Historic Seasonal Pastoralist Occupation in the Absarokas of Wyoming: A Study of Jack Creek Cow Camp

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 landscape 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 valuable historical construction materials. In addition, site and collected prehistoric artifact analyses will always further 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 archaologically 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 classes 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 19th 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: The Corral and Fence line

Overview of corral

Method: Main Cabin

Overview of main cabin

Conclusion: The preliminary research conducted at Jack Creek Cow Camp reveals a multitude of historical layers possibly dating back to the late 1800s, as well as late-archaic lithic procurement 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 impacts 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. In turn, this reflects the growing industry of the cattle industry in America.

References


Method: Dump Site

Overview of dump site

Method: Old Cabin Site

Overview of cabin facing north-east

Method: Franc’s Fork Cabin and the Pack Camp cabin

Overview of main cabin

Method: Jack Creek Cow Camp

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The Pack Camp cabin was used as a staging area for pack trains to supply mountain stock camps. It is shown between the Pitchfork Ranch and the Jack Creek Cow Camp.

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 location herders.

• Bedroll: shows use of bedroll

• Old Fence Line

The use of this cabin, and the surrounding cabins, have played a role in the ranching history of this area over the last century.

• It also contained a bed and a stove area; the addition of these facilities locally available in the early 20th century U.S.

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

• Iron Stove: On the door it reads: EUGENE IRON WORKS PATD, MAY 20 1913, 19 20 1914. With patent markings like these it is self explanatory of date and place of production. This round iron and partially crushed are seeds the kernels of products locally available in the early 20th century U.S.


Method: The Corral and Fence line

During the corral dendrochronology was used to date when this living line was modified in a post in the corral. The picture shows shows the core sample that places the date to approximately 1855, plus or minus 3 years for human error.

In the left is an overview of the old fence line and the cabin one. All that remain of the previous fence line, is several upright posts, rails scattered in the ground stability, and a pile of 75-100 posts. From oral accounts, the newly discovered old fence line is at least pre-1970s. From the generated map, one can see the expansion of grazing grounds needed as more and more horses are needed for the larger number of cattle brought up to the Jack Creek Flats. In a wider perspective, this reflects the growing industry of the cattle industry in America.

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Method: Main Cabin

Overview of main cabin

Method: Dump Site

Overview of dump site