

Roadblock!



Young bighorn sheep rams move along the shoulder of the Burnt River Canyon Road just west of Durkee in Baker County. Bighorns were introduced to the Burnt River Canyon in 1987. Today, the herd numbers around 130 animals and they are perhaps the easiest bighorns to observe and photograph in the state. A good time to see them is in late winter. Take Interstate 84 exit 327 to Durkee and proceed west on Burnt River Canyon Lane. A 21-mile drive through this spectacular canyon will end up at the small community of Bridgeport.

HISTORY

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Their mining claims were taken. Their property was seized and they were prohibited from purchasing new property. Their towns and neighborhoods were torn down. Many moved to urban centers and many more moved back to China. Chinese Americans became a footnote in Oregon's history books.

But if you know where to look — and Rose does — you can see evidence of Chinese influence all over Oregon. Chinese immigrants built the railroads. Their mines helped prop up the economy of Oregon. They worked in canneries and hop farms. They even changed the shape of the land they lived on, in dramatic ways.

“We have very little that comes from Chinese residents themselves,” Rose said. “Archaeology is a way to capture that. The artifacts we find in the dirt? They tell stories about choices and opportunities.”

Eventually, Rose followed the aqueduct to the site of an old mining cabin. A few rotting logs remained in a rough square shape. The site had been disturbed — probably by looters — so artifacts like glass, cans, nails and bits of shovel were strewn throughout the area.

The actual excavation was taking place a quarter-mile away, but here, Rose's volunteers could see snippets of the sorts of things they might find: glass stamped with symbols that link them to companies in China, pieces of pottery, tins of food repurposed as sieves, water filters and mining tools.

When they arrived at the actual site, the excavation began. It was less Indiana Jones and more a meticulous documentation of each and every object in the area.

Rose's volunteers spread out, marking the location of every surface artifact with a flag. Then, they took metal detectors and placed a flag everywhere there was a beep. Eventually, the ground was covered with orange and pink flags fluttering in the dry wind.

Days of digging

Rose and a collaborator moved from flag to flag, log-



Volunteers sweep the ground with metal detectors, marking each hit with a colored flag. GPS coordinates will be taken for each.



Looters scattered artifacts throughout an archaeological site in the Malheur National Forest where Chinese miners lived and worked.

ging the GPS location of each artifact before they ever began excavating. It took all day.

The next day, they dug, excavating precisely marked square plots. Anything the team found, they documented, photographing it in the ground before they removed it from the plot. Dirt was carefully scraped and brushed from the plot, layer by meticulous layer, and placed into buckets. Those buckets were then sifted through window screens to reveal even tinier artifacts.

Eventually, a portrait of a life revealed itself.

Katie Johnson, an archaeologist and GIS specialist on Rose's team at Southern Oregon University, has been documenting pieces of glass bottles found in a hearth.

“He had a lot of different oils and sauces,” she said. “And

some of these, I think, might have had alcohol?”

Over the course of a week, Rose excavated a number of sites. Each piece, carried thousands of miles across the sea, and from there through inhospitable Oregon desert, can tell a story.

“We’re looking at the types of things you would bring with you if you left home. Like, they answer, What does home mean?” Rose said, holding up a small piece of blue-green china. “We find these breakable heavy teapots that are just beautiful things that someone carried with them.”

They find pieces of bone china: cups and plates and teapots. But not all of these artifacts are eye-catching; some look like trash, something discarded along the road. But the empty cans and

food containers from midden piles can tell an archaeologist even more about how someone actually lived. Was the can cut open with a knife or just punctured? That can tell a researcher if it was used to store a liquid, or something large, like pears.

The most striking site had a massive stone wall, the remains of a hearth with the bones of animals the residents ate. To the side were a pair

of rubber boot soles studded with nails — hob-nails — that Chinese miners would push through the soles of their shoes for traction.

These miners came from subtropical areas, Rose said, but they would mine all through the cold Blue Mountain winters, standing knee-deep in frigid water while they worked. The boots kept their feet warm and dry.

There's an urgency to the work Rose and her colleagues are doing in the Malheur National Forest. The threat of wildfire is always present and it's getting worse. The already fire-prone stands of ponderosa pine trees are under threat as climate change makes wildfires bigger, hotter and more frequent.

A grant to the Forest Service aims to mitigate those wildfires by thinning parts of the forests and doing controlled burns.

Don Hann, the heritage program manager with Malheur National Forest, said the Forest Service is obligated to protect any archaeological sites on its land.

“But we’re talking about tiny pieces of clothing, milled wood, pieces of leather and rubber,” Hann said. “Any fire, even a small one, can destroy all that history.”

But where are the mines?

The race against time is twofold: These sites need to be documented before they're burned away. And they need to be located before they're destroyed by thinning operations.

There's a problem, though. There are no reliable records of the locations of Chinese mines. After the Exclusion Act, many worked off-the-books. But a few years ago, as part of a program to identify areas that are likely to burn in a wildfire, the Forest Service used a low-flying plane to get LIDAR images of the area. LIDAR is an imaging technol-

ogy that maps the ground with incredible accuracy, catching differences in elevation of just a few inches.

For archaeologists, that's all they need. Because the Chinese miners did more than dig for gold: they shaped the landscape. Their aqueducts crisscrossed the mountains for miles. They constructed reservoirs that held and released water in the driest parts of summer. They built streams where there were none, and the massive rock piles left behind after excavations, called tailings, formed mounds as well as deep, mileslong ditches.

“Before, we thought we had maybe 1,000 to 2,000 acres of mining area. Now we're looking at 7,000 to 8,000,” Hann said.

In recent years, a lot of misconceptions about the Chinese in Oregon have been corrected — the extent of the mining operations, who was running the mines. And even when historians began to acknowledge the role the Chinese played in Oregon mining, Hann said many still assumed that Chinese miners were laborers working for white-owned mining companies. But that wasn't the case. They ran their own companies, and as many as 70% of the miners in the area could have been Chinese.

“The fact that these populations aren't represented now means that it's even more important for us to understand their historical contribution and acknowledge it,” Rose said.

Chinese people thrived for a time in Oregon. They built infrastructure, established communities and funneled gold into the economy. And then, a suite of policies, targeting one ethnic group, erased much of their history.

But, Rose said, they lived, worked, made friends and built lives. “Their stories deserve to be told.”

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Wind flowing over mountains can create distinctive cloud shapes.

WIND

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Cornices are those snow furls overhanging the lees of ridges and peaks, looking much like breaking white-caps. They arise as wind drives snow across exposed crests; the obstacle forms an eddy in the windstream and thus a fallout of snow on the leeward slope. Snowstorms and simply episodes of windblown snow will build up these young cornices, layer by layer.

Asymmetrical, “hogback”-plan landforms with their gentle slope to the windward and their steep one to the leeward grow the biggest, gnarliest cornices. Those include ridges scalloped on their east or north sides by steep-walled cirques, and mountain horns whittled by glacial ice. We've got plenty of both in the Wallows and Elkhorns.

It's worth emphasizing what any sensible mountaineer knows: Cornices — jutting out savagely over the void — are as lethal as they are gorgeous. Tempting as it is to peer over their lip at the scenic plunges they overlook, don't do it.

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UPGRADE

215 Elm Street La Grande • (541) 963-5440
northwestfurnitureandmattress.com