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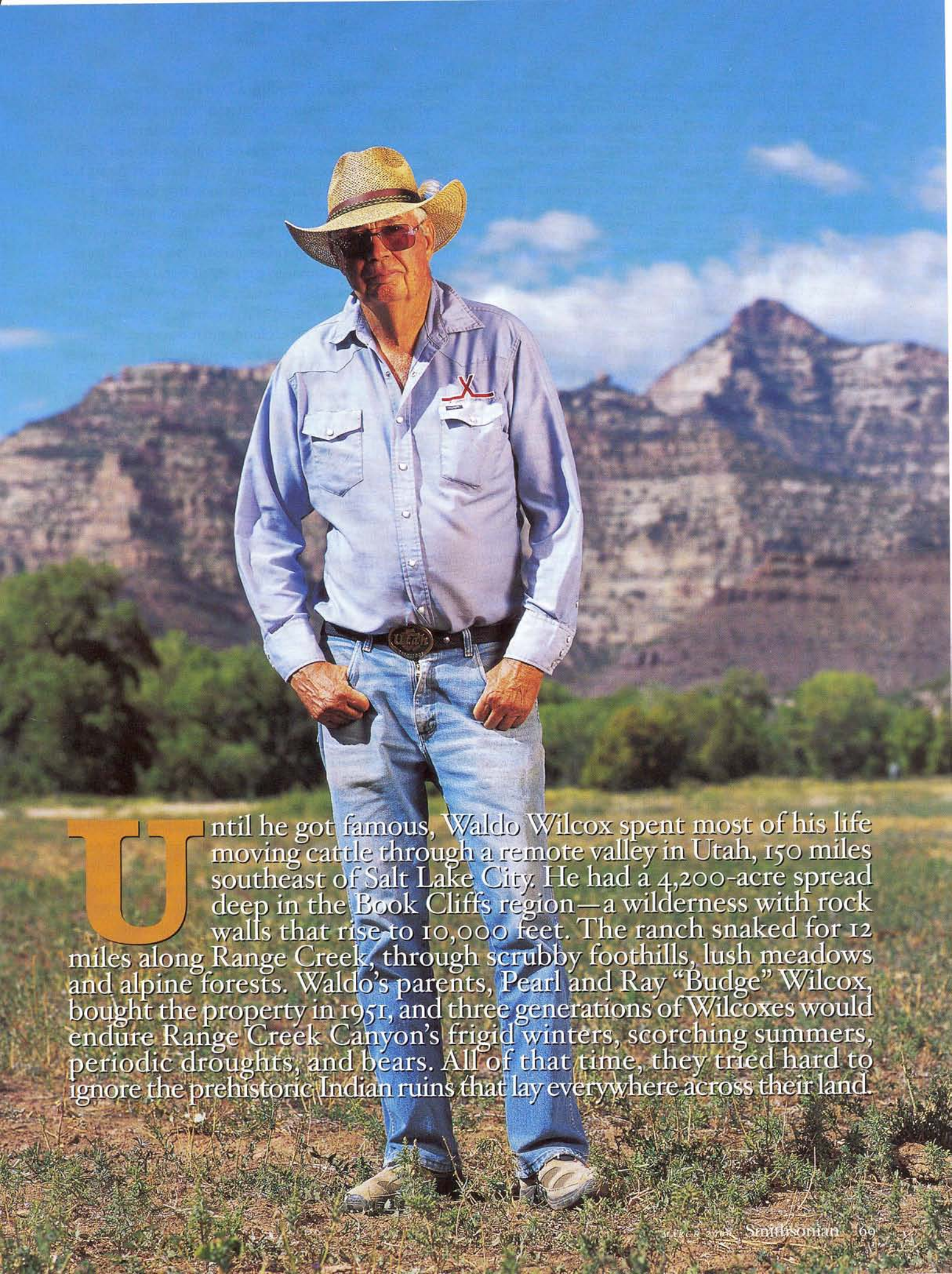
# SECRETS OF THE RANGE CREEK RANCH

**ARCHAEOLOGISTS CHEERED when Waldo Wilcox's vast spread was deeded to the State of Utah, believing that it holds keys to a tribe that flourished 1,000 years ago—and then mysteriously vanished**

**BY KEITH KLOOR · PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS MERRIAM**

RED OCHER ON ROCK (A CENTURIES-OLD PICTOGRAPH, ABOVE) IS ONE OF THE MANY CRYPTIC SIGNS AND ARTIFACTS LEFT BEHIND BY MYSTERIOUS EARLY AMERICANS WHOSE LEGACY RANCHER WALDO WILCOX (OPPOSITE) QUIETLY OVERSAW.



Until he got famous, Waldo Wilcox spent most of his life moving cattle through a remote valley in Utah, 150 miles southeast of Salt Lake City. He had a 4,200-acre spread deep in the Book Cliffs region—a wilderness with rock walls that rise to 10,000 feet. The ranch snaked for 12 miles along Range Creek, through scrubby foothills, lush meadows and alpine forests. Waldo's parents, Pearl and Ray "Budge" Wilcox, bought the property in 1951, and three generations of Wilcoxes would endure Range Creek Canyon's frigid winters, scorching summers, periodic droughts, and bears. All of that time, they tried hard to ignore the prehistoric Indian ruins that lay everywhere across their land.

It couldn't have been easy. Pit houses dug halfway in the ground, their roofs caved in, dotted the valley floor and surrounding hills. Arrowheads, beads, ceramic shards and stone-tool remnants were strewn all over. Human bones poked out of rock overhangs, and hundreds of bizarre human figures with tapered limbs and odd projections emanating from their heads were chiseled on the cliff walls. The family kept mum about this mysterious world. Waldo in particular became a zealous guardian, chasing off curious locals who got wind of all the artifacts.

Then, in 2001, Wilcox, entering his 70s, quietly sold the property for $2.5 million to the nonprofit Trust for Public Land, and then federal and state agencies helped arrange for the land to be deeded to the State of Utah. Archaeologists called in to visit the site were flabbergasted. The ruins were not only extensive but well preserved: the pit houses were intact, no graffiti or bullet holes marred the petroglyphs, and granaries were stuffed with corncobs a thousand years old.

Scientists wasted no time in setting up a research camp. "There are few places left in the continental U.S. where the sites haven't been picked over and vandalized to a great extent," says Kevin Jones, the state archaeologist for Utah. The researchers soon realized they'd lucked into a constellation of 1,000-year-old hamlets that belonged to the enigmatic Fremont people, highly mobile hunters and farmers who lived mostly in Utah from around A.D. 200 to 1300 before disappearing—like the cliff-dwelling Anasazi, their contemporaries farther south.

So far, archaeologists have documented nearly 300 Fremont sites at Range Creek (none of which has been excavated). And they managed to keep a lid on their work until a June 2004 Associated Press story described the archaeological riches and the eccentric landowner who'd guarded the secret for decades. Wilcox became an overnight sensation, portrayed in newspaper stories from Salt Lake City to Sydney, Australia, as a heroic cowboy who'd stood vigil over an amazing time capsule. "It's like being the first white man in there, the way I kept it," Wilcox boasted to one reporter. Archaeologists' comments fueled the place's mystique. Jones was quoted as calling Range Creek a "national treasure" and its discovery akin to "finding a Van Gogh in your grandmother's attic." Another hailed it as "one of the most important archaeological collections in North America."

**"We've seen places where people were living in knife-edge ridges, 900 to 1,000 feet above the valley floor." They were "afraid of something."**

Part of the excitement rests on hopes that Range Creek may help explain what happened to the Fremont. Along the canyon floor, traces of large villages indicate a flourishing settlement, while pit houses and granaries built high in the cliffs suggest a defensive retreat. "We've seen places where people were living in knife-edge ridges, 900 to 1,000 feet above the valley floor, which means to get a jug of water you'd have to send someone on a big long hike and back up," says Jones. "These people were afraid of something. They were obviously trying to protect their food, and it wasn't from mice."

Research at Range Creek may help explain why farming rather suddenly halted across much of the Southwest seven centuries ago, prompting tribes to abandon their ancestral pueblos. Over the years, experts have suggested that warfare, drought, disease and religious upheaval may have caused the exodus. "The most interesting thing about the Fremont is they adopted farming, did it at varying levels of intensity for 1,100 years, and then quit," says Duncan Metcalfe, curator at the Utah Museum of Natural History, in Salt Lake City, who is conducting research at Range Creek. "If we can figure out why, I think we can understand why other populations, at the time, abandoned agriculture too."

THE WILCOX RANCH lies only 30 miles southeast of Price, Utah, but the journey takes two and a half hours on a rutted logging road that curves up 4,000 feet along sheer cliffs before descending into Range Creek. Waldo Wilcox meets me outside the north gate. He now lives in Green River, 50 miles north, with his wife, Julie. But he still has the run of his former property. Clad in bluejeans and a straw cowboy hat, Wilcox shoulders a set of ropes, which he uses to pull himself over large boulders. A stylized or "walking" X, his cattle brand, is emblazoned on his pale-blue shirt, on the side of his pickup truck and on various cliffs. He seems a cross between John Wayne and Archie Bunker, a sometimes ornery anachronism whose speech is peppered with political incorrectnesses. He professes little interest in the former inhabitants. "All I know is I grew up with a bunch of dead Indians, and that's all I want to know," he tells me. "It was their life."

We meet up with Jones, the lead archaeologist, and when I first see this storied site, I'm underwhelmed. The collapsed pit houses—basically, circles of boulders—pale in comparison to the majestic ruins of New Mexico's Chaco Canyon or the grandeur of Colorado's Mesa Verde, with their multistory stone houses nestled into overhanging cliffs. Here most of the granaries—which number in the hundreds and range from cabinet-size to several yards across—are so high in the cliffs they are visible only with binoculars. "Because the ar-

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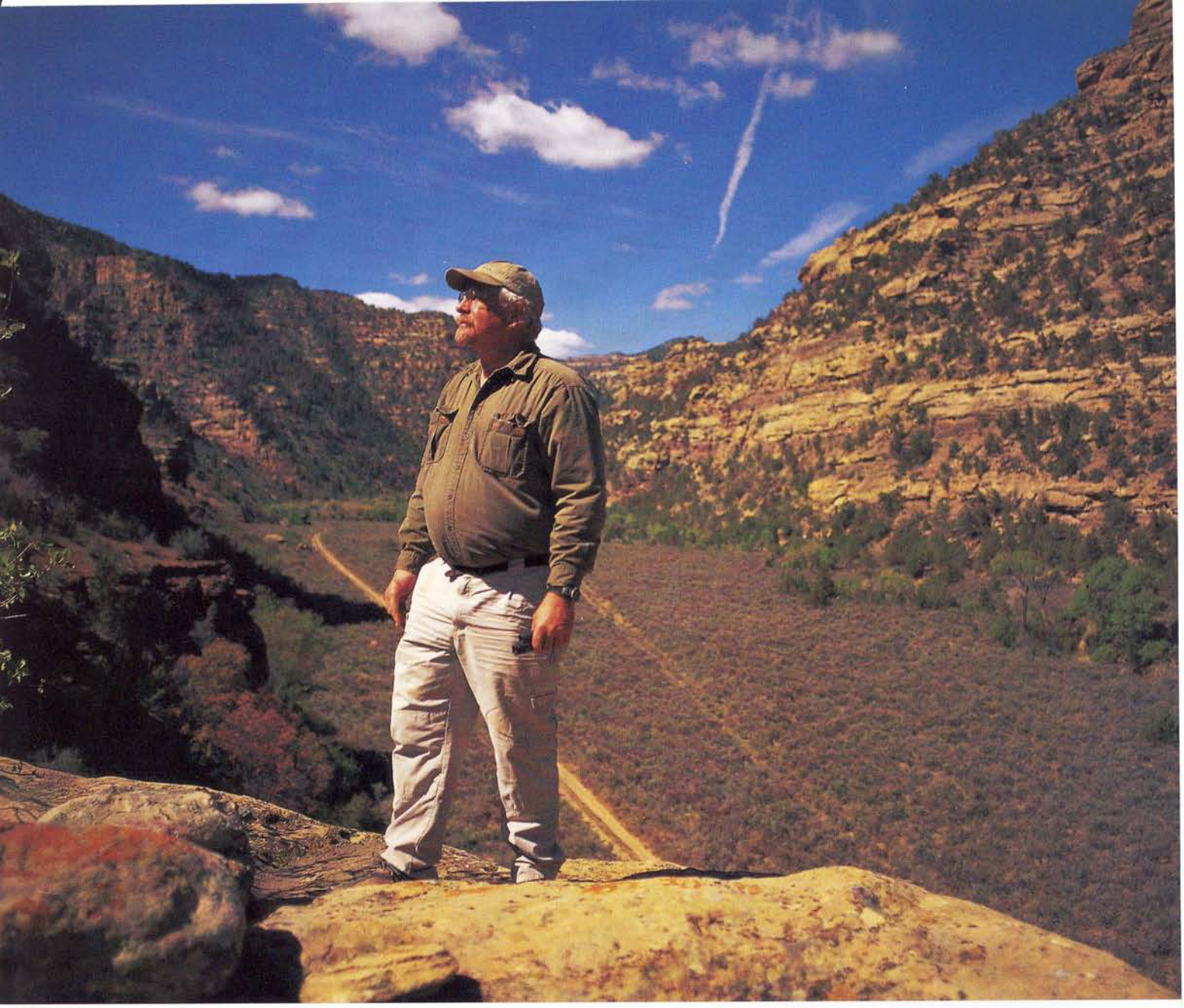
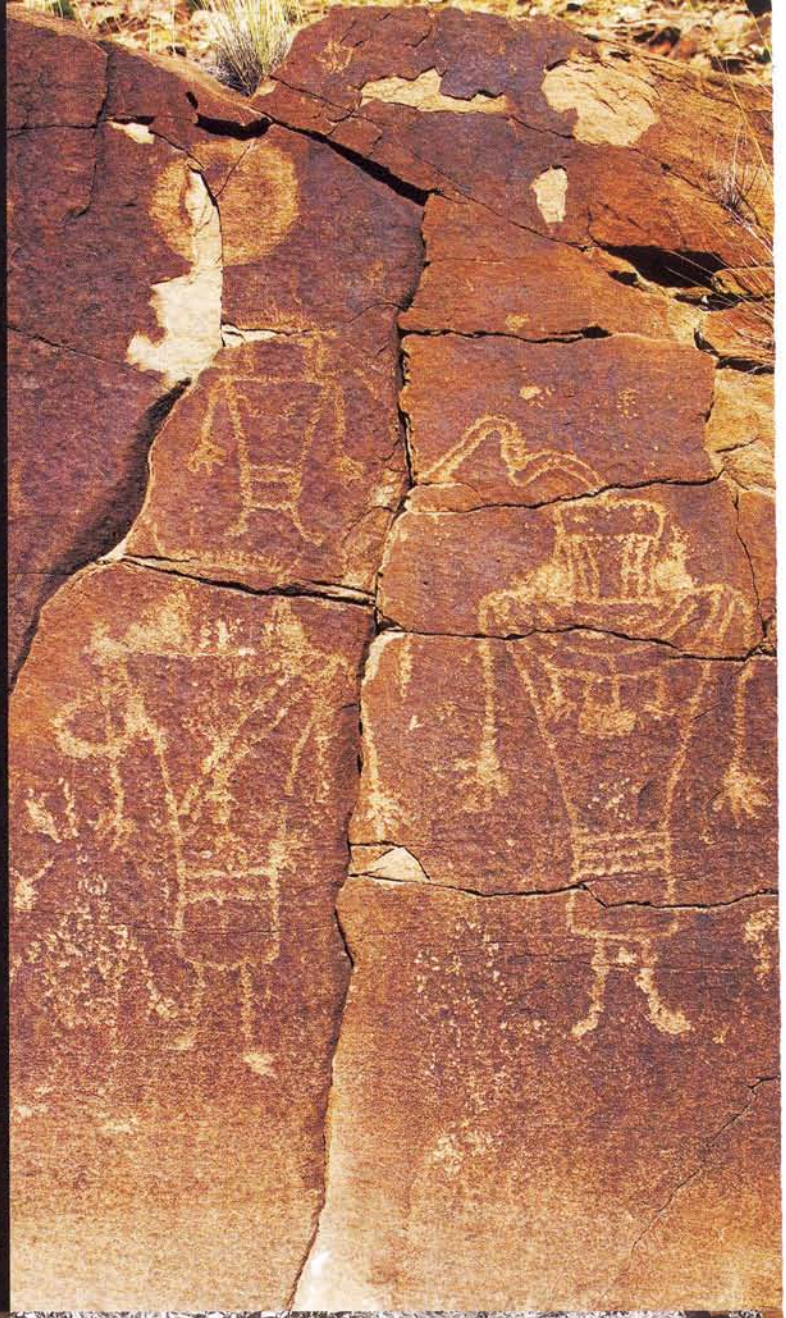


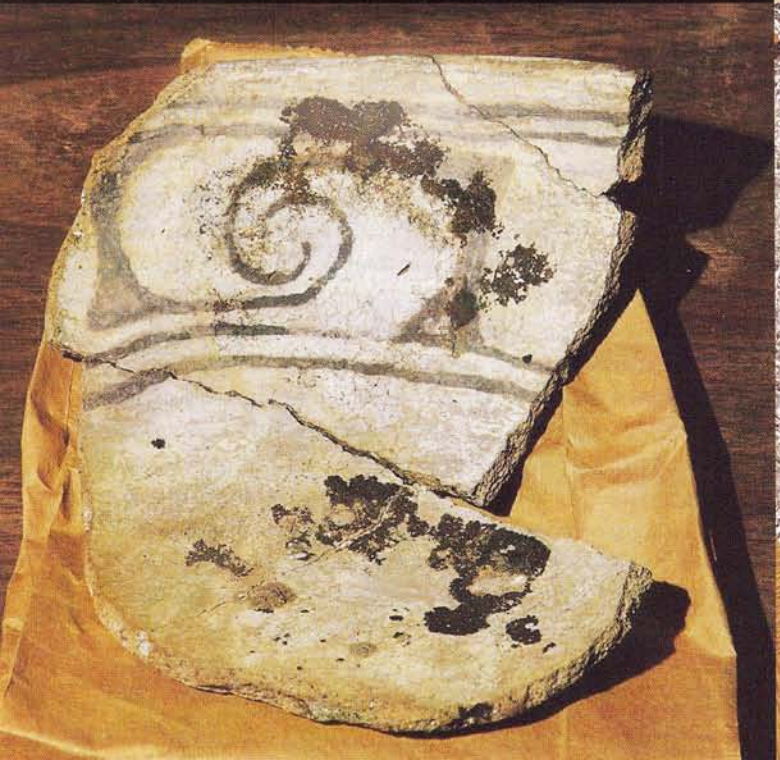
ARCHAEOLOGISTS (JONES ABOVE RANGE CREEK) MARVEL AT THE CLIFFSIDE GRANARIES THAT THE FREMONT PEOPLE BUILT. CONTAINING CORNCOBS PERHAPS 1,000 YEARS OLD, SOME FOOD STORES ARE SO REMOTE THAT ONLY EXPERIENCED ROCK CLIMBERS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO INSPECT THEM.

chaeology itself isn't spectacular or striking to the average visitor, this won't be a great tourist attraction," Jones says with obvious gratitude.

But the place grows on you. Jones and I follow Wilcox up the steep slopes through patchy groves of pinyon, juniper and sage. Wilcox sets a brisk pace. Several hundred feet above the valley floor, we stop at a natural bench where some 50 slabstone boulders form a ring—the foundations of a pit house. Perhaps a thousand years ago, the pit was dug about two feet into the ground. The builders would have leveled the floor and sunk four juniper or cedar posts into a squarish frame near the center of the pit. They would have fastened another four logs horizontally to the tops of the posts, and then leaned numerous logs against those crosspieces. Branches and brush may have been added to the walls and roof, which would have been covered by a thick layer of earth. The typical house was roughly conical or like a pyramid with a flat top and stood about 12 feet across and 6 feet high. A hole in the roof allowed for access in and out via a ladder and let smoke escape. Near some of the houses, the ground is still black in places from the ash of cooking fires. A lot of pit houses burned before the occupants could clear out their possessions—a boon for archaeologists.

Lying nearby is a large metate, an indented stone that the Fremont used to grind corn and seeds. Jones points to a slight crack in a cliff wall about 20 feet above our heads. "There's a little granary there," he says, peering through his binoculars. "They're all over the place up here. You have to risk your life to get into them." Through my binoculars I can see a square structure wedged into a crack, sealed with mud. It looks virtually impossible to reach, and so far only accomplished climbers working with Range Creek researchers have been able to get into it.





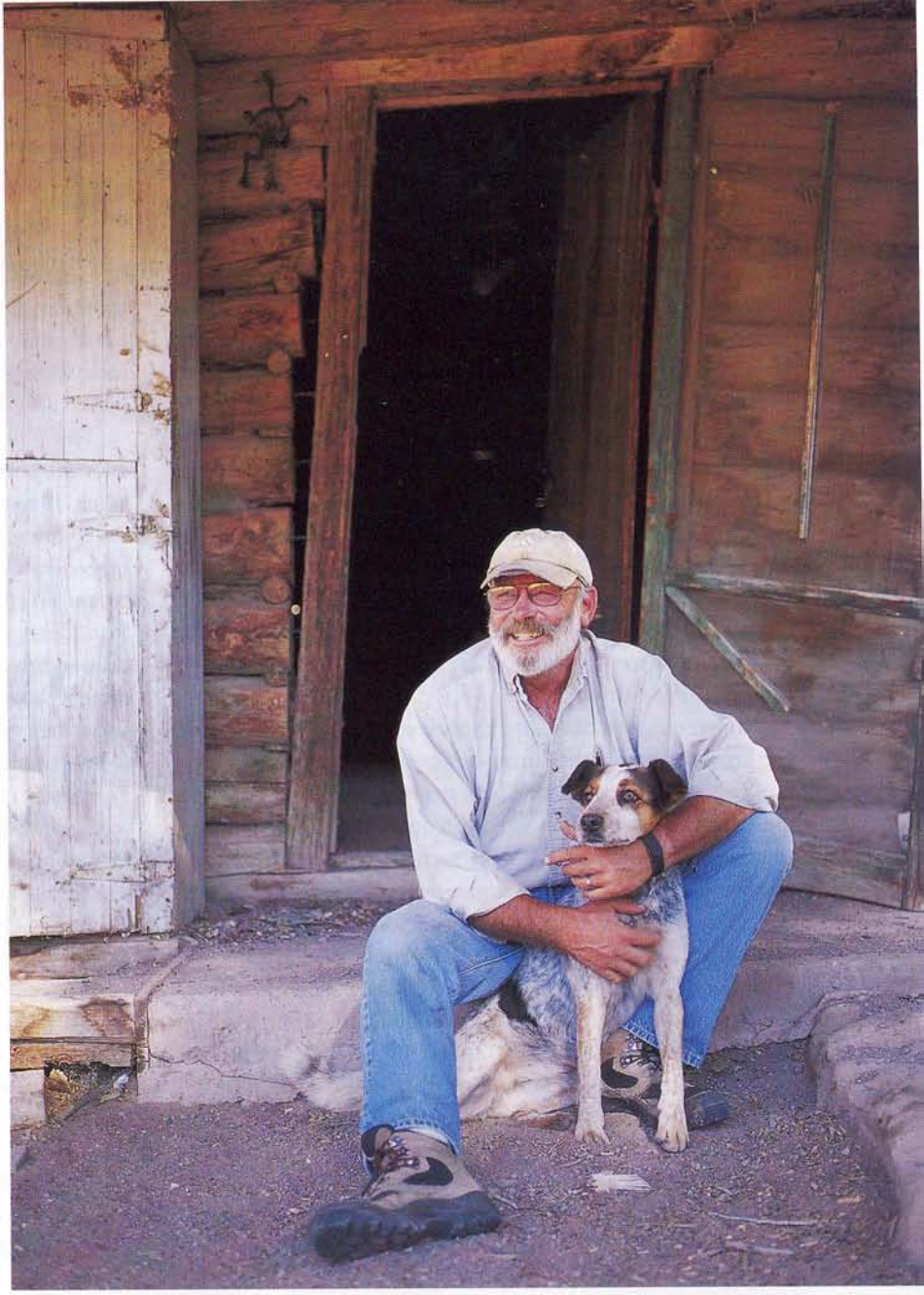
Renee Barlow, an archaeologist at the Utah Museum of Natural History and an experienced rock climber who has inspected granaries, has calculated that some held hundreds of bushels of maize. Filling them, she says, "would mean hundreds of trips climbing with big loaded baskets on your back."

Archaeologists speculate that the Fremont were "scatter hoarding," or hiding their food in multiple places. "You risk losing some of it, but at least if another person gets into it, they've only got one bit," Jones says. As we climb higher, Jones, who is 54 and husky, points out several more adobe granaries, molded into tiny crevices with reddish clay, virtually camouflaged high up on the sandstone cliff. There is evidence the Fremont used crude ladders or made toeholds in the rocks to reach them. Wilcox says he has never tried to reach the cliff granaries.

Wilcox turns his attention to a long, narrow crack in the big wall in front of us. "See that hole with them rocks back in there? I bet you a hundred dollars to ten dollars that you dig down under them rocks you'd find a dead Indian." Jones stiffens. I ask Wilcox how he would know. "Because them rocks are there, on top of the grave. And you'd find him all hunched up like a baby is after it's born."

"Well, we're not going to test your hypothesis by digging into it," Jones says. Nothing makes an archaeologist more jittery than finding human remains on government land. It often triggers a federal review that requires researchers to notify tribes that may claim that the remains are those of an ancestor. Tribal concerns about possible desecration can bring research to a halt. As Wilcox talks on, Jones looks as if he wishes he were on another cliff. But the old rancher is just getting started. "You're not going to find anything of value in a grave. I've seen several of them dug up, and I think these Indians were so damn poor that when they died they went to the happy hunting ground and there was no need to take what little they had."

The human remains issue has flared up before. When the Range Creek story first appeared in the news media, local tribes such as the Northern Ute, who claim affiliation to the Fremont, were angry that archaeologists had kept them in the dark about the site. Since then, researchers and tribal leaders have pretty much settled their differences. Still, Metcalfe reluctantly told me that archaeologists have found five sets of human remains, either on ranch property or nearby. He says the tribes have been notified and the researchers haven't touched the remains, much as they would like to analyze them. And though Wilcox once showed me a set of eroded bones and a skull partially buried about a quarter of a mile from his old homestead, he says he himself never dug up any graves: "My dad told me when I was a kid, 'we own the land, but we don't own them dead Indians.'"



WHO WERE THE FREMONT PEOPLE? EXPERTS (ABOVE, DUNCAN METCALFE AND HIS DOG AT RANGE CREEK) HAVE LITTLE TO GO ON. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: AN UNFIRED, UNDATED CLAY FIGURINE, POSSIBLY A FERTILITY SYMBOL, FROM THE PILLING COLLECTION; PETROGLYPHS CARVED WITH A BONE OR STONE TOOL; A FLAT BASKET USED FOR ROASTING SEEDS, AND A SHOVEL-SHAPED OBJECT WITH PAINT MARKINGS; FRAGMENTS OF DISTINCTIVE CLAY POTS MAY HAVE BEEN FREMONT-MADE, OR ACQUIRED IN TRADE WITH THE ANASAZI PEOPLE.

P. 72 TOP: FRANÇOIS GOHIER (2); BOTTOM: DOUGLAS C. PIZAC / AP / WIDE WORLD PHOTOS (2)

ARCHAEOLOGISTS DON'T LIKE the term "Fremont." But they've been stuck with it since the 1920s, when Noel Morss, an anthropology student at Harvard, documented "distinctive unpainted black or grey pottery," a "unique type of moccasin," "elaborate clay figurines" and "abundant pictographs of distinctive types"

along the banks of the Fremont River in south-central Utah.

Some scholars maintain the Fremont were country cousins of the Anasazi, or "ancestral puebloans"—a term contemporary Native Americans prefer. ("Anasazi" is said to be a Navajo word for "ancient enemy.") Others contend they developed from a distinct desert culture established before the Anasazi. Until recently, researchers had believed that the Fremont simply packed up when the climate turned dry. "The easy answer for a long time has been the 1300 A.D. drought," says Michael Berry, a Bureau of Reclamation archaeologist based in Salt Lake City. But the Fremont had endured similar droughts in the past. In another view, the drought, population pressures and an invasion combined to make life untenable for the Fremont. Utes, a tribe of hunter-gatherers, may have migrated into the area from California around the same time the Fremont were starting to retreat to the cliffs, and the competition for food perhaps turned ugly.

Archaeologists have also theorized that warfare among the Fremont broke out during this period. "You know, if your family is starving to death, if you get corn farming pushed to the limits and you're only getting a quarter of what you need to make it through a Utah winter, then going in and raiding your neighbors is going to seem more and more like a better alternative," Metcalfe says. That Fremont life was treacherous seems obvious even from their rock art. Perhaps the most haunting petroglyph I see at Range Creek is an upside-down figure with a bucket-shaped head and either a tail or penis. It was colored red and etched on the rock at the base of a cliff. It may depict a Fremont who fell to his death.

About the only thing researchers know for sure is that by around A.D. 1350, all the physical trappings that shouted Fremont—the distinctive sandals, baskets and pottery—disappear from the archaeological record. It's possible the Fremont people just moved on. Scientists have recently uncovered potential evidence of Fremont hearths and dwellings, dating from around 1500, along a tributary of the Green River in northwestern Colorado, 75 miles north of Range Creek. Barlow and others wonder if the culture shifted from farming back to full-time hunter-gathering. "When you become a hunter-gatherer again, you don't stay in one place long," says Metcalfe. "You'll change your look to an archaeologist. The material culture will be very different, but it might be exactly the same people."

**The Wilcoxes "certainly did make an effort to preserve the place," says historian Steve Gerber. "That's not to say they didn't take anything."**

LIKE THE STORY of the Fremont, the story of Range Creek is complicated. For starters, the canyon is not entirely pristine. Fur trappers arrived in the late 1800s, and cattle ranching began then too. One rancher, Clarence Pilling, found 11 clay figurines made by the Fremont. He later donated some of them to the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum in nearby Price, where they are now on display as the "Pilling figurines."

The Wilcoxes themselves have also done some collecting over the years. "Oh, if I seen an arrowhead, I picked it up. I won't lie to you or anyone else," Waldo Wilcox says. "I don't have very many. But I do have half a dozen or so." Wilcox's niece, Jeanie Jensen, says that members of the family often picked up artifacts. In 1999, Ellen Sue Turner, an archaeologist from Texas, visited the ranch, and Wilcox's wife, Julie, showed her a number of artifacts, including Fremont sandals, a wide-mouth jar, arrow points and a grinding stone. (Turner writes about her visit at www.staa.org/fremont/index.html.) Steve Gerber, the official historian for the Range Creek archaeological research project, whose father owned a ranch adjacent to the property, says the Wilcoxes "certainly did make an effort to preserve the place," adding: "That's not to say they didn't take anything or that people before them didn't take anything. The value to scientists is that they didn't go digging potholes."

"I have been on many sites that I am confident have not been walked in on in 1,000 years," says Renee Barlow. "A lot of the sites we have recorded, the artifacts are still right where they were dropped." There are so many artifacts that less than 10 percent of the ranch has been surveyed since work began in 2002. Jerry Spangler, a Utah archaeologist working at Range Creek, says: "Waldo has forgotten more sites than any of us will step on in a lifetime."

Meanwhile, the Wilcox legend continues to grow, and he continues to win awards and accolades for his Range Creek stewardship. It's less widely known that, although Wilcox sold the property, he retains the rights to exploit any subsurface mineral or energy deposits, including oil and natural gas. He says he hasn't ruled out leasing access to the deposits to natural gas developers. That prospect horrifies some of the archaeologists.

Wilcox and I were driving back through the old ranch when we passed two hikers. They were about a mile from the gate, where their car was parked, so Wilcox pulled over to give them a ride. When the middle-aged tourists saw Wilcox, they were as giddy as a couple of teenagers meeting their favorite rock star. "You're a hero," one gushed. Wilcox shrugged and allowed himself a little smile. ○

WHY DID THE FREMONT PEOPLE DISAPPEAR AROUND A.D. 1300? NEWLY ACCESSIBLE EVIDENCE AT RANGE CREEK (OPPOSITE, A DWELLING THAT MAY HAVE BEEN A SEASONAL RESIDENCE FOR FREMONT FARMERS CULTIVATING THE FLOOD PLAIN) MAY HELP UNRAVEL THE MYSTERY.