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Lolo National Forest

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Forest Reveals Secrets in Burned Area

Missoula, MT. – On the morning of October 11 this year C. Milo McLeod and Anya Minetz, heritage specialists with the Lolo National Forest, discovered plenty of evidence of human activity near the old Jocko Indian Trail west of Seeley Lake: a fire pit probably built by hunters, some tin cans, a bottle cap, even a couple of modern cartridge casings, maybe also left by hunters.

But these were not the kind of human artifacts they were looking for. This was not stuff of the past; nothing that might reveal something about the people who traveled or lived in the area over 100 years ago. But the two kept looking because ground was almost bare from the recent fire and the forest had already given up quite a bit so early in the day. They were looking for signs of human activity from long ago as part of a routine archeological survey. They had already determined that the area they were searching had a “high probability” for historic finds. Besides being near the old Jocko Indian Trail, it was close to water and the ground was flat and open. As the Lolo National Forest Heritage program manager on the Lolo for over thirty two years, McLeod had been in the area before and had conducted many such inventories across the forest, always starting with a strategy to search in places he knew from research were likely areas for travel or settlement.

McLeod was well acquainted with the old Jocko Indian Trail. But on this trip the landscape had a different appearance. Burned trees had few limbs and you could see through the forest for hundreds of feet and the forest floor was absent anything that could burn; pine needles, duff, and branches had been consumed by the intense heat and flames of the Jocko Lakes Fire.

“The landscape had certainly changed since the last time I had been in there in the early 90s,” McLeod said. “The area had burned hot – you could see mineral soil. We had just walked about 50 feet from this modern hunter’s camp, and Anya bends over and says, ‘here’s another one.’”

It was another rifle cartridge. McLeod examined it. The casing and round were both intact. But this one was not something you could buy in any sporting goods store.

“It was a .56-50 Spencer cartridge, first patented in 1860 and used by the Army until 1870,” McLeod said. “The .56-50 was used by trappers and traders and was one of the first repeating rifles used by the U.S. Army. Finding one cartridge is interesting, but in the first day we found eight loaded cartridges and two bullets.”

The items were found spread along a linear path about 50 feet long and 30 feet wide.

That wasn’t all. The pair continued to search the site, coming back over a several day period. They would eventually find an axe head manufactured between 1836 and 1837; a pair of scissors; a

whetstone; a bullet mold for producing .31 or .36 caliber round balls for a pistol, and eight additional fully loaded .56-50 Spencer cartridges. And the most interesting of all to McLeod: a cut-down rifle barrel about 14 inches long with a beveled end.

“Anya got on the internet and found out that this was buffalo hide scraper manufactured after 1804 by the Hudson Bay Company out of a segment of a .50 caliber octagonal rifle barrel,” McLeod said. “This is when the buffalo hide trade was still very active in Montana. And Fort Connah south of Ronan was an old Hudson Bay trading post, abandoned sometime before 1870.”

The items were noteworthy, McLeod said, for their obvious value to someone living or traveling through the west at that time – they were items that a person would depend on for survival. “These were not things you would just lose,” he said. McLeod noted that the old Jocko Indian Trail was the route Indian Tribes used to get to the great buffalo herds east of the Continental divide. “It was the route from the Flathead Valley to Seeley/Swan, and connected with the Blackfoot River and the trail to the buffalo. Lewis commented on it in the Lewis and Clark Journals as ‘the Great Road to the buffalo,’ used to gain access to the plains and the buffalo herds,” McLeod said.

McLeod and Minetz have already catalogued the items and mapped their locations. They may end up on display in the future. Some will be sent off to a lab for testing to determine their precise age.

Why a traveler left behind valuable possessions over 100 years ago near the old Jocko Indian Trail will likely remain a mystery, McLeod noted.

“The artifacts and the distribution say that there was an event that happened here,” McLeod said. “Whoever had them, he didn’t lose them, and he didn’t cache them. Was somebody attacked while traveling the Jocko Trail? Were they run off by a grizzly bear...we will never know.”

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