

To the Archaeologists:

There You Go Again

The last issue of the *Overland Journal* carried a story by Jack and Richard Steed regarding their excavation of Johnson's Ranch, considered the end of the California Trail in pre-gold rush years. When the Steeds first submitted their story, the editor asked if they had tried for professional archaeological support, and their answer was that they had indeed, and had been refused. Therefore, the decision was made to publish their story since the site was one of the most important along the trail, and since their research resulted in positive verification.

Two letters were received from archaeologists following the publication of the article. They were essentially the same, so we are reprinting only the first one, from Jonathon C. Horn of Montrose, Colorado, and the response from President Hunt and Jack Steed.

Dear Mr. Hunt:

I have just finished reading "The Rediscovery of Johnson's Ranch" by Jack and Richard Steed in the *Overland Journal*, Winter 1986 issue. Having grown up in Northern California, it is quite evident that the Johnson Ranch is a very significant site to the history of California and overland travel. As such, I was very alarmed to read of the removal of hundreds of buried artifacts from the site by the authors in an apparently unscientific fashion. As a professional historian and archaeologist, damage to an apparently undisturbed site of this importance, regardless of how well intentioned, in the haphazard manner described in the article is unexcusable. Amateur archaeologists with proper training and supervision are perfectly capable of undertaking an excavation in a professional way. However, removal of artifacts for a well balanced photograph and list of items in the text does not constitute

adequate justification. The proof the authors suggest is demonstrated by the artifacts recovered from the site, which they are admittedly incapable of analyzing, are little more than evidence of their vandalism. They should have left the material remains of the site alone and either learned proper excavation and analytical techniques themselves and/or contacted someone who was trained in historical archaeology.

Judging from the rest of your journal, it is apparent that your organization is interested in the preservation of our historic past. It is unfortunate that an article such as "The Rediscovery of Johnson's Ranch" found a forum in the *Overland Journal*. Not only does it give apparent consent to the destruction of our quickly vanishing and irreplaceable historic resources but blemishes the integrity of your organization. Only through the cooperation of concerned groups such as the Oregon-California Trails Association, historians, and archaeologists, may our fragile historical remains be preserved and properly studied.

Jonathon C. Horn
Box 521
Montrose CO 81402

Here is President Hunt's reply:

Dear Mr. Horn:

I have just put down the phone after talking with Jack Steed about your letter concerning the work that he and his son, Richard, have done at the historic Johnson Rancho. I didn't want to respond to you until I had had the opportunity to verify my initial understanding as to the circumstances surrounding their project.

I agree with you that, in the best of all possible worlds, it would be commendable to have concerned groups, historians, and archaeologists all joining together to preserve our nation's fragile historical records, but, unfortunately, sometimes it just doesn't work out that way

despite the best of intentions.

Let me give you the facts of the situation as Jack reiterated them to me:

1. Before initiating their attempt to locate the site of the Rancho, the Steeds approached the then state archaeologist and inquired if his office would be interested in participating in such an undertaking. They were informed that, because of so many Indian sites yet to be worked and the limitation on the state's financial resources for such undertakings, the state office had no interest at all in digging a pioneer site. They learned subsequently from other local historians who were interested in the Johnson Rancho that other such inquiries in the past had met with an equal lack of interest within the archaeological profession. No attempt was ever made by those contacted to refer them to archaeologists who might be interested in such a project.

2. The Steeds' purpose in seeking to determine the exact site of the Rancho was to see to it that this important trail site could be preserved — with the cooperation of the property owner, of course. In the process of carrying on their explorations, they have kept the entire collection of metal artifacts intact — leaving all other remnants untouched — and they have systematically recorded their finds.

3. The Steeds have been advised that their own work at the site and their removal of these metal artifacts has not significantly diminished its value as an archaeological site. What is needed is for a professional archaeologist to express some interest in this most historic trail site — someone who can win the confidence of the ranch's owner and gain the necessary permission to do a scientific dig.

Now I can assure you that I have no intention of presuming to speak for the Steeds in this matter. They are most capable of speaking for themselves. I would merely like to point out to you that they can hardly be condemned for proceeding with this project on their own terms when the archaeological profession manifested such a complete lack of interest. They made a reasonable attempt to elicit some scientific interest, and their responsibility in this matter does not, I would suggest, require them to go begging to you folk to take some interest in historic trail sites. Perhaps this incident would never have happened if someone like you, with your knowledge and obvious appreciation of the significance of this site, had been available here in California to take just such an interest. If fault needs to be assessed in this matter, I, for one, don't see it going to them.

Nor do I think that your attempt to affix a certain measure of fault and blame to our organization to be proper in this instance. You must understand that this effort was not in anyway a project of OCTA, nor was this article an editorial or an attempt at moral suasion. If one were to extend your guilt-by-association reasoning to its logical and absurd conclusion, then one would surely have to condemn the Holy Bible for condoning, advocating, and giving legitimacy to rape, incest, and murder because those particularly unsavory subjects are addressed on its pages.

I am not trying to suggest to you that I believe our organization is above legitimate criticism, and, in hindsight, it occurs to me that we undoubtedly missed an opportunity to preclude just the sort of negative reaction you felt upon reading the Steed article by not having the foresight to preface it with a short explanation of the actual circumstances, but I cannot see that your criticisms are valid in this case. However, rest assured that I have discussed your letter (and several others of like sentiment) with our editor, Greg Franzwa, and we are agreed that such critical views should be aired in the OJ along with any rebuttals so that our members can judge for themselves whether such criticisms are justified. As I understand the facts in this particular situation, I do not see the publication of the Steed article as giving OCTA's consent to the destruction of our quickly vanishing and irreplaceable resources, nor do the actions of the Steeds in anyway constitute vandalism. Their article was of considerable interest to our readers, and to the extent that it rather conclusively answers a long-standing mystery and matter of contention, it is a valuable contribution to the literature of historic trails research. That this project was not done according to the accepted rules of modern archaeological methodology, as you might have wished and hoped, can only be attributed to the fact of your own profession's seeming indifference to this most exciting and challenging opportunity. One cannot very well blame others for wanting to meet the challenge and for doing so. I want you to know that I am prepared as president of OCTA to appoint a standing committee of working archaeologists to advise us on just these sorts of matters and to help ensure that, in the future, archaeologists and trail historians do have the chance to work together to preserve our nation's cultural heritage. The latest list available to me does not list you as an OCTA member. How about joining and giving the benefit of your knowledge and expertise? We would welcome it.

Thomas C. Hunt
President, OCTA

Here is Jack Steed's Letter to the Editor:

My son and I have been made aware of criticism relative to our work at Johnson's Ranch. In response, I submit the following:

From the beginning, our intentions were strictly honorable: site provenance and preservation. Situated on private property and not registered historic, the area was subject to cultivation whenever the needs of the owners might dictate. For more than one hundred years the area lay open to anyone interested enough to investigate it, but few persons were ever so inclined. Wheatland teacher Miriam Griffith tried twenty years ago to enlist the aid of California officials — to no avail. As soon as Richard and I realized what we had come across, and prior to any metal detecting, the California official with proper jurisdiction was contacted by me personally. His uninterested response was very frustrating, to say the least. Bureaucratic paper-shuffling would never save Johnson's Crossing, so with the blessing of Miss Griffith, we two amateurs determined to make the attempt.

Without government grants, but aided by relatives and friends, we drove the eighty-mile round trip some twenty times. Several times, no sooner had we arrived up there

when the rain began, and we had to turn around and drive back home. Other times we recovered only square nails. But always our enthusiasm for the area brought us back again. Little by little the area gave up its secrets, and today we think we know not only the locations of the houses, but where Kearny's soldiers bivouacked, where Johnson kept his livestock, and other things not mentioned in our story. True, we worked without an archaeological grid, but we know within a few feet just where we found each significant item.

Rest assured, we have not disturbed the decomposed adobe outlines of Johnson's house. Nor have we touched the garbage pit near the Burtis hotel. We merely removed metal from the area. And today this metal is secure for all to see and appreciate.

We hope that through our efforts a groundswell will commence that will finally force California to forever

record the exact spot at which the 1844 route to California effectively terminated.

Jack Steed
1669 Bowling Green
Sacramento CA 95815

OCTA has not received memberships from either of the complainants, but it does have two very capable archaeologists as members at present: Dr. Melburn G. Thurman of Ste. Genevieve, Mo., and Dr. Robert L. Schuyler of Philadelphia. President Hunt has asked both to serve on a standing archaeological committee, and also asks any OCTA members who contemplate a dig to first consult with either member of that committee.

1985-1986 OCTA COMMITTEES

The following committees have been appointed by OCTA President Tom Hunt:

1986 Convention

Tom Hunt, coordinator; Don Buck, program chairman; Mary Mueller, tours chairman; Larry Mitchell, entertainment chairman; Pat Loomis, resident critic.

Nominating

Troy and Billie Gray, co-chairs; Roscoe A. Bischoff, Michael Bateman, M.D., Karl Baresel, Ruth Anderson, Bob Berry, Milton Madden, and Barbara Magerl.

Nominating Procedures

Charles W. Martin, Sr., chairman; Barbara Magerl and E. G. ("Frenchy") Chuinard, M. D.

Legislative

Bill and Jeanne Watson, co-chairs; Earl Schmidt, E.G. Chuinard, M.D., Barbara Burgess, Bob Richmond, and Jim Nelson.

Historian

Mrs. Ruth Anderson.

Preservation and Markers

Merrill J. Mattes, chairman; Karen Buck, and Roger Blair.

Public Relations

Barbara Magerl, chair; Cindy Lundahl, Peggy Smith, Miriam Mountford, G. Nicholas Ifft, Ron Smith, and Dick Ackerman.

The Rancher and OCTA

Karen Buck, chair; Troy and Billie Gray, Tony Primeaux, and Bob and Bertha Rennells.

Membership

Mary Mueller, chair; Dick Ackerman, Elaine McNabney, Jane Mallinson, Lee Underbrink, Tony Primeaux, and Bill Chivers.

Awards

Dr. John A. Latschar, chairman; Bill and Jeanne Watson (one vote only), Dr. Sharon Brown, and Dorothy Baresel.

National Staff Criteria

Cathy Galbraith, chair; Tom Lemons, Ron Thom, Don Andersen, and Kate Daschel.