IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE THE EVERGLADES?

Smithsonian
MARCH 2006

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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, chassing 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 a 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.”

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.”

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 blue jeans and a straw cowboy hat, Wilcox shoulders a set of ropes, which he uses to pull himself over large boulders. A stylized “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.

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'll 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 wants he be 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.'"

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"
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.”

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.”