

Big Creek & Bighorns

100 years of outfitting

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Thirty one years ago I stepped off a Greyhound at midnight at the Boise bus terminal, three days after I had got on it in Philadelphia. I had never seen an Elk, Mule Deer nor a Bighorn, nor did I have any knowledge of Cougar Dave Lewis, Jess Taylor, Stan Potts, the River of No Return Wilderness, etc.. I was headed to Big Creek with plans of being a hunting guide. Little did I know at the time that it would be the best move of my life.

In the past ten years we attempted to sell part of our Big Creek outfitting Business and both times the sales failed. You could say we are back or that we never left, either would be true. Big Creek has a long history of outfitting and Bighorn Sheep hunting so Bill Louderback and I thought it would be timely to give a brief history of outfitting, more specifically, Bighorn Sheep outfitting, on Big Creek, along with an update on the current status of Bighorns and outfitters on Big Creek. Read this like you are relaxing by the camp fire after a long day hunt, appreciate all the mispronunciations, misspellings, incorrect dates & names, just remember, an outfitter is telling it. Brief is a relative term so please bear with me. Although many outfitters have guided sheep hunts in lower Big Creek the bulk of the hunts were and are performed in conjunction with the original Taylor Ranch operating area. Simply put, this area encompasses most of the huntable ram country on Big Creek. So this lower part of Big Creek will be my Focus.

The Frank Church River Of No Return Wilderness is a 2.4 million acre, circular patch of land located in central Idaho. It includes a vast majority of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River plus much of the South Fork and Main Salmon River. Most of the Frank is either summer or winter range for Bighorns or the route in between the two. The native American residents there were appropriately nicknamed, the Sheep Eater Indians. In the late 1800s the discovery of gold in this area created a large influx of people into this part of Idaho. As was the case in that day and age, it was inevitable that conflict between settlers and Indians, whether real or contrived, would bring the US Army Cavalry to central Idaho. One of the Army's packers would fall in love with the Big Creek country and return to homestead there many years after the Sheep Eater campaign was over.

Running west to east through the heart of the "Frank" is 50 miles of Big Creek. Big Creek is the largest tributary to the Middle Fork. About seven miles up Big Creek from its confluence with the Middle Fork is an unnaturally gentle patch of real estate surrounded by beautifully rugged sheep country. Here Rush Creek, Cliff Creek and Pioneer Creek all converge with Big Creek. Beginning in 1900 several parties would settle in this area, mining, grazing, surviving. Eventually (1918) Dave Lewis (now in his 70s) made his way back to Big Creek and homesteaded the land which many of us now know as the Taylor Ranch. "Cougar" Dave would build a small complex at the mouth of Pioneer Creek (Taylor Ranch site) getting by on a military pension, living off the land, collecting government predator bounties and seeking out other creative means of

earning a living. Eventually Lewis would realize there were outsiders who were willing to pay good money to be escorted on guided hunting excursions including hunts for Bighorn Sheep. Cougar Dave became the first true Bighorn Sheep outfitter on Big Creek. I recommend reading "Cougar Dave, Mountain Man of Idaho" by Pat Cary Peek.

In 1934 Cougar Dave (now in his 90s) sold his homestead and hunting business to Jess and Dorothy Taylor, hence the Taylor Ranch. Eventually Jess would fulfill his dream of guiding hunting clients in lower Big Creek while building a very nice complex of cabins, airstrip, corrals and cleared pastures. Meanwhile, upstream, hunting operations were being developed at Cabin Creek, Acorn Creek (Dewey Moore's airstrip), Monumental Creek and Edwardsburg (Head of Big Creek). Jess would operate out of the Taylor Ranch until 1969. The Flying W Guest Ranch at Cabin Creek would evolve into a full blown hunting lodge and outfit while Dewey Moore was at Acorn Creek with an airstrip and cabins of his own.

Bighorn tags were available over the counter till the late 60s when the Idaho Fish & Game instituted a draw for sheep tags. Sheep tag numbers on Big Creek have fluctuated dramatically over the years. The Big Creek "area" (Bighorn Sheep unit 26) has been altered many times as well. There were times when Big Creek was "Big Creek", now it includes part of the Middle Fork breaks on the early hunt and does not on the late hunt. The early hunt used to be September and the late hunt was October. Now "early" runs till Oct 13, and "late" Oct 14-31, Not to long ago "late" ran through the first week of November. There was a time when Big Creek was divided by Big Creek itself, A north half and a south half. Tag number were as high as 15 in the 1980s & 90s. A couple of years ago we had 2 early and 2 late. There are now 4 early and 2 late.

Although there were formal and informal outfitter areas throughout the years and the area, Bighorn Sheep were not included in the exclusive area system until the late 80s. Until then outfitters could and would roam in and out of other outfitters areas guiding Bighorn hunts. Today, an outfitter can still hunt in another outfitter's area, provided he gets permission to do so from the current outfitter, the Idaho Outfitters & Guides Licensing Board, as well as that of the local land manager, i.e. USFS, BLM.

Back to Big Creek specifically. There were many outfitters and guides who would come and go through the years but several stand out as sheep hunting outfitters. Obviously Dave Lewis started it all, followed by Jess Taylor. Jess would pass the torch to a then young man named Stan Potts. The best way to describe Stan is to say he was and still is "passionate" about sheep and sheep hunting. Stan and his wife Joy, would begin there Taylor Ranch experience in 1966 guiding over 30 successful sheep hunters in the Big Creek region. Stan did not limit his sheep hunting to Big Creek. He would become an icon for Sheep hunting and outfitting in Idaho, chasing rams and leading clients from Mt Borah, the Owyhees to Hells Canyon and everywhere in between.

Stan would than pass the torch to another "then" young man, Con Hourihan. Until this time the only significant changes to Big Creek and the surrounding Wilderness were the intrusions by man and even that had tapered off with the transition of the land from

“pioneer free for all” of homesteading, mining, hunting lodges, farming and grazing. Now the USFS was well on it’s way to regaining control of the area. Most of the private property on Big Creek was purchased back by the USFS including Dewey Moore’s and Cabin Creek (the Flying W Ranch). In 1979 the area became the River Of No Return Wilderness Area. Many of the purchased private buildings were dismantled, burned and or relocated. Someone flying in to Cabin Creek today would have no Idea of the elaborate complex that was constructed through the 1900s.

One of the few inholdings that did not go back to the Feds was the Taylor Ranch. Even though others would outfit out of the Taylor Ranch after Jess’ retirement, no one would do so as owners of the ranch. The Taylor’s chose to sell the Ranch to the University of Idaho. Instead of becoming another backcountry ghost town of empty foundations, unirrigated pastures, and dry ditches, it would remain vibrant and in fact actually become more developed over the years. New cabins, electricity, plumbing, even wifi and more. For two decades (two separate ten year stints) Jim and Holly Akenson would manage the day to day affairs of the Taylor Ranch, restore and compile an extensive written history of big Creek and the surrounding area, spearhead and or assist countless scientific studies out of the ranch, spearhead, oversee, and partake in many of the Taylor Ranch’s physical changes.

Jim and Holly’s arrival at the Taylor Ranch was brought on by and marked an historic event in lower Big Creek when the University of Idaho, the new owner of the Taylor Ranch, decided that they would no longer allow an outfitter to base out of the Taylor Ranch. After 64 years of guided hunts out of that location, Taylor Ranch Outfitters would move it’s base of operation six miles upstream to a section of state land opposite the Cabin Creek Meadow.

Back To Hourihan. You can’t talk about Lower Big creek without including Con. For lots of different reasons, Con would become an icon as well but the explanation would require a lot more room than we have here. Con showed up to work for Stan in 73. In 1978 he took over Taylor Ranch Outfitters with his wife Tina. In the fall of 1982 Con and Tina packed up all their belongings and left the Ranch for the last time. Oddly enough, 1982 was my first year with Con and my only season operating out of the Taylor Ranch.

I worked for Con and Tina for about 6 years before becoming a partner for another 4. In the mean time Con and Tina were divorced. Con lost a wife and gained me as a partner, talk about a lose lose. Con was a great boss, partner, mentor and friend. He was and is one of those people who leaves a lasting impression on everyone he meets. What kind of an impression he leaves may vary but once again, not enough room here. I attribute much of my success to Con.

I would eventually buy out Con’s interest in 1991. At the same time I purchased a Middle Fork of the Salmon float business. We called the hunting Taylor Ranch Outfitters and the floating American Adrenaline Co. Eventually we would bring everything under the title of Idaho Wilderness Company. We would also add to the operating area twice, once with some territory operated by “back out of retirement” Stan Potts and the other

with additional territory operated by Jerry Jeppson. By now the “we” I refer to includes my wife Michelle and two sons, Steven and Joel. Between 2002 and 2008 we had two different failed attempts to purchase our Big Creek Hunting operation. During the first attempt, the Zettels anticipated remaining in the hunting business but at a reduced level. We purchased the last of the Jeppson hunting operation on Monumental creek, (also a tributary to Big Creek). Our plan was to operate a shorter season and less clients. As “plans” sometimes go (or not) we got the old Taylor Ranch business back and so went the down sizing and the semi retirement rocking chair. We currently operate on all the traditional Taylor Ranch outfitting territory plus parts of Papoose Creek (acquired from Potts) and the south side of Big Creek up to and including all of Monumental Creek (in two different acquisitions from Jeppson).

During those Hourihan years another then young man Travis Bullock, would show up on the scene and stick around on Big Creek for 25 years and still counting. Travis and I both have found wives to follow us to Big Creek, we both are raising a couple of son’s each, in and out of wall tents and we remain neighboring outfitters on Big Creek generally basing out of Cabin Creek. Several years after my transaction with Hourihan, Travis and Con partnered up and bought out part of Jeppson’s operation out of Cabin Creek. The partnership was short lived and Travis would continue on with his solo career and still is today. Travis has taken his place in a long line of Cabin Creek outfitters including but not limited to, Wallace, Curtis, Lanham, Ron Vaughn, Scott Farr, and Jerry Jeppson.

The names, faces, areas, ownerships, titles, ect. have and continue to change on lower Big Creek. Recent extensive fire activity (past 25 years) has dramatically changed the look and habitat for sheep on Big Creek. In many cases for the better. We now suffer from the hardships and hazards of post fire conditions that the pioneers rarely had to deal with. Where as the 1996 introduction of wolves into the area has had catastrophic results on species like moose and elk, it seems that at least for now the sheep are experiencing minimal negative effects.

When I think of the local legends and the years they spent guiding in this extraordinary part of the world, Cougar Dave Lewis 18 years, Jess Taylor 15+ years, Stan Potts 15+ years, Con Hourihan 15+ years, I consider myself blessed (and old) knowing that I have just completed my 31st year guiding and outfitting all sorts of trips including countless Bighorn Sheep hunt in this special place. I’m glad the bus brought me to Idaho. I’m sure many of you have been blessed enough to enjoy a Big Creek experience as well. It remains one of the few wild places left where “we” can still feel like Cougar Dave did when “he” first arrived some 140 years ago.