

John Day Fossil Beds National Monument

Cultural History at Sheep Rock

Named for the flocks of sheep that settlers saw roaming its sides, Sheep Rock peak towers over the John Day River and the National Park Service visitor center. While

this landform preserves millions of years of geologic history, the valley below it carries a long and rich record of human activity.



homestead cabin near Sheep Rock

American Indian Presence

Eastern Oregon was inhabited by people belonging to the Columbia Plateau and Great Basin cultural groups. The earliest record of human presence in what is now the Sheep Rock Unit of the National Monument consists of the picto-

graphs in Picture Gorge which are centuries old. The valleys on either side of the Gorge became a “transition zone” between two culturally distinct groups: the Umatilla, Tenino, and Cayuse of the Plateau people, and the Northern Paiute of

the Great Basin. Typically, the tribes did not stay long, but lived here in the winter to hunt, fish, and gather roots and pigments.

Early Homesteaders

Between 1862 and 1909, the Homestead Act allowed settlers to claim 160- to 640-acre tracts of free land. Frank Butler was the first to settle in the valley north of Picture Gorge in 1877. The Officer family was the first to ranch

in this valley when in 1881 Eli Casey Officer took a homestead claim; he was said to have brought the first flock of sheep to the John Day area. His son, Floyd Officer, homesteaded the land where the

Cant House is now located and sometimes accompanied geologist and minister Thomas Condon on his study expeditions into the nearby fossil beds.

Life at The Cant Ranch

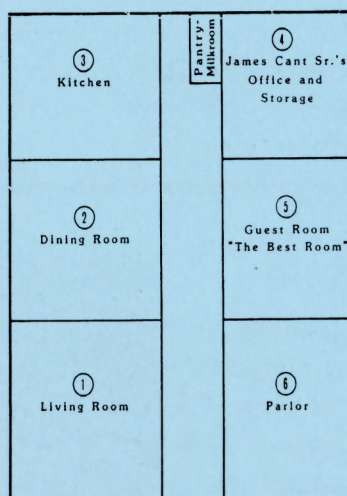
In 1910, Scottish immigrants James and Elizabeth Cant purchased approximately 700 acres of land from the Officer family and established their own ranch. By 1916, they and their four children were outgrowing the old house, and they ordered plans for a larger one through the mail. Built with lumber milled near the town of Mitchell, the building was completed in 1917. Now the National Park Service visitor center, the Cants’ house was structurally very similar to what you see today—the major recent changes include the conversion of James’ study at the southeast corner of the first floor into public restrooms and the modification of the bedroom directly above it into an employee kitchen and breakroom.

In the summers, the women and girls in the household slept on the upstairs porch, while the men and boys slept outside on the first-floor porch. The Cants

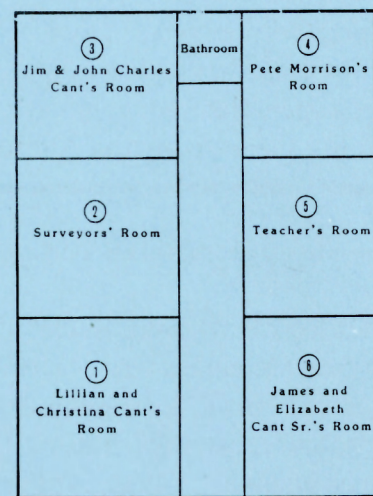
frequently had guests staying with them; there were also a number of ranch hands who slept in the house or in the bunkhouse just to the southeast. Often the family had overnight guests after hosting social events. Midnight suppers were popular at these affairs, and neighbors remember them often lasting until dawn.

School was held in the third

floor attic until the nearby Cant School was built in 1919, and the schoolteacher lived with the Cants as a family member. The Cant School continued to be the area’s educational center until the road through Picture Gorge was completed in the early 1920’s, after which the children traveled to Dayville for school.



(FRONT OF HOUSE)
FIRST FLOOR

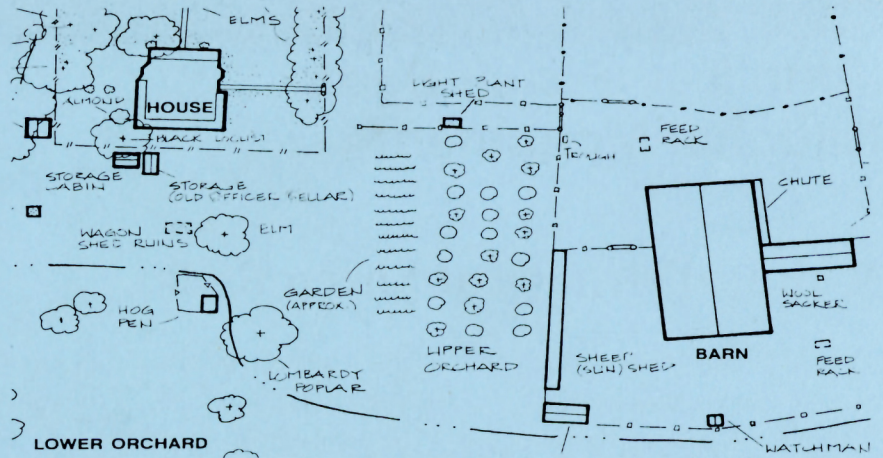


SECOND FLOOR

Cant Ranch Grounds

The Cants cultivated the grounds around the house for their immediate needs. In addition to the vegetable garden and fruit orchards, the lower pasture held a hog pen, while the chicken coop was closer to the house. Near the river the fields were cultivated with wheat, alfalfa, and other crops; they were irrigated with ditches that had been made when the Officers owned the land.

One of the original structures built by the Officer family still stands today: the small log cabin now used as the Fossil Demonstration Lab. Most of the other



The Cant Ranch, 1917-1946

existing buildings were constructed during the time that the Cant ranch was in operation.

Over time, land was added to the Cant property until it encompassed nearly 6,000 acres. James

Cant, Jr., and his wife Freda helped James and Elizabeth run the ranch until their deaths in the early 1970s.

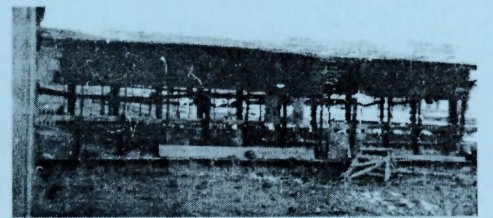
Two Eras of Ranching

After the discovery of gold in eastern Oregon in 1862, it was recognized that the area's climate and terrain were suitable for sheep grazing, and eventually nearly all of this large, high desert area was inhabited by sheep ranchers. James Cant was part of a second wave of immigrants who usually worked for established ranchers until they could start their own operations.

Raising sheep was an intensive process requiring dedication and loyalty. Sheep were herded into remote areas for grazing during the summers; in fact, James Cant, Jr. and his wife Freda spent their honeymoon herding sheep on nearby Aldrich

Mountain in 1932. The fall was spent shearing and trailing selected sheep to the market. Winters saw shearers again in the hills with the grazing animals, and in the spring they were occupied 24 hours a day with lambing. Sheep and lambs had to be watched vigilantly to protect them from predators such as eagles and coyotes and from diseases like scabies and rocky mountain spotted fever.

The Cant family owned more than 4000 sheep and employed several ranch hands at a time. At especially busy times, such as lambing and shearing, the Cants "traded" hands with neighboring ranchers so that everyone could get their work done.



shearing pens

Around 1946, the Cants followed the general trend, switching from sheep to cattle ranching. By this time, cattle had proven to be more lucrative than sheep, and skilled sheep workers were difficult to find due to the depletion of the workforce by the world wars. With this switch in livestock, several changes were made to the ranch and its grounds, including the construction of new buildings and the modification of corral fences.

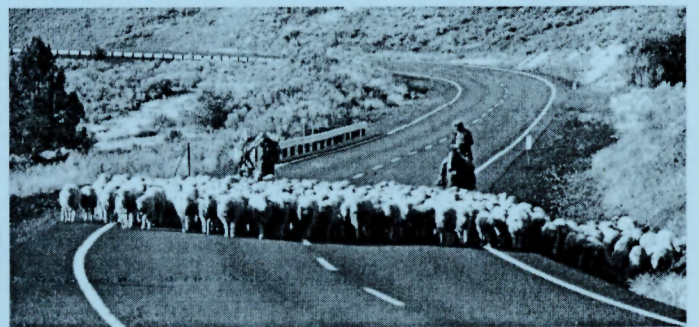
The Sheep Rock Area Today

After John Day Fossil Beds National Monument was established in 1975, the National Park Service acquired the Cant Ranch house and 849 acres of the property. In 1977, the house was opened as a Visitor Center, and in 1978 the Park Service restored the property to a near-1920's appearance. Two hundred acres of the former Cant property, including the house and outbuildings, was designated a Historic District in 1984. The Park Service has subsequently made efforts to

preserve the historic grounds and structures while also providing for them to be used productively.

Thus, the house provides space for a fossil museum, library, and administrative offices, while the outbuildings are used for paleontological research and exhibitry as well as educational programs.

Descendants of the Cants and other early ranching families



recent sheep drive near Visitor Center

continue to cultivate the land in the area surrounding the park; during your visit you may see grazing sheep or farm machinery, reminders of the Sheep Rock area's rich human history.