

HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW AND
ASSESSMENT

OF
THE CANYON CREEK BATTLEFIELD AREA:
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA

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HISTORIC ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES AND SITE POTENTIAL IN CANYON CREEK

With European contact and initial settlement the Canyon Creek area has followed the rural development theme common throughout eastern Montana. Today the area has several private homes and ranches scattered over the battlefield. The primary land use is ranching and farming. A review of the BLM land status maps and Historical Index shows that initial settlement focused on those same activities.

The BLM Historical Index of land patents indicates a few 40 to 80 acre parcels were homesteaded in the 1880s but the entries were canceled within a few years in each case. Most of the Canyon Creek battlefield land was patented to private ownership under various land laws in the early twentieth century. Much of the area entered private ownership as Railroad Grant lands. Many smaller parcels entered the private sector as patents under the Homestead Entry law and a few parcels were purchased as Cash Entries. One entry was a state IN LIEU selection. Table 1 summarizes the BLM Historical Index data.

The battlefield area has been subject to only one systematic archeological inventory, although several sites have been identified by avocational archeologist Kenneth Feyhl. The Calamity Jane Reservoir archeological inventory (Davis 1975) identified eight sites from the historic period. Sites 24YL705, 706, and 722 are isolated hearths. Davis (1975) suggests these sites are historic in age due to the appearance of the charcoal in the hearths. No attempt was made to radiocarbon date the hearths at the time of discovery. A disturbed historic dugout or homestead site (24YL708) was also recorded in the area. The site is located in SE1/4, NE1/4, Sec 1, T1S, R23E. The dugout may postdate the Railroad Grant patent of 1894 recorded in the BLM Historical Index. Davis (1975:708) indicated the site had been looted and retained no archeological value. The remaining sites are discussed in the following sections.

The most notable historical figure to reside in the battlefield vicinity was Martha Jane Canary or Calamity Jane (Davis 1975:56-57). She is reported to have homesteaded in the area during the 1880s. She may have been in the area as early as 1879 although the historical evidence suggests that 1882 is a more reasonable date. Davis (1975:57) quotes her diary as saying she purchased 320 acres on Canyon Creek from a Joe Stager. She lived on the property for an undetermined period, perhaps intermittently until the early 1890s. Jane lived in a log cabin on the property and there was purportedly a dugout on the creek bank. When and who built the cabin and dugout are unclear, although most historical accounts agree that Jane acquired them with the property. Local historical lore places the cabin site in the NE1/4, SW1/4, Sec. 6, T1S, R24E. The locale is currently occupied by a ranch complex including a house and barn. The actual site has not been inventoried or evaluated for archeological evidence.

Horse Cache Butte or Calamity Jane Horse Cache (24YL704) is a triangular shaped butte located above and south of Canyon Creek. The Butte is reportedly the site where horse thieves "cached" stolen stock. Jane is reported to have participated in the stealing or caching of stock depending on the source. Some sources suggest Jane had no illegal dealing with the horse thieves, other than cooking them meals (Davis 1975:57). The butte itself and a series of prehistoric sites are

recorded as archeological resources as noted previously.

Several unrecorded historic sites lie within the Canyon Creek battlefield area. One is the right-of-way for the Northern Pacific Railroad and an undetermined number of homestead sites. These sites very likely will include cabin or dugout locations, barns and other outbuildings, corrals, and fences.

The valley floor is irrigated land and the irrigation system is undocumented and unrecorded. At least one dam and possibly two were built to contain Canyon Creek for irrigating a large orchard. The features were built in the 1908-1912 era, but were washed out during high water years (Feyhl 1964). The Yellowstone County poor farm is purported to have existed near the canyon's mouth. Feyhl (1964:7) noted "crumbling adobe walls and gumbo yard" during an early investigation of Canyon Creek Canyon. The precise location was not noted.

CANYON CREEK BATTLEFIELD AND RELATED SITES

The Canyon Creek battle is not well described in the literature pertaining to the Indian Wars. It appears to have been only touched on as an incident in the Nez Perce War of 1877. Beal (1963) describes it as a skirmish, giving limited treatment to it in his writings as do most other authors.

Major Lewis Merrill's battalion of Seventh Cavalry engaged what was believed to be the rearguard of the Nez Perce. Merrill found the Nez Perce on a ridge southeast of Canyon Creek. There he skirmished with the warriors as the Nez Perce's main body moved into Canyon Creek.

Captain Frederick Benteen, initially held in reserve with two companies, was ordered to move forward and attack the Nez Perce moving into the Canyon. Benteen charged across a flatter portion of the terrain and engaged the Nez Perce below Horse Cache Butte. Benteen charged the Nez Perce positions twice, but failed to dislodge the warriors. The warriors, apparently few in number and acting more as snipers and a rearguard, held the Seventh at bay until their families could transit the canyon.

Colonel Sturgis attempted to follow the retreating Nez Perce up the canyon until dusk, when he fell back to the mouth of the canyon. He encamped there for the night and buried his dead.

The 1877 Canyon Creek battlefield is recorded as an archeological site. Davis (1975:54) recorded the battlefield as 24YL702 as part of a proposed Bureau of Reclamation Calamity Jane reservoir construction project. The site form locates the site boundary as the W1/2, Sec 5, and NE1/4, Sec 6, T1S, R24E. This boundary encompasses the location of the current historical marker and portions of the known battlelines. The site form does not take into account the entire field of battle as it is known from historical records and physical evidence (see following discussion).

A rock alignment feature was also recorded by Davis (1975:21-22) that may be related to the

Canyon Creek battle. Site 24YL701 is a linear feature of bedrock slabs interpreted as a possible defensive feature or fortification. The site is located in the SE1/4 NE1/4 NW1/4, Sec 5, T1S, R24E, across the canyon from Horse Cache Butte and on the talus below the mesa that defines the north side of the valley. The sandstone slabs lie entirely on bedrock parallel to the rim of the Calamity Jane Horse Cache Butte. There are two alignment remnants of 13 meters and 4 meters long respectively. The feature varies in height to a maximum of 40 centimeters. Davis (1975:22) speculates the feature was used by the Nez Perce as a defensive fortification during the battle.

The feature is consistent with rock defensive breastworks or rifle pits used by both the army and the Nez Perce at the Bear Paw battlefield. Site 24YL701 is also consistent with rock alignments used by civilian volunteers at Misery Hill, Idaho during the Nez Perce campaign (White nd). Site 24YL701 is fully consistent with the identification as a rock breastwork possibly used by the Nez Perce at Canyon Creek. The site should be redesignated a feature of the Canyon Creek battlefield.

Another feature, of dubious origin, is a petroglyph that includes stylized hoof prints, a possible rendition of Chief Joseph's name in Nez Perce, an English rendition "**CHIEF JOS**" and the date "**1877**". Feyhl (1987) places the site near the eastern apex of the butte and on the talus below. Feyhl (1987:62) noted the cliff above the inscription is scarred from gunfire. Some scars are not weathered suggesting a recent origin, while others are very weathered. The weathered scars could be associated with the battle of Canyon Creek. Feyhl (1987) suggested the inscription may postdate 1879 based on linguistic data from Alan Marshall (Feyhl 1987:63). Although of questionable origin the petroglyph and gunfire scars bear further investigation to ascertain if they could have association with the battle.

The *Billings Gazette* reported in a "Yesterdays" column (December 6, 1960) that the skeletal remains of two soldiers killed in the Canyon Creek Battle were discovered by laborers in 1915. The men, who were working on the Orchard Cove project, found the remains on Canyon Creek where the bank had caved away. Boots and military buttons were found with the remains. The disposition of the remains was not noted in the article. A review of the 1915 *Billings Gazette* should be undertaken to learn if further documentation of the find exists beyond that reported in the 1960 column.

RELIC COLLECTING AND METAL DETECTING AT CANYON CREEK

Relic collecting at the site of the Canyon Creek battlefield has been a local recreational activity for at least 25 years according to several local informants, principally Robert Davis, Gordon Pouliot, Kenneth Feyhl, Harold Hagen, and Mike Blohm. Thain White (currently residing in Dayton, Montana) is believed to have visited and possibly collected the site, but no documentation exists. Gordon Pouliot of West Glacier, Montana (personal communication July 23, 1994) indicated he had metal detected the area around the historical marker once in the late

1960s, but had found nothing. John Popovich of Billings, Montana and Henry Weibert of Columbus, Montana are believed to have collected the site numerous times, but the collections were unavailable for review.

Robert Davis and the late Jack Columbus of Billings visited the site on numerous occasions in the 1980s (personal communication from Robert Davis, May 10, 1994). Mr. Davis reported he found one .45/70 cartridge case and a stone arrowhead on the talus slope of the mesas north of the Buffalo Trail road (approximately NW 1/4, NW 1/4, Sec 5, T1S, R24E). They also found numerous (absolute numbers undetermined) bullets in the SW 1/4 of Section 5. This area is north of Horse Cache Butte. Davis also found bullets and cartridge cases as well as a metal arrowhead near several large boulders on the lower slope of the east end of the Butte. Mr. Davis' collection includes a tincan and about a dozen .45/70 cases and one .44-caliber Henry case. Mr. Columbus died in 1992. His collection appears to have been dispersed to his family.

Mike Blohm of Laurel has worked on the Canyon Creek site for six years (personal communication June 23, 1994). He has amassed a collection of about 300 cartridge cases, a few bullets, and a Colt Single Action revolver. Most of those materials were recently surrendered to the State Historical Society of Montana as many appear to have been collected from state lands.

Mr. Blohm has metal detected much of the battlefield. He provided a list of his finds (attached) and has recovered at least 234 .45/70 cartridge cases, 11 .50/70 cartridge cases, 8 Colt revolver cases or cartridges, three .44-caliber Henry rimfire cases, a few blown primers, and 28 bullets of .45 and .50 calibers. He has also recovered a few rounds of headstamped cartridge cases that may postdate the battle. The Colt Single Action Army revolver is a Model 1873. It is complete except the wooden grips are decayed or missing. The revolver is loaded with at least five rounds. Sterling Fenn, a noted Colt revolver collector from California, raised the serial number via standard chemical methods as 17371.

Mr. Blohm recorded and plotted his find data on enlarged aerial photos. It is excellent data. He has defined Benteen's attack area, Merrill's movements, and some Nez Perce positions.

He has also done some historical research. He visited Ben Stein of Bozeman who has the original Andrew Garcia manuscript. According to Blohm, Garcia suggests some movement occurred on the south side of the mesa, not only in Canyon Creek, although the army accounts suggest the opposite.

Mike does not have access to all the lands, but has covered most available lands in a very systematic manner.

The available collector data, particularly that of Mike Blohm, indicates the likely positions of the action. The collector data suggests that Merrill engaged the Nez Perce rearguard in a ridge and gully landform northwest of the Laurel Airport. The artifact finds suggest the initial contact was about 1/2 mile north of the location presumed by historical research. Merrill and the Nez Perce appear to have engaged on the northeast slope initially. Artifact finds are sparse in this area

suggesting a small firefight. Blohm has located a larger and more dense concentration of cartridge cases on the northwest side of the ridge apparently suggesting soldiers firing from the higher terrain toward retreating Nez Perce as they moved downhill and to the northwest.

Benteen is believed to have moved across the southern tip of the ridge and northerly toward Horse Cache Butte. Immediately south of the butte Blohm found a few artifacts suggesting some fighting occurred there. More definitive evidence of Benteen's two charges are the artifacts found to the east of the butte's eastern tip and into the fields adjacent to Canyon Creek.

In addition some evidence of Nez Perce sniper locations has been discovered on Horse Cache Butte and on the talus below the butte's rim. There is artifact evidence to indicate the rimrock of the mesa north of Canyon Creek sheltered Nez Perce snipers. The talus below the rimrock has yielded some battle-era artifacts as well.

The east-west trending canyon on the south side of Horse Cache Butte has yielded artifacts suggesting some fighting or movement occurred in this area as well. Army-type cartridge cases are common finds. In this situation, however, it should not be assumed the Seventh Cavalry was the only combatants to be armed with .45 caliber Springfield's and Colts. The Nez Perce had many captured army weapons from their battles at White Bird Canyon and Big Hole (Scott 1994). Without detailed firearms identification analysis association of artifacts with specific combatant groups is tentative.

An intuitive observation of the collected artifacts and Blohm's plotted locations is the Nez Perce snipers or rearguard was not large in numbers. Firearms identification may elucidate this supposition. If such a supposition holds true, then it appears the Nez Perce were continuing to use tactics similar to those employed at their previous engagements. The archeological evidence in the Siege Area of the Big Hole battle demonstrates that less than two dozen Nez Perce warriors pinned down Colonel John Gibbon's Seventh Infantry while the main body of Nez Perce escaped.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Canyon Creek battlefield is reasonably well defined by the metal detecting efforts of Mike Blohm, Kenneth Feyhl, Harold Hagen, Robert Davis, and the late Jack Columbus. Their data appear to support the historical battle accounts. The artifactual data and notes of the relevant find locales appear to more precisely define Major Merrill's portion of the battle as well as the Benteen lines. The plotted artifact finds also locate some Nez Perce combatant locations, although most collecting activities to date are random and unsystematic in nature.

All site collections should be more rigorously documented. The cartridge cases should be closely examined to determine calibers and weapon types represented. The find spots are reasonably well documented and are amenable to firearms individual characteristic examination, if

permission can be obtained from the original collectors. Mr. Blohm's collection is especially well documented and is definitely amenable to firearms firing pin analysis. If permission can be obtained from Mr. Blohm and the state a small investment in time would provide significant new insight into the role of firearms in the battle.

The undocumented collecting efforts of others are reported to have netted large numbers of cartridge cases and other relic finds. These undocumented efforts have likely affected the artifact patterns, but Mr. Blohm's investigations strongly indicate some patterning remains. Merrill's charge area, Benteen's attack area, and some Nez Perce positions have been clearly documented by Mr. Blohm. His collection and its associated documentation are a primary resource of the physical evidence of the battle.

Based on Mr. Blohm's investigations it is apparent the Canyon Creek area has the potential to yield additional archeological data related to the battle in patterned context. It appears the Canyon Creek battlefield has a high potential to yield definitive information on Nez Perce positions and movement, Army positions and movement, and possibly the location of the Army camp. A systematic metal detecting archeological inventory is likely to be a successful endeavor.

Greene's (1995) historical assessment of the battle provides several research questions that can be assessed through archeological investigation. It is clear from Greene's (1995) assessment and the relic collecting that the site is eligible to the National Register of Historic Places under criteria **a** and **d**. The work of Greene and others indicates the general course of the engagement and notes the movements of both combatants. An archeological inventory using systematic metal detecting could more precisely locate specific troop and Nez Perce combat areas. The movement across the plateau by Merrill and Sturgis as well as the Nez Perce defensive firing positions in this area could be more precisely defined.

The extent of the use of Calamity Jane Horse Cache Butte by the Nez Perce could be more accurately ascertained. And the nature and extent of the 7th Cavalry's attempt to scale the butte could also be addressed. Although the canyon area is, today, impacted by modern developments systematic metal detecting survey could be undertaken to ascertain the full extent of the Nez Perce delaying action up the canyon and the army's extreme northerly movement during the battle. One question that archeological investigations is most likely to be able to address, due to the conflict and vagueness in the historic record, is if there was any movement up the side canyon as suggested by Andrew Garcia.

In addition to the potential for an archeological metal detecting inventory the previously recorded Canyon Creek features, the rock alignment and possible Chief Joseph rock art, should be revisited and fully documented. The rock alignment, possible breastworks, should be metal detected and tested. Finally the Canyon Creek battlefield archeological site form should be revised to taken in the additional field of battle as defined by historical documentation and relic collecting efforts.

A systematic archeological metal detecting inventory coupled with an intensive traditional

archeological inventory of the area will undoubtedly reveal substantial new information regarding the battle and other occupations in the area. It would be desirable to identify the full nature and extent of the archeological manifestation of the battle event itself. In addition, locating and documenting the Martha Jane Canary homestead is a highly desirable goal. The battle site, the Calamity Jane homestead, as well as other features and sites in the area are the physical evidence of a substantial time depth of human occupation of the Canyon Creek locale. Many of the sites will undoubtedly meet criteria for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Table 1
Land Patent History of Canyon Creek Battlefield

Location	Patent Type	Date
R23E,T1N		
Sec 35	Railroad Grant	5/21/1896
Sec 36	State School Section	
R23E,T1S		
Sec 1	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 12		
NE1/4, N1/2 SE1/4, SE1/4 SE1/4, SW1/4 SE1/4	Homestead Entry	1913-canceled 1915-canceled 1/26/1916
SE1/4 SE1/4	Cash Entry	8/29/1919
R24E, T1S		
Sec 3	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 4	Homestead Entry	1882-canceled
	In Lieu Selection	11/9/1907
Sec 5	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 6		
N1/2 NW1/4, N1/2 NE1/4 S1/2 NE1/4, N1/2 SE1/4 S1/2 SE1/4, S1/2 NW1/4, SW1/4	Unable to verify Homestead Entry Homestead Entry	 10/16/1915 2/5/1915
Sec 7		
N1/2	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
S1/2	Railroad Grant	5/22/1914
Sec 8	In Lieu Entry	11/9/1907
Sec 9	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 10	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 15	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 16	State School Section	
Sec 17	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 18		
E1/2	Homestead Entry	12/12/1928
W1/2	Homestead Entry	1910-canceled 7/12/1918
Sec 19	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 20		

Table 1 continued

E1/2	Homestead Entry	9/13/1916
NW1/4	Cash Entry	6/26/1911
SW1/4	Cash Entry	4/8/1912
Sec 21	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 22		
NE1/4	Homestead Entry	6/3/1913
NW1/4	Homestead Entry	4/20/1917
SE1/4	Homestead Entry	7/27/1917
SW1/4	Homestead Entry	3/12/1918
Sec 27	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 28		
N1/2	Homestead Entry	12/22/1915
S1/2	Homestead Entry	3/6/1916
Sec 29	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894
Sec 33	Railroad Grant	12/31/1894

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