

"COUGAR DAVE"

THE STORY OF DAVID LEWIS
QUINTESSENTIAL MAN OF THE WILDERNESS
and other historical notes about the
UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO TAYLOR RANCH
WILDERNESS FIELD STATION

Compiled By
PETER PRESTON



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David Lewis came to be known as "Cougar Dave" to most people and his backcountry friends knew him as "Uncle Dave." By whatever name, Dave Lewis was a unique individual, the type of man about whom folklore is woven. Cougar Dave spent all of his adult life in the Western wilderness, most of that time on lower Big Creek in central Idaho, in what is now known as the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, administered by the U.S.D.A. Forest Service. His Big Creek homestead, where Dave lived the last thirty years of his life, has become the Taylor Ranch Wilderness Field Station of the University of Idaho, a fitting tribute to the "quintessential man of the wilderness."

Dave Lewis was born in Wales about 1845 and migrated to the United States in 1860. During the American Civil War he served in the Union Army after which he spent some time at sea, only to find "the life of the sailor too tame for his restless spirit" (Cascade News, June 26, 1947). In 1870 he became a naturalized citizen of the United States (U.S. Census 1920, Yellow Pine Precinct, Valley County, Idaho).

Dave Lewis is reported to have done some mineral prospecting in California and Oregon (Reddy 1995:40), then found his way to Idaho. He was in the area of Boise, Idaho, during the time of the Bannock-Paiute War which swept through southwest Idaho and eastern Oregon in 1878. Dave was hired as packer and guide for the Army units detailed to quell this uprising (Parke 1955:42). A handful of renegades from this 1878 action escaped into the Salmon River Mountains of central Idaho and began marauding Euro-American settlers in Long Valley in 1879; thus began the so-called Sheep-eater War. Cavalry and mounted infantry units from Camp Howard (at Grangeville) and Boise Barracks were dispatched to quell the renegades. In support of the Army, Dave Lewis was hired as an ammunition carrier with his pack string. During this campaign Dave became intimately connected to the Chamberlain-Big Creek wilderness which was to become his life-long home. He also became close friends with his Army compatriots, especially Lieutenant William C. Brown who later (as retired Colonel Brown) wrote the definitive history of the Sheep-eater War (Brown 1926). Brown's history incorporated information from Dave Lewis in an exchange of correspondence between the two (Carrey 1968:56).

By the mid-1880's, perhaps the early 1880's, Dave Lewis had built a cabin in Goat Basin, a short distance upstream (north) of the confluence of Goat Creek and lower Big Creek. Here Dave had an irrigated pasture for his horses and began his life-long career as a bounty hunter for cougar, which resulted in his cognomen "Cougar Dave." An 1888 newspaper article notes that Cougar Dave Lewis was living on Big Creek and was paid \$64 bounty for 12 cougar, one bear and one coyote (Idaho County Free Press, April 20, 1888). At one point, the State of Idaho owed Dave \$800 in bounty money. In 1978 all that remained to mark Dave's original cabin site on Goat Creek was a weed-covered pile of chimney rocks and hard-to-see irrigation ditches (Hartung 1978:101,117).

Dave apparently lived at Goat Creek for many years, alone in the wilderness. Some ten years later, in the late 1890's, the Caswell brothers became his nearest neighbors when they established a cattle ranch at Cabin Creek, about nine miles upstream (west) on Big Creek. In the fall of 1900 the Bull brothers, Elix and Billy, became closer neighbors when they staked a placer claim and built a sod-roofed cabin at Pioneer Creek, a little over two miles from Goat Creek, upstream on Big Creek (Hendee 1993:3; Fuller 1987:248 indicates settlement by the Bull brothers in 1896). The Pioneer Creek property was later to become Dave Lewis' homestead. The Bull brothers did not find gold at Pioneer Creek and by 1902 had moved to the gold rush site at Thunder Mountain. The Caswell brothers, likewise, had earlier moved to Thunder Mountain to find some of the richest ore deposits. The Caswell's sold their Cabin Creek ranch to John Conyers in 1902. Dave Lewis took advantage of the Thunder Mountain gold rush, not as a miner, but by packing supplies to the miners with his pack string (Fuller 1987:247-248).

In 1908, for reasons unknown at this time, Dave Lewis left lower Big Creek to settle on a property, later known as the Jewett Ranch, on Slate Creek, a tributary of the main Salmon a few miles down river (north) from Riggins. Dave raised horses on Slate Creek until 1910, then returned to lower Big Creek (Carrey 1968:56; Idaho County Free Press, July 6, 1922). Dave may have intended to settle on the Pioneer Creek property he had had his eye on, but John and May Conyers had moved onto the property in 1910, after selling their Cabin Creek ranch to John Rouston and O.M. Ables. The Conyers' ran cattle and improved the property by building a new cabin, fencing and a corral for their livestock, and establishing a pasture-hayfield. Dave Lewis apparently moved back to his Goat Creek cabin and continued bounty hunting. In 1918 the Conyers' moved back to Cabin Creek to run the Elizabeth Bellingham ranch and, concurrently, Dave Lewis moved onto the Pioneer Creek property (Hendee 1993:3).

At his Pioneer Creek ranch, Dave kept about a dozen horses and continued bounty hunting and trapping, and became the first known big game hunting guide in the backcountry. In the winter, when the snow was too fresh for cougar hunting, he would read for many hours at a time. His prowess as a cougar hunter and big game hunting guide became wide-spread knowledge resulting in a photo of Dave with his cougar dogs appearing in the New York Times in 1927 (Fuller 1987:249). Adelia Routson Parke continues with her description of Dave Lewis (Parke 1955:45):

"Secretly, I think Uncle Dave was flattered by the publicity and acclaim he often received in magazines and newspapers, but he wanted it to be the truth. One writer described Dave's dogs as 'ferocious, man-eating creatures,' just to make good reading, I guess, but Dave was irritated by such distortion of fact... In the business of hunting cougar he was assisted by four trustworthy companions. He called them his 'family': Old Jack, Young Jack, Whiskers, and Fox. (This was the 'family' when we first knew Dave. Over the years he owned many canines.) On the trail of a cougar these dogs were merciless, never quitting until they had it treed. Then they would sit under the tree, holding the quarry until Dave arrived to shoot it. That was the climax of the hunt, and their reward for long, hard hours on the trail. Otherwise the dogs were just pets - gentle and affectionate. A picture comes to mind of Uncle Dave as he saddled and packed preparatory to leave [the Routson ranch] for his ranch. When all was in readiness, he mounted Old Belle, lead rope in hand, then looked all around. Here were the two Jacks and Whiskers, cavorting about, barking ecstatically, glad to be starting home, but no Fox in sight. Then Dave called, 'Fox,' the fierce tone increasing with each call. No response. Finally, he would get off his horse, proceed to the house, and with the aid of a broom rout the recalcitrant one from under the bed. This was an invaribale procedure. The dog was so attached to the [Routson] children, he wanted to stay with them, but Dave could not spare him, for Fox was one of the best cougar dogs he ever owned."

During his correspondence with Colonel Brown in the latter's preparation of the history of the 1879 Sheepeater War, Dave recommended that a headstone be erected to commemorate the loss of the only soldier during the campaign, Private Harry Eagan. Colonel Brown followed up on Dave's recommendation and a marble monument was commissioned by the War Department. The monument was to be erected on Soldier's Bar, an alluvial bench a little over two miles down Big Creek from Dave's place, and very near where Private Eagan fell in battle with the renegade Indians. In 1925 the 300-pound monument found its way by freight wagon to Edwardsburg (Big Creek) to be picked up by Joe Elliott who had been contracted to erect the monument. Joe Elliott was, at that time,

postmaster of the Clover Post Office at Elliott's Mile Hi Ranch above Garden Creek and mail carrier for the Big Creek route (U.S. Postal Archives).

Joe Elliott used a block and tackle to load the monument on a large black mule named Dempsey who had been fitted with a special pack frame. There is no indication that the monument was off-loaded during transit, so the 35-mile trek down Big Creek to Dave Lewis' place was apparently made in a single day. Visiting Dave at the time was Harry Shellworth, a wilderness enthusiast and president of Boise-Payette Lumber Company, the predecessor of the Boise-Cascade Corporation. Shellworth later wrote (quoted in Parke 1955:43-44):

"I happened to be at Dave's ranch the evening Joe arrived with the headstone. He [Joe] was unable to read the blueprints and did not know how to mix cement. Dave was very much disturbed and asked me to go with Joe the next morning and help him. We took the stone and cement to Soldier's Bar, unloaded it at [near] the point where Eagan fell. Dave went back to the ranch after helping Joe bring sand and water up from the creek. Elliott and I spent the rest of the day digging the foundation hole specified in the blueprint, and the next day started and finished the monument..."

The monument is set atop a cone-shaped pile of native rocks and reads (Hockaday 1968:8):

HARRY EAGAN

Private Co. C, Second Inf.
Killed in action here during an
attack by Sheepeater Indians
on rear guards and pack trains
of Co.'s C, second Inf., and G and
D, 1st Cavalry
August 20, 1879

Dave Lewis was well known to politicians and early conservationists. In December of 1930, Dave hosted Idaho Governor H. C. Baldrige's committee considering the establishment of the Idaho Primitive Area, which was the forerunner of the current Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness. The committee included Idaho National Forest Supervisor S. C. (Charlie) Scribner, Harry Shellworth and other prominent businessmen from across the state, and was endorsed by Idaho-born U.S.D.A. Forest Service District Forester (position title now Regional Forester) Richard Rutledge. Governor Baldrige expressed his impression to the committee: "It was the wildest country I've ever seen...Few, if any, areas of the United States offer the opportunities of this section for hunting and fishing." (Hendee 1993:3). The Idaho Primitive Area was established in 1931, an action which limited but did not preclude certain developments within the area.

In 1933 Jess Taylor met Dave Lewis while the former was hunting in the Big Creek area and the two became friends. Perhaps sensing that his life was running out (at age 90!), in 1934 Dave agreed to sell his Pioneer Creek ranch to Jess Taylor for \$1200. Dave and Jess Taylor and his first wife jointly occupied the ranch in 1935 while the legal papers were being drawn up and processed. Former Forest Ranger Walter A. Estep (South Fork District, 1921-23) was engaged to act as Dave's attorney-in-fact. Walt was then a Ramey Ridge miner and lived on a branch of Mulligan Creek, about thirty five miles up Big Creek from Dave's place. In early December of 1935, Walt Estep had been at Dave's place getting the final signatures on the transfer of deed. Walt was heading up Big Creek to go out to Cascade to have the documents recorded when he was shot to death by Frank Lobauer. It appears that Walt was philandering with Frank's wife and Frank had had enough (Frank was convicted of manslaughter, paroled a few years later, and disappeared in the wilderness). A result of Walt Estep's murder on the trail was a delay in recovering the deed papers and delay in transferring the property to the Taylor's (Fuller 1987:243-244).

In June of 1936 Dave became ill and knew he needed medical attention. Dan LeVan Jr (who was then eight years old) remembers that "Uncle Dave" rode in to the Big Creek Ranger Station where he was laid out on the floor of the commissary building in grave condition. Dan says that Dave was more concerned about his horse than himself and Dave had said that he had fallen from his horse three times on the 35-mile journey. An ambulance arrived to take Dave to a hospital (LeVan 1996). A newspaper account indicates Dave was taken to Boise where he was hospitalized and died of a heart attack the following day at age 92. The article further noted that "his mountaineer associates will claim that it was a sudden dose of civilization that took Cougar Dave" (Idaho County Free Press, June 25, 1936). Another story indicates that Dave rode out in a rainstorm which resulted in his death from pneumonia in Cascade. Whatever the correct story, David Lewis was a remarkable man, whose solitary life and exploits in the backcountry are equal to none. Archaeologist Sheila Reddy quotes from the (Boise) Idaho Daily Statesman, June 25, 1936, "...He was part of the forest. The thickets and valleys were his doorstep, the mountains his attic... The mountains will miss Cougar Dave" (Reddy 1995:42).

Jess Taylor and his first wife stayed on the Pioneer Creek ranch only a year or so, then returned to Boise where he was a building contractor. He leased the property for a number of years as headquarters for big game hunting guides or otherwise had a caretaker living at the ranch. One such caretaker was Tex Martin who had a whiskey still at the ranch. Corn and sugar were mule-packed to the ranch and the finished whiskey, in wooden barrels, went out the same way (Hartung 1978:102).

Jess Taylor remarried in 1948 and returned with wife Dorothy to establish a big game hunting resort. A new house, on a concrete foundation and with indoor plumbing, was finished by 1950, followed in 1954 with a duplex for hunting guests. Other outbuildings were rebuilt as time went on. The Taylor's raised hay and had a large vegetable garden. In 1948 the nearest airstrip was at Soldier's Bar, a little over two miles downstream, which is not very far but was not a convenient place from which to pack supplies delivered by aircraft. A priority project became the development of an airstrip at the ranch. Jess did so with two Percheron draft horses, a slipscraper, and a log drag. The first plane landed at what became known as the Taylor Ranch in 1950. A result of the airstrip and Jess Taylor's lobbying was the establishment of mail delivery by air about 1951 with service provided for many years by Johnson Flying Service from McCall. The regular mail service allowed passengers and freight to be also regularly delivered by air. The Taylor's ran a comfortable and successful hunting camp for eighteen years (Hartung 1978:103).

During the deep winters of 1964 to 1967 the Taylor Ranch was used by the University of Idaho as a base for studying cougars by Dr. Maurice Hornocker (What an irony that Cougar Dave had used this place to rid the area of cougar and Hornocker was at the same place to encourage their comeback!). Dr. Hornocker successfully lobbied for the University to purchase the Taylor Ranch for continued use as a wilderness research station. The University acquired the property in 1969 for \$100,000. From 1969 to 1982 the ranch was leased, during hunting season, to big game hunting guides and also supported University research activities. In 1982 the hunting outfitter leases were terminated. Over the years the physical plant was improved with new buildings. In 1990 a new classroom was reconstructed from former guest quarters moved in pieces by helicopter from the former "Flying W Ranch" at Cabin Creek (Hendee 1993:5-6).

The Forest Service trail that extends the entire length of Big Creek crosses the Taylor Ranch property. Perhaps uniquely, the Forest Service has a right-of-way agreement with the University of Idaho for passage and maintenance (Krumpe 1994). The trail hangs on the sun-facing north wall of Big Creek canyon where 100 degree temperatures are not uncommon in mid-summer. Such was the case when University of Idaho Professor Edwin Krumpe and I approached Taylor Ranch on a hot July afternoon in 1994. Looking down from the trail I could see the green oasis of the irrigated horse pasture which was in such contrast to the semi-desert terrain of the surrounding mountains. As I walked across the bridge into the cool pasture I could feel my energy being renewed. It was evocative of James Hilton's description of the approach to "Shangri-La."

ADDENDUM (28 MAY 1998) TO "COUGAR DAVE" MONOGRAPH, FEB 1996

Ref pg 2, pertaining to Dave Lewis' "cabin" on Goat Creek: The cabin was an assumption of John Hartung, made during his 1978 survey of Big Creek cultural sites, based upon a pile of rocks and irrigation ditches. Hartung admitted puzzlement that he could not find remains of "the cabin", but still assumed that Dave had lived in a cabin. I later learned, in an interview with Emmit Routson, that Dave had lived in a tent on Goat Creek, never had a cabin there. Emmit said "Dave never built anything." Emmit, who died last September at age 91, knew Dave well, said he was as dirty a person as he has ever known. "His only occasion for taking a bath is when he fell off his horse while crossing Big Creek", or something to that effect. Emmit tells the story of Dave asking John Routson Sr to cut Dave's hair, in which Dave's hair was so encrusted with dirt that John had to wet Dave's hair in order to get the scissors through. I also have recorded somewhere a story by deceased USFS Officer Lavelle Thompson about having a meal at Dave's place which, if you didn't laugh at it, would turn your stomach. But Dave was everyone's friend and basically had a heart of gold.