

# **The Fruit Merchants of Hells Canyon**

## **The Story of Archibald Ritchie and John Eckles on the Payette National Forest**

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The life stories of Idaho's pioneers are an important part of the historical fabric of the state. One of those stories has as its central characters the "fruit merchants," Archibald (Archie) Ritchie and John Eckles, operators of Eckles Ranch, located at Big Bar on the Snake River in Hell's Canyon. It's a story that begins in Scotland, half a world away from Idaho.

### ARCHIBALD RITCHIE

Archibald Ritchie was born in Scotland on March 22, 1839. At age 21 on June 4, 1860, he married Jessie Frew, age 19, at Denny in Sterlingshire, Scotland. The county of Sterlingshire is just north of Glasgow. Shortly after their marriage Archie left for America, while Jessie remained in Scotland.

After arriving in the United States, Archie found work in New York City as a mechanic. The States were in turmoil. They had been fighting a Civil War since the spring of 1861. Archie apparently felt sympathetic to the northern cause, and joined the National Guard of New York on July 12, 1864, with the rank of Sergeant. Then on March 7, 1865, at age 26, he enlisted as a private, Company H, 1st Regiment of the New York Engineers, Union Army. Veterans records registered his position as that of an artificer, or skilled mechanic; he was 5 feet 6 inches tall, with blue eyes and a fair complexion.

Muster and Descriptive Rolls for his detachment indicate he signed up at Broadway and Chambers, in New York City. He was sent to Wart Island, New York, on March 14, 1865, then transferred to Richmond, Virginia. An inducement for enlisting for three years had been a \$100.00 bounty, offered by the 8th Congressional District of New York City, however his services were only needed for a short time.

Soon after Lee surrendered to Grant on April 1, 1865, the war ended and Ritchie was mustered out. His Muster-out Roll slip from Richmond, Virginia, dated June 30, 1865, show Ritchie had drawn \$53.54 for clothing and received \$33.33 bounty, pro-rated from the full three-year enlistment bounty of \$100.00.

When applying for his military pension in 1904, he answered questions regarding his travels after his discharge. He said he had, "left New York City (in) 1867 for the Rocky Mountains, been prospecting in all the States and Territorys [sic] in the Rocky Mountains, been in this part (Idaho) since 1887, placer mining and raising a small garden on Snake River" (Dept. of Interior, Bureau of Pensions application, 12-27-1904).

### JOHN ECKLES, ECKLES RANCH

John Eckles, according to *The Council Leader*, was born in 1840, "crossed the plains in 1882 and has been a resident of this part of Idaho for about 30 years" (July 4, 1912).

In a homestead application made in 1909, Eckles stated he settled at Big Bar on the Snake River in April of 1888. Deputy Forest Ranger Arthur V. Robertson made the following comments in his report after he inspected the homestead on January 10, 1909:

(Residence) Claimant's residence on the land has been continuous since date of settlement. 25 acres of the land in cultivation, producing hay, grain, garden truck and fruit. Farming implements consisting of mower, rake, wagons, plows, harrows, and all small tools necessary to conduct a farm. Plenty of household furniture to maintain a home.

(Improvements) Log house, 1 room size 14 x 18 [with] cellar built on back, 8 x 17, value \$200.00; 1 lumber house, 1 room 11 x 14, value \$50.00; 1 stone cellar with 1 story built of lumber overhead, 16 x 20, value \$300.00; 1 log blacksmith shop 12 x 18; 1 log stable and chicken house 16 x 22; 2 small granaries built of lumber. Value of these 4 buildings \$300.00. Water is taken from Eckles Gulch and is a perpetual supply.

(Cultivation) 25 acres of this land is actually producing crops: 5 acres in orchard, 500 trees; apples, peach, pear, cherries, prunes, plums, grapes, nut trees, and all other varieties of small fruits. Age of trees from 2 to 20 years. Orchard is bearing. 100 acres under ditch...Value of land when cleared, \$25.00 per acre. Crops raised on this land consist of alfalfa, barley, oats, corn, fruit, and all kinds of garden stuff. Cultivation of this land has been from 10 acres in 1892, to 25 acres at the present time (1909).

(Grazing) Stock owned by claimant: cattle 6 head, horses 3 head, domestic fowls, about 100 chickens... No timber on this land except for 3 or 4 scrubby bull pine trees down near the river bank (Robertson 1909).

The warm, low elevation (1800 feet above sea level) bar, located on the east side of the Snake River, had long been used by Native Americans as a winter camp site. The mild temperatures and fertile soils provided an excellent location for the "fruit merchants" and Ritchie and Eckles soon became well-known for their fine produce. Local residents traveled into the canyon to buy fruits and vegetables.

Cole, in *A Wild Cowboy*, describes pioneer Amy Smith of Bear, Idaho, who, like many area women in the late 1800's, bought fruit from Ritchie and Eckles.



Canning fruit was another major undertaking, as it involved a fourteen-mile trip to the Eckles bar orchard on the Snake River. After making the perilous trip down the canyon and picking the fruit, Amy and her children made the trip back up the steep trail. The family and their fruit, which had been individually wrapped in leaves to protect it from bruising, arrived home intact (Cole 1992:52-53)

Grace Jordan, a Hell's Canyon housewife of a later era noted, "It was the usual thing for us to put up a thousand quarts of fruit, vegetables, poultry and meat in the course of a year...the filled shelves in the cellar were grand to see" (Jordan 1954:158).

Single men also had to secure a supply of food for themselves. In his journals, Lou Caswell, one of the discoverers of the Thunder Mountain gold mine, told of planting a garden on Big Creek for himself and his brothers: "April 29, 1900: Put in some choice potato [sic] seed her in house garden...Got done about

4 (o'clock). Have little over 1 acre. Put in 3 kinds of peas that Dan brought over from John Eckles on Snake River" (Caswell 1895-1900).

The mines in eastern Oregon, and mines in western Idaho, like those at Cuprum, Landore, Decorah, Helena, were a good market for produce from the Eckles Ranch. Archie and Eckles packed fruits and vegetables up the winding canyon trails. Spring vegetables, green onions, lettuce, new red potatoes, and ripe strawberries made the fruit merchants a welcome sight coming up the trail after a long winter.

In *A Wild Cowboy*, a photograph shows both Eckles and Ritchie (n.d.) standing with several other men outside their cabin. Cole notes, "When winter weather made prospecting too rough, miners flocked to Eckles' cabin 'like tomcats' " (Cole 1992:10).

*The Council Leader* reported, "he (Eckles) was known far and near for his hospitality and many kind acts; in fact, the latch string of his cabin was always out" (July 4, 1912).

#### BEYOND REGRET

One of the curious puzzles remains. Why didn't Jessie join her husband in America? It might be assumed, over the years Archie corresponded with Jessie and sent her money in Scotland.

An examination of Ritchie's military records reveals a minor, but personal detail. His signature in 1865 after he first arrived in the United States is unskilled, ragged; indicating he was barely able to sign his name. Later, his penmanship, possibly as a result of his correspondence with Jessie, or from keeping records at the fruit ranch, had improved. When he answered questions on the 1904 military pension application, his script is smooth and rounded; the letters well-formed and well-written.

When Archie applied for a soldier's pension he was allowed \$8.00 a month, and received that amount from November of 1904 until his death on July 7, 1906. After he died, Jessie, age 65 may not have had any income. She petitioned for a military widow's pension, applying through the American Consul in Glasgow, Scotland. She was granted \$12.00 per month until her death on February 10, 1916.

Archibald Ritchie was buried at his home at Big Bar. His headstone indicates his military rank and detachment.

John Eckles died on June 29, 1912. *The Council Leader* carried the following notice of his death:

The people of Cuprum and vicinity were shocked Saturday morning when word was received that John Eckles was dead. He got up in the morning and went about his chores apparently as well as usual and as he was returning to the house for breakfast, he was taken by a violent coughing spell when a few feet from the house. His brother-in-law and sister, Mr. and Mrs. Kilgore, rushed out to find him with blood rushing from his mouth, and by the time they could carry him in the house and lay him down, he had expired... He was 72 years old and was never married. The funeral services were held Sunday afternoon at his home (July 4, 1912).

The graves of the two old friends lay side by side west of the highway at Big Bar. A log fence protects the headstones, naming the men and marking the place. A few old apple trees, remnants of the earlier orchard, are growing along the terraces north of the graves. In springtime, a blanket of white blossoms drift over the untended grass until canyon winds gather and carry the blossoms to the river. A sweet memorial to the "fruit merchants" of Hell's Canyon, on the Payette National Forest.

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The information regarding Archibald Ritchie and Jessie Frew Ritchie came from Veteran's Military Records of the United States, National Archives, Washington, D.C. These include records of enlistment, Muster and Roll of Detachment, Muster-out Roll, and applications for pension records.

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