

Oral History Adds Cultural Texture At John Day NM

By Royal G. Jackson

A new program of research whose focus is the cultural history of John Day Fossil Beds NM, has recently been initiated by Supt. Ben Ladd. The world famous fossil beds, located near Dayville in Eastern Oregon's John Day Valley, have long been known and visited by scientists and others interested in the past. The story revealed through these rich paleontological resources is an ancient one that has intrigued many over the years. Indicative of the more recent human history are the livestock industry-associated buildings, structures and implements, which are much in evidence today. They suggest the story of the human use and occupation of this area which is so much better known for its rich fossil remains.

The focus of this research is the Cant Ranch; its relationship to the Monument's natural and cultural resources, and its representative role as a typical livestock operation in the John Day Valley in the early 1900's. The National Park Service's visitor center and headquarters presently is housed in the original three-story family home of James and Elizabeth Cant, an early Scottish ranching family. The Cant family is important to understanding the history of John Day Fossil Beds NM for two reasons: It was from their holdings that a large portion of the Monument's fossil resources was acquired in the early 1970's; and, their story exemplifies the dominant historical themes of the area's history.

The Cants

In 1905 the young and energetic James Cant arrived to the John Day Valley after spending several years in Argentina raising horses for use in the Boer War. He immediately went to work herding sheep for a fellow countryman from Scotland, Alexander Murray, and began to build up his own band of sheep. In 1907 he sent to Scotland for his boyhood sweetheart, Elizabeth Grant; they married and through hard work were able to acquire, by 1910, the land that became the nucleus of the Cant Ranch.

In ensuing years the Cants prospered in the livestock business, first raising sheep, then shifting their operation to cattle as did most area ranchers. They became a well known and respected family in the sparsely settled area north of Picture Gorge on the John Day River. Their three-story home, which was built in 1917, was an elegant residence for its time; it served as a landmark and hospitable lodging place for weary travellers on the rough road up the John Day Valley.

The Cant Ranch became an established link in the network of ranches that made up the rural ranching community between Dayville and Kimberly. Over the years it was the scene of many social gatherings, resounding to the distinctive and lively bagpipe music that was played for the traditional Scottish dances. The large Scottish community in the John Day Valley provided the stimulus for celebrating cultural activities; the Cant Ranch often provided the place.

In order to educate the four Cant children a school was started on the third floor of their home and children from nearby ranches were invited to attend. A live-in teacher brought from "back east" cheerfully struggled with the three R's; children accustomed to the excitement and constant activity of a working ranch were sometimes not the most receptive to formal education. On numerous occasions the "schoolhouse" was converted to a dance hall and men, women, and children accustomed to long hours of physical labor gave themselves over to dancing, socializing and general merriment.

Although these occasional social events were memorable highpoints and some respite from everyday work, ranch life was dominated far more by work than by leisure. The primary economic activity of the Cant Ranch, livestock raising, provided the rhythm of life just as it did for most rural residents of the area at this time. Lambing, shearing, branding, marking, moving stock to summer range, mending fence, coping with severe weather, and dealing with predators — these were more typical of everyday activities than the occasional social event. A visitor to most ranches would have recognized quickly the din of newly born lambs bawling for their mothers, the easy conversation of the

sheepshearing crew members at their noon meal, the clang of metal from the blacksmith shop and the tantalizing baking smells from Elizabeth Cant's busy kitchen. All of these sights, sounds, and smells were typical of rural life in Eastern Oregon during the early decades of the 20th century.

By the time Mr. and Mrs. James Cant had passed away in 1972, the Cants and their ranch had become a part of the local history, leaving indelible marks on the land and its people. In 1975 the National Park Service acquired a part of the family's land holdings and incorporated them into John Day Fossil Beds National Monument.

Oral History as a Research Methodology

The first step in documenting the cultural history of the Monument is being carried out through a methodology little used in the past but gaining greater acceptance — oral history. Oral history is the collecting of any individual's spoken memories of his life, of people he has known, and events he has witnessed or participated in.

Orally communicated historical information can provide supplementary details for topics documented through these traditional means. This is particularly true for past material culture — buildings, work implements, corrals, bridges, roads and other man-made artifacts. Thus, oral history is increasingly being employed to obtain data from the management of cultural resources on public lands. It also is useful in capturing historical information about changes in the land over time e.g., the condition of the range, prevalence of wildlife, and agricultural practices no longer employed.

A second use of oral sources is to pro-



Typical view from the window of John Day Valley ranch house around the turn of the century was sheep and their associated out buildings.

Oral History Adds Cultural Texture (continued)

vide complementary information i.e., buttressing the written record through a more intimate and personal viewpoint on well-documented occurrences. Dramatic events such as floods, murders, volcanic eruptions, accidents, epidemics and other life-changing experiences are likely to be recalled in highly personal terms. An example would be recollections of federal government programs during the 30's, in which thousands of sheep were slaughtered, piled and burned. This Depression era measure still evokes vivid and colorful memories among many western stockmen.

Oral history also is useful as a tool to create primary documents i.e., where there are no written records about a given event the oral account may constitute the only original source of information. Information about activities which in some way transgress laws, mores or customs is often difficult to obtain; e.g., deer poaching, "moonshining", cattle rustling, and illicit sex. For the non-literate or those more at ease with oral than written forms, it may be the only way to share historical knowledge.

In summary, oral history is useful to resource managers for: (1) gathering supplementary information about topics already documented through other sources, (2) complementing the written record with information that is more personal and often vividly recalled, thus offering a subjective dimension, and (3) creating primary source material where no previous written record exists. Each of these approaches is being usefully employed in obtaining historical information about the Cant Ranch and its environs.

The Oral History Program at the Cant Ranch

The oral history program was initiated by me during Spring 1982. NPS supplied me with a list of individuals who have first hand knowledge of the topics being investigated: (1) the historical relationship of the Cant Ranch with the Monument's natural and cultural resources, (2) and the Cant Ranch as it exemplifies the livestock industry in the John Day Valley in the early 1900's.

The initial list of potential narrators named 10 people, most of whom were 60 to 75 years of age; two of the Cant's four children were included. Background research on local and regional history was carried out using primary and secondary sources in libraries, archives, museums and private collections. A preliminary interview format was constructed and pilot tested. These tape-recorded interviews provided the basis for additional research, site visits to the study area, and revisions in the question set. The resulting interview format contained about 75 ques-

tions that touched all aspects of the topics under study. To date 8 of the 10 informants have been interviewed one or more times, and all tapes have been transcribed on a word processor. In some cases transcripts have been submitted to narrators for revision and additions; ultimately all will complete this process.

Included in the thematic framework of the research are the following: the John Day River as a common thread of rural life; changes in the land over time; stability and change in the livestock industry; rural social life patterns; the Scottish-American subculture; attitudes toward federal land management; influence of the natural and cultural environment on work and leisure; Indian-white relations; transportation and communication; agricultural practice and change; exploitation of the fossil resources; past material culture — cultural resources; and, National Park Service administrative history of the Monument.

Implications for Management

The findings of this research will be useful in carrying out the mandated tasks of planning, managing and interpreting the Monument's resources. Supplementary information is being obtained about the location, age and uses of buildings, corrals, roads, water systems, gardens and other improvements at the Cant Ranch. This data helps the manager better comply with historic preservation laws governing the maintenance, alteration, and removal of cultural resources.

Narrators also are providing complementary historical information. For example, much is known about the construction of the Cant home which is now the visitor center: construction date, materials used, builders' names and other information. Complementing this data are narrators' descriptions of the housewarming, which was well remembered by all who attended as the highpoint of that winter's social season. This information provides insights into the social customs of the day and is useful to the NPS interpretive programs. Some applications could be in slide-tapes, films, written narratives, pamphlets, exhibits, living history programs, and similar media.

The interviews also are producing complementary and primary source information about such topics as the effects of fencing on the open range, relations with the Indians who seasonally migrated through the area, development of major roads and communication patterns, federal land management and the distinctive place of the Scottish-American subculture that flourished in the John Day Valley in an earlier day. This expanded historic data base provides management with better information for decision-making.

The oral history program at John Day Fossil Beds also is enhancing NPS-community linkages. All federal land managers have been called upon to seek

greater public involvement in resource management decisions. The knowledge and historical perspectives of long-time residents of the John Day Valley are particularly valuable to NPS employees who often are not from the local area. The oral history program is bringing these narrators into the management process to share their collective historical views, and this in turn, stimulates a cooperative spirit between agency and community.

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