

# HISTORIC SEASONAL PASTORALIST OCCUPATION IN THE ABSAROKAS OF WYOMING: A STUDY OF JACK CREEK COW CAMP

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## ABSTRACT

Seasonal use of an historic pastoralist settlement in Wyoming's Shoshone National Forest allows a study of human ecological impacts as well as chronology. In turn, this research will generate greater understanding of the cattle ranching dimension as it relates to the archaeology of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. Local ranchers currently use the Jack Creek site and thus subject to periodic alterations to fit modern needs.

This is a study of human modifications to the cow camp using methodologies that include an overview map of the site encompassing current structures, remnants of past structures, and evidence of other human made ecological impacts. In addition, site temporal associations are reached through 1) dendrochronology and 2) manufacturer marking analysis from related historical artifacts as observed within the camp's dumpsite. Site analysis includes observations of corral fence lines and reuse of available historic construction materials. In addition, in situ and collected prehistoric artifact analyses will further assist in the assessment of impacts both immediate and peripheral to the site.

Because such a site, its structures, and related historical artifacts are irreplaceable and valuable resources that archaeologically quantify aspects of Wyoming history, they require historic protection. Subsequently, such management and monitoring will provide invaluable educational opportunities.

**Introduction:** The Absaroka mountain range is rich in both prehistoric and historic archaeological sites. The settlement history of the region is due in part to the growing business of cattle ranching. Otto von Lichtenstein, or commonly referred to as Otto Franc, established the pitchfork ranch in 1879 (Meeteetse). During the 1880s, many sons of England, Scotland, and Ireland's gentry class came over to establish themselves as ranchers (Starrs: 1998). By the 1900s, the cattle business was quite prevalent in the area. During the 1920s and 30s, the railroad opened much of the west to tourism, which in turn fueled dude ranching (Martin: 2003). The cow camp was important to the upper pastures of Jack Creek Flats. The use of this cabin, and the surrounding cabins, have played a role in the ranching history of this area over the last century.

**Research Objective:** This site is not only significant to the history of Wyoming and in turn the United States for its use since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but prehistoric as well. Prehistoric artifacts are also associated with the Jack Creek Cow Camp. The tip of a late prehistoric projectile point (3200-1500 RCBP) was recently found near the main cabin. Since the cabin is still in use by ranchers today, it is important that as much history that can be documented is done so before it is altered.

## Method: Dump Site



Overview of dump site

•Solder dot cans: The dump site included hole and cap and hole-in-cap cans which were typically produced from the 1850s to the 1920s. These cans often contained beans, peas, milk, or other small food items.



•Iron Stove: On the door it reads: EUGENE IRON WORKS PATD, MAY 20 1913, 19 1914. With patents and markings like these, it is self explanatory of date and place of production. This now crushed and partially buried stove reveals the kinds of products locally available in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. economy.



## Method: Old Cabin Site



•Overview of site facing north-east.  
•Other than the depression left behind, the remnants of the corner in the foreground is all that is left. It is possible that any timber worth salvaging from this sight was incorporated into the current cabin (yellow line added to show approximate locations of former walls).

### •Dendrochronology:

The tree in the middle of the old cabin sight was originally thought to have grown after the cabin fell out of use. Through dendrochronology, this tree would have to be at least 229 years old, +/- 5 years for human error. That would place the cabin in the pre-1776 time frame, obviously not right. The alternative explanation is that the tree was incorporated into the structure, perhaps even for support, as this is seen in other places in the western United States (as seen in the structure to the right in Beulah, Colorado).



## Method: The Corral and Fence line



Overview of corral

Dating the corral: Dendrochronology was used to date when this living tree was modified as a post in the corral. The picture below shows the core sample that places the date to approximately 1933, plus or minus 5 years for human error.



•Old Fence Line  
•Current Fence Line

To the left is an overview of the old fence line and the current one. All that remains of the previous fence line, is several upright posts, rails scattered in the general vicinity, and a pile of 70-100 posts. From oral accounts, the recently discovered old fence line is at least pre-1970s. From this generated map, one can see the expansion of grazing grounds needed as more and more horses are needed for the larger numbers of cattle brought up to the Jack Creek Flats. In a wider perspective, this reflects the growing industry of the cattle industry in America.

## Method: Main Cabin



Overview of main cabin From 2005

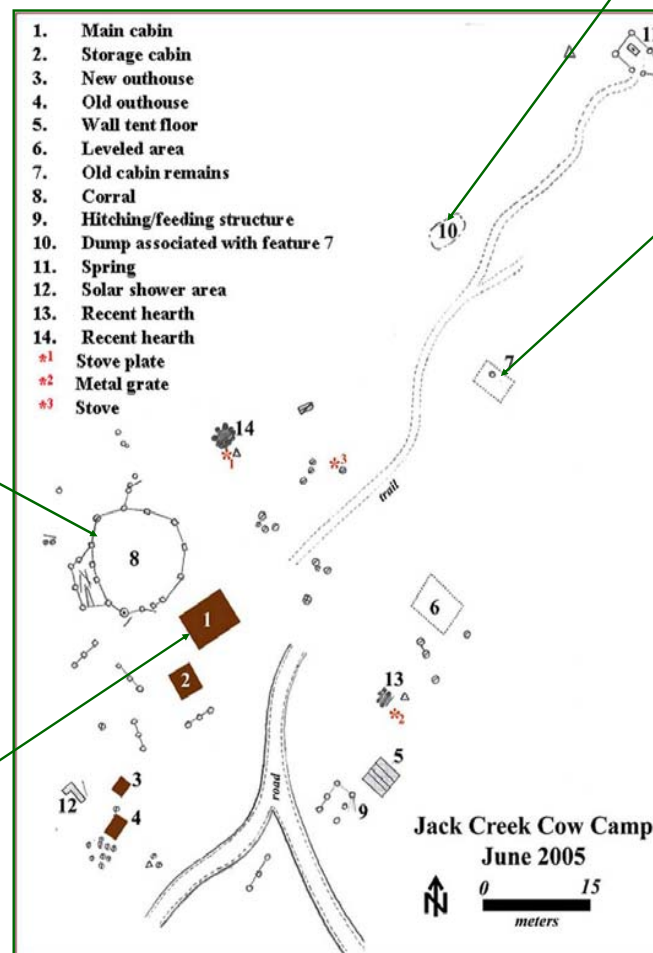


Overview of main cabin from the 1930s

•Although the building is now square notched, the remnants of saddle notching implies that these logs were reused (see photo to the right).



•Brands on the door way leave a record of the different ranch hands that used the cabin. These boards seem to have been flipped, as the symbols are at the bottom and upside down (photo to the right is of a rubbing from same image on the left).



## Method: Franc's Fork Cabin and the Pack Camp cabin

•The cabin at Franc's Fork is another historical cabin, but at a higher elevation than the cow camp; it was most likely used by sheep-herders and later hunters too.  
•It had a sod roof, contained a bed and stove area and was not more than 10 meters from a water source.



•The Pack Camp cabin was used as a staging area for pack trains to supply mountain stock camps. It lies about halfway between the Pitchfork ranch and the Jack Creek Cow Camp.



•It also contained a bed and a stove area; the addition of tar paper and shingles suggests it was maintained up until recent times.

**Conclusion:** The preliminary research conducted at Jack Creek Cow Camp reveals a multitude of historical layers possibly dating back to the late 1800's, as well as late-archaic lithic procurements dating back 8-9 thousand years. The large number of people that have spent time working the ranch and staying at the cow camp have, over the years, left a variety of artifacts that help us understand life in the Absaroka mountain range over the last century (and also, no doubt, removed a number of prehistoric artifacts). It is important to document the history of human interaction with the surrounding area as it is an area currently still in use and perpetually subject to change. In addition to ranching, tourism has accelerated the ecological impact rate to this area. Cattle ranching is important to the history of Wyoming, Wyoming's history is a reflection of American western expansion, and that is a fundamental part of United States history which concerns us all.

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