

# vanished?

—by Keith Kloor

—photographs by Douglas Merriam

**U**ntil he became 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 bought the property in 1951; over the next half a century, 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, chasing 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. They 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, the 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 2004 when an Associated Press story described their archaeological riches and the eccentric landowner who'd guarded the secret for decades.



Part of the excitement about Range Creek rests on hopes that it 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. "These people were afraid of something," said lead archaeologist Jones. "They were obviously trying to protect their food, and it wasn't from mice."

Research at Range Creek may 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 1,000 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."

The Wilcox ranch lies only 30 miles southeast of Price, Utah, and the Indian ruins on it are pale in comparison to the majestic ruins of New Mexico's Chaco Canyon or the grandeur of Colorado's Mesa Verde. But the place, and its cabinet-size granaries so high in the cliffs they are visible only with binoculars, grows on you and one cannot

but marvel at the ingenuity of Range Creek's lost inhabitants.

Perhaps a thousand years ago, they dug pits about two feet into the ground, leveling the floor and sinking four juniper or cedar posts into their squarish frames. Another four logs were fastened horizontally to the tops of the posts, and numerous logs were leaned against those crosspieces. Branches and brush may have been added to the walls and roof, which would have been covered by a thick layer of earth. The typical house was roughly conical or like a pyramid with a flat top and stood about 12 feet across and 6 feet high. A hole in the roof allowed for access in and out via a ladder and let smoke escape. 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 mul-



Fremont pit house on Rock Creek, Utah



Fremont pit house on Rock Creek, Utah

Fremont, from p. 19

iple places. Molded into tiny crevices with reddish clay, the adobe granaries camouflaged high up on the sandstone cliff appear to bear out this assumption. There is evidence the Fremont used crude ladders or made toeholds in the rocks to reach them.

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" along the banks of the Fremont River in south-central Utah.

Some scholars maintain the Fremont were country cousins of the Anasazi, or "ancestral puebloans"—a term contemporary Native Americans prefer. ("Anasazi" is said to be a Navajo word for "ancient enemy.") Others contend they developed from a distinct desert culture established before the Anasazi. Until recently, researchers had believed that the Fremont simply packed up when the climate turned dry.

"The easy answer for a long time has been the 1300 A.D. drought," says Michael Berry, a Bureau of Reclamation archae-

ologist based in Salt Lake City. But the Fremont had endured similar droughts in the past. In another view, the drought, population pressures, and an invasion combined to make life untenable for the Fremont. Utes, a tribe of hunter-gatherers, may have migrated into the area from California around the same time the Fremont were starting to retreat to the cliffs, and the competition for food perhaps turned ugly. Archaeologists have also theorized that warfare among the Fremont broke out during this period.

Fremont, p. 22, 2nd col.

Fremont, from p. 21

But about the only thing researchers know for sure is that by around A.D. 1350, all the physical trappings that shouted Fremont—the distinctive sandals, baskets, and pottery—disappear from archaeological record. It's possible the Fremont people just moved on. Scientists have recently 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.

Like the story of the Fremont, the story of Range Creek is complicated. For starters, the canyon is not entirely pristine. Fur trappers arrived in the late 1800s, and cattle ranching began then too. The Wilcoxes themselves have also done some collecting over the years.

In 1999, Ellen Sue Turner, an archaeologist from Texas, visited the ranch, and Wilcox' wife, Julie, showed her a number of artifacts, including Fremont sandals, a widemouthed jar, arrow points, and a grinding stone. (Turner writes about her visit at [www.staa.org/fremont/index.html](http://www.staa.org/fremont/index.html).) But, the Wilcoxes did make an effort to preserve the place.

"I have been on many sites that I am confident have not been walked in on in 1,000 years," says Renee Barlow. "A lot of the sites we have recorded, the artifacts are still right where they

were dropped." There are so many artifacts that less than ten percent of the ranch has been surveyed since work began in 2002.



Meanwhile the Wilcox legend continues to grow, and he continues to win awards and accolades for his Range Creek stewardship. It's less widely known that, although Wilcox sold the property, he retains the rights to exploit any subsurface mineral or energy deposits, including

oil and natural gas. He says he hasn't ruled out leasing access to the deposits to natural gas developers. That prospect horrifies some of the archaeologists.

The full article, "Secrets of the Range Creek Range," was published in the March 2006 issue of the *Smithsonian*.]