



Cultural History of Sheep Rock

Named for the sheep that settlers saw dotting its slopes, Sheep Rock peak casts its shadow over the John Day River and the James Cant Ranch of John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. While Sheep Rock preserves millions of years of geologic history, the valley below cradles a rich record of recent human activity.

American Indian Presence

American Indians have traveled through and inhabited eastern Oregon for as long as 10,000 years. To the north, tribes belonging to the Columbia Plateau culture first settled along the Columbia River and its tributaries, as another early culture sprung up in the Great Basin to the south. The Blue Mountains region around Sheep Rock became a "transition zone" between these two groups: the Tenino of the Plateau people, and the Northern Paiute of the Great Basin. At first, the tribal bands may not have stayed in the mountains long, but as they learned about the land and its resources they lived here year-round, moving to seasonal sources for hunting, fishing, and gathering roots.

Early Homesteaders

During the mid-to-late 1800's, European Americans began to settle in the Blue Mountains, drawn by opportunities for trapping, mining, agriculture, and ranching. In 1862, with the Homestead Act, the U. S. Government allowed settlers to claim 160-240 acre tracts of free land. Back in 1823, the U. S. Supreme Court had ruled that indigenous American Indians were nomadic and thus not owners of land, which was then so freely given away to later settlers.

Frank Butler was the first settler in the Sheep Rock valley north of Picture Gorge. The Officer family was the first to ranch the valley when in 1881 Eli Casey Officer took a homestead claim. He was said to have brought the first flock of sheep to the John Day area. His son, Floyd Officer, homesteaded the land where the James Cant Ranch house is now located. Floyd sometimes accompanied geologist and Minister Thomas Condon on his study expeditions.

Life at the Cant Ranch

In 1910, the James and Elizabeth Cant, Scottish immigrants, purchased approximately 700 acres of land along the John Day River from the Officer family. They began their own ranch while living in a small house that the Officers had inhabited. By 1916, James and Elizabeth, and their four children (James Jr., John Charles, Christina, and Lillian) were outgrowing the old house. Ordering plans through the mail, the large Cant house was built in 1917, using lumber milled near the town of Mitchell. When completed, the old house was torn down. (Now serving as a museum and headquarters for John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, the Cant house is structurally similar to when the Cant family lived there.)

In the summers when it was very hot, the men, women, and children of the household would sleep on the screened and breezy outdoor porch. The Cants frequently had visitors staying with them, and they also had a number of ranch hands who slept in the house or in the bunkhouse next to the big house. Often the family had overnight guests after hosting a large social event. These events were sometimes held in the spacious attic, like the big housewarming party in 1919, when the family had the piano lifted upstairs so that there could be music for dancing. Midnight suppers were popular at these affairs, and neighbors remember the events often lasting until dawn.

School was held in the attic for one year, before the nearby Cant School was built in 1919. Between eight and ten children attended school at the house, including the four Cant children, four Humphreys children from an adjacent ranch, and the children of employees. The school's

first teacher, Stella Pigg, came from Kentucky. All the teachers lived with the Cants as a family member. The Cant School continued to be the educational center until the road through Picture Gorge was completed in the mid-1920s, after which the children traveled to Dayville for school.

The Cants cultivated the grounds around the house for their immediate needs. In addition to the vegetable garden and fruit orchards, the lower pasture held a hog pen. The chicken coop was closer to the house. In the fields adjacent to the river grew wheat, alfalfa, and other crops, all irrigated from water ditches. Over the course of time, land was added to the ranch, until it encompassed nearly 6,000 acres. From the 1950's on, James Cant, Jr., and his wife Freda, helped the aging James and Elizabeth run the ranch until their deaths in the early 1970's.

One of the original structures built by the Officer family still stands today: the small log cabin immediately behind the Cant house. Except for the monument's maintenance shop, all of the other buildings were constructed during the time that the Cant ranch was in operation.

Two Eras of Ranching

After the discovery of gold in eastern Oregon in the early 1860s, it was recognized that the area's near-desert climate and terrain were suitable for sheep grazing. Sheep ranchers moved in and by 1870 the number of sheep in eastern Oregon increased ten-fold. Basque herders tended to immigrate to the southeastern corner of Oregon, Irish men to the west and south towards the Cascades, and the Scots to the John Day area. This group of Scottish immigrants usually worked for established Scottish sheep ranchers. James Cant, for example, worked for Alexander Murray, in Dayville, until he could establish his own operation.

Raising sheep was an intensive process, requiring dedication and loyalty. Sheep were herded into remote areas for grazing during the summers; in fact, James Cant, Jr. and his wife Freda spent their honeymoon sheep herding on nearby Aldrich Mountain in 1932. The fall was spent shearing and trailing selected sheep to market. Winters saw sheepherders again in the hills with the grazing animals, and in the spring they were occupied 24 hours a day with the lambing. Sheep and lambs had to be watched carefully to prevent predators such as eagles and coyotes from stealing them, and the animals had to be protected from diseases like scabies and rocky mountain spotted fever.

The Cant family owned around 4000 head of sheep and employed several ranch hands at a time. At especially busy times, such as lambing and shearing, the Cants "traded" hands with local ranchers so that everyone could get their work done. After shearing, wool was hauled to a number of nearby market and shipping centers, such as Shaniko and Pendleton.

Around 1946, after the demand for wool died after two world wars, the Cants followed a general trend and switched from sheep to cattle ranching. By this time, cattle had proven to be more lucrative than sheep. With this switch in livestock, several changes were made to the ranch and its grounds, including the construction of new buildings and the modification of corral fences.

The Sheep Rock Area Today

After John Day Fossil Beds National Monument was established in 1975, the National Park Service acquired the Cant Ranch house and 849 acres of the ranch property from the Cant family. In 1977, the house was opened as a Visitor Center, and in 1978 the NPS restored the house and grounds to their (probable) 1920s appearance. Two hundred acres of the former Cant property, including the house and outbuildings, was designated as a Historic District in 1984. The National Park Service has subsequently conducted studies and made efforts to preserve the historic grounds and structures while also providing for them to be used productively.

Descendants of the Cants and other ranching families continue to cultivate the land for crops and raise livestock on lands surrounding the park. Nearby you may see grazing livestock or operating farm machinery, reminders of the Sheep Rock area's rich human history.

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