

FOREST FEATURE

Pacific Northwest Region - Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

A day in Hells Canyon with Lewis-Clark State College

On April 3, 2013, Archeologist Tony King from the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF) and Matt Burks, Public Affairs Specialist for WWNF had the opportunity to meet up with Professor Patricia Keith of Lewis-Clark State College and her class at the remote boat launch Dug Bar, located in the middle of Hells Canyon. As Tony and Matt waited for the sound of the approaching jet boat carrying 13 college students of the Hells Canyon Institute, Matt found himself thinking about the impact of a week-long course in Hells Canyon about wilderness values for the undergraduate students. Staying at Garden Creek, collecting data about the pH levels of the tributaries to the Snake, writing down the stories passed on by the European settlers and Nez Perce Indians, or collecting information on the flora and fauna of the canyon would all be heightened and intensified by staying in the Canyon.

The jetboat, operated by Butch Odegaard of River Quest Excursions, stopped at the dock long enough for Tony and Matt to hop on. Accompanying them were three Lewis-Clark State College professors: Patricia Keith, retired Professor of English; Amy Canfield, Professor of History; and Steve Evans, retired professor of Native American Studies and his wife Connie Evans, a member of the Nez Perce Tribe. The first stop was lunch under the oldest hackberry tree in Oregon, about a quarter mile north of Chinese Massacre Cove where we were to visit next. Over the course of tuna sandwiches, hot tamales, and bottled water Matt and Tony learned about the specialties of the students and their aspirations for their week on the river. While some students were involved with history and others the biological sciences, they each felt a reverence for Hells Canyon and gratitude for this time spent in the outdoors.

After lunch, Tony gave a short presentation about the history of Temperance Creek and the Forest Service involvement with the preservation of the site at Chinese Massacre Cove, formerly known as Deep Creek. From there, the group hiked to Chinese Massacre Cove where Professor Amy Canfield told the history of the site where 34 Chinese people were tortured and killed by people/men from Wallowa County looking for gold. The group listened in silence, paying homage to the site before proceeding another few hundred feet up the river to the site of the memorial.



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FOREST FEATURE

Continued

The memorial, a simple granite headstone, inscribed with a short telling of the events of 1887 is written in three languages: Chinese, English, and the Nez Perce language Niimiipuutímt. Connie Evans read the inscription aloud to the group in Niimiipuutímt. A long moment of silence was shared before Butch Odegaard told the story of hiking up the hillside two years ago with all the power tools for installing the stone, which was lowered from a helicopter. Butch thanked Lyle Wirtanen, Garry Bush, and Tony King for their work in making the memorial site a reality.

As the class returned to the boat and Dug Bar, Tony and Matt began to prepare for the slow crawl in the SUV out of the canyon and the drive back to Baker City. But there was one more stop: The Nez Perce Crossing. A quarter mile from Dug Bar, Butch shut down the jetboat engines and something odd happened; rather than being pulled downstream the boat stayed in place then began to move in circles, caught in a back eddy. Steve Evans, retired professor of Native American Studies from Lewis-Clark State College, stepped to the front of the boat and began to tell us the story of the crossing.

In the spring of 1877, Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce were forced to cross the Snake River by General Howard and the troops from Fort Lapwai. They chose their traditional crossing location just south of Dug Bar, where a back eddy breaks the rushing current just enough to allow a Nez Perce warrior to hold the head of a young colt above the water while he rides his horse alongside, eight legs straining together in an effort to reach the other side. Most of the young warriors made several trips across the river to carry the old and infirm tribal members on rafts made of hides. While the crossing was a hardship for the Nez Perce, it was all but impossible for General Howard and his army to follow them.

After jumping out of the jetboat at Dug Bar and piling back into the rig, Tony and Matt began to reminisce about the day. Being with the college students and seeing their interest in public lands had been inspiring for them. It was important to remember that we are only in our jobs for a short period of time before we pass the torch to the next generation who will hold us accountable for our decisions while they wrestle with the current issues of their time. Knowing that the lands will be well cared for in the future is a comforting thought.



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Continued



Above: Professor Patricia Keith (in orange hat)

Left: Archeologist Tony King



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