

Hells Canyon Agriculture In An Unlikely Environment

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KIRKWOOD BAR (Idaho) —
"River time" they call it here.

Clocks become unimportant when you live by river time. Days begin early, with the rising of the sun over the canyon's Idaho rim, and end in the fading light of a pastel sunset sliding behind a mountain meadow in the rugged Oregon peaks.

There are no TV's, no computers, no meetings, no newspapers, no malls, no interstate highways, no telephones. There are only mountains — endless mountains — craggy, rocky cliffs that drop hundreds of feet to the river below, interspersed with steeply-sloping sweeps of grass and shrubby trees.

And always, there is the river. The river is the Snake, rising out of the Tetons in Wyoming and slicing its way north through some of the Northwest's most rugged wilderness, to eventually join with the majestic Columbia River. Over the eons, the Snake has carved out of ancient volcanic deposits the deepest gorge in North America — Hells Canyon.

Hells Canyon National Recreation Area is part of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, more than 650,000 acres of wilderness in western Idaho and eastern Oregon. Terrain ranges from flat bars of sandy soil deposits along the Snake River to alpine meadows reaching well over 8,000 feet high in the Seven Devils Mountains. Herds of elk, mule deer, cougar, bobcats, rattlesnakes, and numerous small species are at home in the Hells Canyon wilderness. Birds and waterfowl of numerous species follow the river on their annual migration.

Because of its relative inaccessibility, the isolation and primitiveness of Hells Canyon remains much as it has been over the centuries. Only a few dirt roads traverse the lower canyon's nearly 100 miles-stretch, most of them winding, steep and dangerous in bad weather. Foot and horse trails are narrow paths carved out along the sheer rock and steep slopes along the canyon walls and are not-easily traveled.

Still, thousands of visitors each year enjoy the unique beauty and recreational opportunities of Hell's Canyon. And whether, they raft the miles of white-water rapids, bounce through them by jetboats or hike through by trail, most at least make a brief stop at Kirkwood Historic Ranch.

Though it seems unlikely at first introduction to the canyon, what the visitors who stop on Kirkwood Bar come to see is a tribute to agriculture.

The 10-acre Kirkwood Bar was once home to a thriving ranch, running up to 4,000 head of sheep on this rugged and unfriendly terrain. In fact, about 100 families homesteaded the canyon area in the late 1800s and early 1900s, carving out a nearly self-sufficient lifestyle far removed from the rest of the world. Nearly every one of the numerous river bars, some an acre or two, others much larger, supported canyon agriculture. Though cattle were run by some canyon ranches, sheep proved better adapted to the rugged environment.

Welcoming Hells Canyon visitors to Kirkwood Historic Ranch for the past two summers have been two former York countians, Patricia Bupp Bacha and her hus-

band, Andrew "A.J." Bacha. Patty is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Bupp, Seven Valleys, and A.J. is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Bacha, Red Lion. Both are teaching graduates of the University of Idaho, Moscow.

"I cried most of the way the first time we walked to Kirkwood," laughs Patty in remembrance of her first trip along the six-mile, cliffside hike from the downriver trailhead at Pittsburg Landing. Even the journey to the trailhead itself is an adventure, an 18-mile drive from the main highway, along narrow gravel roads across high, rugged mountains, with steep, straight-down, dropoffs.

After making the hike in and out several times in this second summer, the former dairy farm daughter casually relates that she only saw one rattlesnake the last time - and just went around it.

During the grazing heydays of Hells Canyon, flocks of sheep were herded to the lush grass high country of the mountains through the summer months, to graze as far away as Montana. Livestock was brought back to winter in the relatively mild, river-tempered shelter of the canyon floor. Alfalfa and grass hay was grown on the flat, sandy bars, watered through the summers' 100-degree temperatures with hand-dug ditch irrigation channels carrying gravity-flowed water from the Snake and feeder creeks of high country snowmelt.

Kirkwood became the best-known of the canyon's ranches, made famous in the book HOME BELOW HELL'S CANYON by Grace Jordan. Grace and Len Jordan spent the depression years, 1932 through 1943, in the canyon's isolation, raising three children, improving the ranch facilities and expanding their flock to 3,000 head grazing 17,000 acres of rangeland. Jordan spent much time away from the ranch during the summer grazing season, while his wife, family and farmhands kept Kirkwood running in his absence.

The ranch was sold in 1943 when the Jordans moved "outside" the canyon, so their children could attend public schools. During their early school years, Grace Jordan taught them with a Baltimore, Maryland, based correspondence school curriculum. Len Jordan later became politically active, served as the governor of Idaho for a term, then represented Idaho as a Senator in Washington, D.C. for more than 10 years.

Bud and Helen Wilson, who purchased Kirkwood from the Jordans, increased the sheep flock to 4,800 head. Then, in 1973, the United States Department of Agriculture acquired the ranch for part of a national recreation area.

While a few active ranches still exist in the Hell's Canyon, most of Kirkwood remains today as it was when the sheep grazing era ended. The crumbling timber remains of a large feeding barn and lambing shed, the round, galvanized-metal grain bins still intact, testify to the

riverbar's thriving ranching years. Old haying equipment, with explanatory markers and pictures, tells visitors how each piece was used to farm Kirkwood's alfalfa fields.

Water still tumbles down Kirkwood Creek, which slices through the center of the 10-acre bar, and can be diverted into the irrigation system canals by pulling a few metal slides. And remnants of the old stands of alfalfa still bloom, enjoyed today by wide-eyed mule deer with playful fawns by their sides.

The administering U.S. Forest Service has restored a former bunkhouse, built while Kirkwood was under Wilson ownership, by ranchhand Dick Sterling. Named in his memory, the long, low, expertly-crafted structure is constructed of lodgepole pine.

"There were no nails used in the sides or the roof," relates A.J. Bacha of the Sterling Museum where he and Patty welcome visitors and tell them about the ranch and canyon history. "Nails were used only to fasten down roofing materials."

Three display sections of the museum focus on various aspects of ranching and canyon history. One includes various old implements and tools of ranching, with a numbered guessing-game for visitors to match the artifacts to their use.

"Usually a couple of our ranch cats are curled up on the old wooden wheelbarrow," Patty

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Kirkwood Historic Ranch is located on a 10-acre river bar 80 miles upstream (south) on the Snake River from Lewistown, Idaho. At the left of the upper bar are remains of the sheep sheds and lambing pens. Alfalfa, irrigated from Kirkwood Creek which crosses the riverbar, was grown on the lower portion of the ranch for winter hay needs.



"Hi! Welcome to Kirkwood," is how Patty and A.J. Bacha greet visitors to the historic sheep ranch on the Snake River in the Hells Canyon Wilderness. Ranch and canyon artifacts are housed in the Sterling Cabin museum behind them.



The lodgepole pine-built Sterling Cabin, in the foreground, is a former bunkhouse now converted for museum use to depict the agriculture and Indian history of Hell's Canyon and Kirkwood Historic Ranch. The Jordan House in the background serves as a private residence for ranch hosts and is on the National Historic Register.

Homestead
Notes