wiles decided he should stock up on supplies for the winter. He hiked out, hopped in the truck and headed toward Cascade and to his surprise and relief the gate at the transfer station was open (he never saw it locked again).

With a full load of supplies that cost him thirty-three dollars, which would be plenty to last him the winter, he made it to the old wooden bridge at Monumental Creek. Noel Routson, and his crew of seasonal Forest Service workers were re-decking the bridge. Wiles told Routson he was moving into the old McCoy cabin about a mile from the bridge. Routson eyed the supplies that weighed nearly one ton and told him he was crazy to think he was going to pack that load to his cabin without mules or horses. Routson offered to pack the supplies in on his horses if he helped them finish the decking on the bridge. Wiles was more than happy to help. That was the beginning of a long friendship.

Another family Wiles felt fortunate to meet was the Scotts. Dick and his wife had trapped in the Snowshoe area during the past five winters and were ready to get out of the business and move to Oregon. Wiles saw this as a great opportunity and bought out their supplies, which included: two horses, two pair of skis, and some other miscellaneous items. Unfortunately Mrs. Scott passed away in Oregon while giving birth to their first-born a year or two later.

The first winter Wiles trapped the areas around Monumental Creek, Catherine Lake, and Lower Ramey Meadows. When in the Catherine Lake area he stayed in a nice cabin built in the trees on the south end of the lake by Dan McRae and another trapper in 1914 (he still believes it is mostly intact today except for the roof). He occupied a cabin at Lower Ramey Meadows while in that area but does not know who built it. Wiles says, "Anybody in real good shape could go from Lower Ramey to Catherine, which I did a few times, in one day, but it was a good days work." This is some twenty miles, with a roughly four to five thousand foot vertical gain. The only other person he knew that was trapping in the area was his friend Joe Powell, who had a cabin at Cave Creek. Powell trapped mainly in the vicinity of Cave Creek and Papoose Creek.

During his early years of trapping Wiles mainly trapped marten because the furs sold for \$20 to \$25 apiece, at a time when the minimum wage was 15 cents an hour. He also trapped coyotes, fox, and other animals. Every winter he would vary his trapping areas to allow the populations to multiply again. He generally was on about a three-year rotation. For example, the second winter of 1939 and 1940 he trapped beyond Catherine Lake into Wet Meadows where he had a tent set up. Other years he started from the head of Little Indian Creek to Shellrock and Stoddard Creek. Then the following season he worked the other side from Wet Meadows to Chamberlain. Throughout his time trapping in these areas he used various cabins, which included one on Chamberlain Creek, Cave Creek, Flossie Lake, Papoose Creek (built by the Jensen Brothers), and a cabin known as the Hand or Sheepeater Cabin (built by James Hand). When he could not get to one of the cabins he would simply take shelter under a tree, build a fire and hunker down. His first few years he did most of his trapping using skis, but eventually moved to "bear paw" snowshoes. He says both modes of snow travel had their advantages and disadvantages, but overall he preferred the snowshoes.

In 1939, his first off-season of fur trapping, Wiles became interested in prospecting. Tom Brumet, who had a cabin on Coxey Creek, showed him the ropes. At the time Wiles was twenty-two years old. He thought Brumet to be about 56, but old Brumet knew his way around the artful trade. The two of them, started out at Big Creek then followed Golden Creek down to the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Before Golden Creek flowed into the Middle Fork it turned into a large waterfall that cascaded into the river below. The surrounding terrain was too steep to maneuver through and by this time Brumet and Wiles were not willing to turn back. After some discussion the two decided to rappel down the waterfall with ropes. It was a bit dangerous, but all went well and they continued down the Middle Fork and the Main Salmon to Barth Hot Springs. At the springs Wiles met some of Brumet's friends, Jack Griffen and his wife, along with Bert Rhodes. The group of three was also placer mining near the springs where the cable bridge crossed the Main Salmon. The trip was not a giant success as far as the prospecting went, but Wiles picked up the basic foundation of skills and knowledge that he would use from then on. For a short time after the trip he worked with Forest Service Ranger Dan LeVan helping rebuild trails in the areas of Soldier Bar and Eagan Point.

In the late fall of 1940 Wiles met Bill Timm, an older gentleman who had come to the area as an assayer during the Thunder Mountain gold rush. It was rumored that Timm graduated from Yale University. Even with his background Timm lived for the backcounty and originally had a mining claim and cabin in the Thunder Mountain mining district. At their first meeting the two got along well. After a cup of coffee, Timm offered to give him a horse, as he had no way to winter it, and usually spent the cold months in California. In about 1948 Timm relocated to a cabin on the south side of Big Creek across from the mouth of Beaver Creek. Wiles helped him move all of his belongings to this new location. The two remained friends for years until Timm passed away in the late 1950s.

After another season of trapping, in 1940 Wiles went to work for the Snowshoe mine. It was his first time working in a mine and one afternoon he was working down in the shaft and someone yelled, "Fire in the hole." No one

had told him what to do when he heard this announcement. Before he could comprehend it, he was knocked down. After that another employee, Red Flynn, took him aside and showed him the ins and outs. Also, about this time Wiles sold his trusty laundry truck to a Kentucky kid working at the mine and bought a sporty Ford Model-A roadster. After about a month the Snowshoe closed and Ranger LeVan offered him a job.

LeVan needed extra men for trail and roadwork. Wiles cleared the road from Big Creek to Monumental Creek. While on the job he met Noel Routson's father, John, who was the Forest Service crew foreman. John and Wiles hit it off. After the roadwork was finished Wiles said he would stay on working under John. John led the crew north, clearing trail up Smith Creek, Mosquito Ridge, Crane Creek, and into Hand Meadows. Wiles continued working the rest of the summer for the Forest Service, but declined further work when Bob McRae, who owned the Sunday Mine up Logan Creek, offered him a job for more money. Wiles worked for McRae until the beginning of the trapping season.

In March 1941 Wiles and his friend Jack Clem decided to enlist in the Army. Wiles sold his Model A and a 30-30 rifle to Fred Erickson, a friend he had met while working at the Snowshoe, and everything else he owned he gave away. They made contact with the Army and one morning hiked out of Big Creek on snowshoes to Yellow Pine, where they were supposed to get a ride to Cascade and from there go to Salt Lake. They got delayed one month at Cascade and Sole Calendar hired the boys to mend fence. Eventually the two arrived in Salt Lake City where they enlisted on April 21, 1941 as privates. Wiles spent the majority of World War II in the Army and took part in the D-Day invasion on Omaha Beach.

After being honorably discharged from the Army in the fall of 1946 he bought a Ford passenger car and made his way back to Idaho, hoping to get into Big Creek before the snow became too deep. It was late October and the snow had already settled in. A few miles north of Yellow Pine the familiar face of Napier Edwards was spotted on the road and he told Wiles he did not think he would make it over Profile Summit. Wiles reasoned he had nothing to lose by trying. Edwards hopped in the car with him and the two made it as far as Red Meadows when the deep snow made the road impassable. Edwards thanked him for the ride and hiked the rest of the way into Big Creek. Wiles on the other hand had no particular plans so he turned around and drove to Stibnite looking for some work. He ran into Bob McRae who was working as the mine superintendent for Bradley Mining Company. The company had a contract with the Dewey Mine and needed more men to help complete the contract. Wiles took the job and he and Art Frances spent most of the winter through April opening up a tunnel.

After his few months in Stibnite, the road to Big Creek was plowed open and he made his way back to his home on Monumental Creek. He resumed his way of life, trapping in the winter and mining during the summer. In addition to his place on Monumental, Wiles purchased a small cabin located on a nice piece of property in Big Creek/Edwardsburg in 1947.

During the winter of 1947 – 1948 Wiles trapped the Chamberlain Basin portion of his route. It was one of the heaviest snow years he had ever seen. Due to the deep snow he thought he might have better luck cougar hunting at a

lower altitude with less snow. Early one morning while out near Sheepeater he dropped off the ridge for about five miles and began hiking down the Main Salmon River, only to find three feet of snow along the riverbank. After awhile Wiles spotted a small cabin he believed to be Buckskin Bills. He had never formally met him but had heard stories of a man with an imaginative self-image who portrayed himself as a wild mountain man. Wiles knocked on the door of the small place and the little man stuck his head out of the door while holding one hand steady on his belt and the other on the door, "Are you with the game department?" Wiles introduced himself and the two sat down and chatted over a cup of coffee. Later Wiles learned why Buckskin clutched his belt where he did; he kept a concealed knife there for protection. The two parted ways for the evening with the agreement that Wiles would take Buckskin cougar hunting the following morning.

They met up early and made their way up Blowout Creek. Wiles and his Redbone hounds treed Buckskin a "big old tom cat." Despite Buckskin's elaborate efforts to make himself look like a true mountain man, Wiles had to admit he was a good shot. Buckskin took the cat in one shot and Wiles cleaned the cougar and gave Buckskin the hide. Years later Buckskin took this cougar skin back to Kansas to show his friends back home how "wild" it was where he lived. Wiles then prepared to dispose of the remains and Buckskin made a big fuss about keeping the meat. Wiles had never heard of anyone eating cougar meat. The debate continued as the two hiked back toward the river. Buckskin challenged Wiles by saying he probably could not tell the difference between cougar and other meats. He invited him over for dinner the next night. Wiles hesitantly showed up, not knowing what to expect. Buckskin had prepared a feast for the two of them, which included several meat platters (elk, mountain sheep, venison, pork chops, and, of course, cougar). After a taste test of each. Buckskin asked Wiles to indicate the best tasting. Naturally the best tasting meat was the cougar.

A few winters later Wiles found that Buckskin's cougar recipe came in handy. He was hunting and trapping his Rush Creek route one afternoon and ran a cougar several miles down Rush Creek before he caught up with it. He finished cleaning up and estimated he had a good six-hour hike back to his camp in the dark. So he took up shelter under a tree with his hounds and prepared a small fire. He had very little food with him and decided he should save what he did have for himself and feed the hounds the cougar meat. The hounds would not touch it. He figured he would roast it up like Buckskin Bill. After it was done Wiles decided he would try a small piece just to see if his taste buds had deceived him that night with Buckskin. Sure enough it was not too bad. He cut himself up a few pieces and once the hounds saw him eating they too decided it was edible.

In 1948 while hunting cougar on McCalla Creek Wiles became acquainted with another backcountry friend, Ed James. James was with George McCoy and the two were looking for some lost cows. McCoy was working for Blondie McGill who owned a ranch in Chamberlain Basin. A year or so later McGill sold the ranch to the Idaho Fish and Game Department. James went on to do several odd jobs in the backcountry, including packing for the Forest Service.

Most think of the holidays as time to be at home with friends and family,

but for Wiles he was busy working deep in the primitive area and usually did not have time to travel out to see people. In about 1949 or 1950 he thought he made it clear to a handful of people at Big Creek that he would not be back for Christmas. About a week before Christmas, a lady in town started to spread a rumor that Wilbur Wiles was lost and missing. Just by chance Wiles decided to head into Big Creek for supplies and arrived on Christmas Eve. The first few people he met greeted him with more enthusiasm than he had ever seen before when passing through. Eventually someone mentioned the rumor and Wiles of course was surprised to hear that he was missing. "Heck," he retorted, "I know where I am." Needless to say no one ever reported the master of the backcountry missing or lost again.

Although Wiles was never lost in the backcountry he did have his share of close calls. One incident occurred near Copper Camp on his was back to Big Creek. He had two seven-month old Plott hound pups and his new pups picked up the smell of a cougar and took after the cat. He arrived to find that the pups had treed a large cougar. Not outfitted for hunting, Wiles was only carrying two weapons, a .38 automatic pistol and a trusty pocketknife. He pulled the .38 out and took a shot; it appeared the bullet struck the cougar behind one ear. dropping the large cat to the ground. Thinking the cat was dead, he searched in his bag for some chain to tie the pups up with, but once again he was not prepared for cougar hunting and only had baling wire to tie the dogs with before approaching the cat. It turned out the cougar was only stunned and took off in the deep snow. At his point the dogs were going wild, and one of the pups broke loose, tracking the cougar into a large downed tree. Wiles guickly pursued and found the two entangled in a fierce fight. Wiles was not going to stand idly by and watch his new pup get killed, so he guickly pulled out his pistol. With his adrenaline pumping he shoved the gun against the cat's head and pulled the trigger. Click! The gun malfunctioned! Before Wiles knew what was going on, the great animal had his arm in her claws and began to tear into him. The cat bit his hand and two of her large canines nearly went clear through, an injury that still bothers him to this day. He continued to wrestle the cougar trying to fend her off. Luckily, the little pup came to his aid and knocked the cougar down long enough for Wiles to reach his pocket knife, but not before the cat bit through his right boot and clawed his other arm. Wiles gained his footing and slugged the cougar in the jaw, allowing him to cut the cougar's throat, ending the terrific struggle. Blackie, the young pup who help save his life, lived for several more years and treed many more cougars. Blackie also helped Wiles train one of his best hounds. Red. who went on to tree over 220 cougars. After Wiles cleaned the cougar and gathered his wits he made his way to the Big Creek store to see if he could find some antibiotics, the storeowner looked him up and down and thought he needed more than just some antibiotics, besides he had nothing of the sort. Friend, Bob McRea showed up shortly there after and insisted that he be flown out for some medical attention. Wiles was not interested in leaving the area as he had obligations such as feeding his stock. While Wiles and McRea argued, the storeowner started spreading the news of the fight by telephone. No infection ever set in, just a few permanent scars. Wiles to the time of this writing modestly explains, "The story and the details have grown larger and larger over the years, much more so than the truth, but one thing is for sure. I never have

used that .38 automatic since or any gun like it."

The trapping business shifted slightly in the early 1950s. The major change was that retailers were no longer able to call marten furs "sables," so the prices plummeted from \$25 to \$5 per fur. With the price change, marten trapping was no longer lucrative for Wiles. At this point he focused more on hunting and trapping beavers and continued on occasion to hunt cougar as they brought in about \$50 per fur. When not trapping during the winter of 1950-51, Wiles worked on his tungsten claim he had located during the summer on Elk Creek Summit. He ran the first 400 feet of the drift over the winter. He found a good vein; and at the time, tungsten was being stockpiled by the government so it held a price of \$62 per ton. He leased the claim to McRae for a few years while prices remained high. However, the prices severely dropped to around \$15 per ton and it was not worth mining anymore. Wiles still owns the claim and says if the price ever goes back up he has plenty of tungsten to start mining.

A few more winters of trapping had come and gone and by 1955 Wiles had purchased deeded ground from Axel Fockenberg in Edwardsburg. He spent the summer building a small house on the property that he used frequently when not trapping or at his other home on Monumental. In 1957 Wiles built a new home next to the original 1925 cabin at Monumental. From then on he used the new cabin as his residence and the original cabin as storage.

In 1960 Wiles staked another claim in the area, but this time it was an opal mine on Mud Creek, which is a tributary of Monumental Creek. He located a decent sized deposit and has had some good luck finding gem-quality opals over the years. He took on two partners including good friend, Jim Collard, (Wiles first met Jim and his wife, Marge in 1940 and has remained close to their family ever since) and Bill Davis. The 1960s led Wiles into both opal mining and a very intriguing project where he was able to use his knowledge of the area, his skills as an expert outdoors man, and as a trapper. The project was presented to him on a July day in 1964 when biologist Maurice Hornocker introduced himself and his research project to Wiles at his home near Big Creek. Hornocker wanted to conduct a study of cougars to better understand them and he sought out Wiles along with his well-trained hounds to help him. Hornocker was working on his doctoral degree through the University of Idaho. Wiles, of course, was up to the challenge and agreed to help Hornocker with the project.

The cougar project lasted five winters during which the two trudged over 5,000 miles, mainly on snowshoes, tracking, treeing, tranquilizing, examining, weighing, marking, and releasing nearly fifty different mountain lions. Hornocker reasoned the project would be easier to conduct during the months of November to May because cougars could be more easily tracked in the snow. In addition, the snow at the high elevations restricted the mountain lions and their prey to the lower elevations. Wiles explained that they used several camps, most of which he had used on his various trapping routes. The main camp was at the Taylor Ranch with smaller camps (tents) along the way at Rush Creek, Cave Creek, and Waterfall Creek. In addition to these camps they used the cabin at Coxey Creek and Wiles' residence on Monumental Creek. To prepare for the long winters at the various camps, Hornocker had supplies flown into the Taylor Ranch. From here Wiles used three packhorses to transport the goods to all the camps. Included in the supplies were dog food, dried food, and meat. To prevent animals

from getting into their crucial supplies Wiles placed some of the food in waterproof bags and hung them from poles tied between trees. Canned foods were buried to prevent freezing and an ample amount of firewood was split and stacked. Along with these items Wiles would shoot two deer and an elk and the meat was wrapped in canvas and distributed to the various camps where it was hung frozen and could be thawed when they arrived.

The preparation and hard work over the five-year time span paid off as the two debunked many misconceptions and misunderstandings about the mountain lions. During the five-year study it was not uncommon for Wiles to carry out much of the fieldwork on his own while Hornocker was busy working on other aspects of the project. Wiles believes he and his dogs treed over two hundred cats (many multiple times) for the study. Hornocker wrote of his findings and experiences of working with Wiles in the article, "Stalking the Mountain Lion – to Save Him," which appeared in the November 1969 *National Geographic*. Hornocker went on to become world famous as the expert of large cats. His experiences with Wiles were a crucial part of the foundation for this field of science.

In 1974 Wiles spent the summer building his second home in Edwardsburg at the site of the Edwards' former vegetable garden. The Edwards' Chinese cook, China Sam, dug a ditch from Government Creek to the hill above Wiles' current house and utilized the leveled area as a garden starting sometime between 1910 and 1920. Napier Edwards told Wiles that Sam chose the spot because it was three degrees warmer than the flat area at Edwardsburg. At one point Sam planted several fruit trees, but only one cherry tree ever bore fruit. Sam eventually left the Edwards to return to China in search of a young wife.

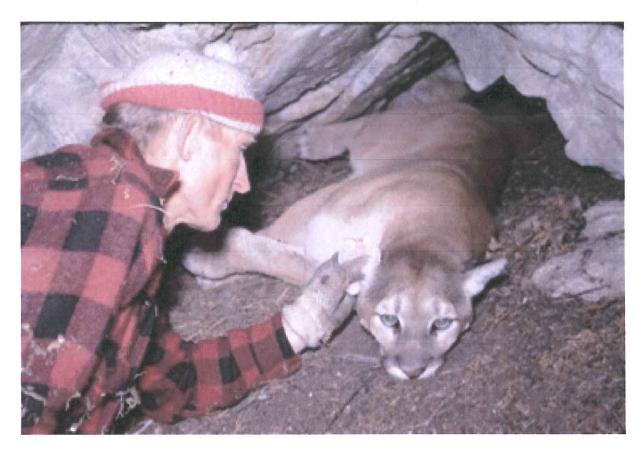
Wiles carried out his rugged routine until the early 1980s when he married Kate Thrall. His wife did not enjoy the high country winters like Wiles and they began to spend more time in the Boise area and winters in Arizona. Eventually Kate's health declined to the point where she was unable to make it back to Big Creek. Once a month during the summer Wiles made day trips to his cabins on Monumental and then would return to Boise. Shortly after his wife passed away he moved back to Big Creek. The last official winter he spent at his home in the mountains was 1998 and he would still like to, but for health reasons winters in a small town northwest of Phoenix. Up until several years ago Wiles worked his opal mine, but recently sold his portion to Jim Collard's daughter. Wiles comes back every summer and stays as long as the snow will permit. He no longer visits his original home on Monumental, as it was lost to a wildfire in 2000. However, maintaining the grounds of the Mountain View Ranch to Wiles' standards of perfection keeps him quite busy. Once the garden and yard are tended to, Wiles still spends a good portion of his time hiking the country he loves and respects so much.



Wiles lowering a 151 pound tranquilized cougar down during the cougar study in February 1967 (Photo courtesy of Dr. Maurice Hornocker)



Wiles preparing to record information on a cougar during the study in February 1966 (Photo courtesy of Dr. Maurice Hornocker)



Wiles studying previously marked cougar in February 1966 (Photo courtesy of Maurice Hornocker)



Wiles climbing a tree after tranquilizing a cougar (Photo courtesy of Dr.Maurice Hornocker)

