

A short history of the Big Muddy area:

More information than you need or maybe wanted, but we think this is really neat stuff. There will/ be a test afterward!

The Land

The Big Muddy Ranch sits on the edge of two major geologic formations. The Columbia River Basalts is the large flat area you drive across to get to Shaniko from the Dalles. The entire Columbia Basin is covered with around 100 layers of basalt, 14-25 million years old. It was scrubbed clean by the Missoula Floods—massive floods released by bursting ice dams in northern Idaho and northwest Montana every 40-50 years for centuries during the last Ice Age, ending about 14,000 years ago.

The Columbia Basalt formation stops at Antelope, and the older John Day Formation (25+ million years old) basically starts here at the ranch. Several hills on the map are the throats of extinct volcanoes, and ash cliffs and basalt dikes are also to be found - and keep your eyes peeled for petrified wood. As you explore the terrain during the rogaine, the John Day Formation presents itself better than I can describe it.

Native inhabitants

Several tribes of Native Americans originally inhabited this area. The area was fought over and used as a travel corridor between the tribes in the Central Oregon Basin and the huge trading community along the Columbia River at The Dalles. The Indian town at The Dalles housed several thousand people and stretched for miles along the banks of the river. The four major Indian groups who traveled and raided through the ranch were the Snakes from the south, the Warm Springs from the west, and the Cayuse and Walla Walla from the north.

Trappers

The first visitor of European descent known to have explored the ranch was Peter Skene Ogden, who led two trapping expeditions up the John Day River, and presumably all the tributaries, in 1825 and 1826. Ogden worked for the Hudson Bay Company, which controlled and trapped this territory for Britain from its headquarters at Fort Vancouver, across the Columbia River from what is now Portland. The Brits objective, ordered from London and opposed by men like Ogden, was to create a "fur desert" in the area so no Americans would deem it profitable to inhabit the Northwest. But Americans were already trapping the western basin, and had objectives other than beaver fur in mind for Oregon.

American settlers

The big American push came in 1843 with the first wagon train that crossed the continent on the Oregon Trail that ended in The Dalles. The John Day area naturally attracted some of the first settlers who didn't want to continue, or were out of funds and couldn't make it to the Willamette Valley.

There were several stage robberies in the area. As a natural travel corridor, this area saw several stage lines run very near the ranch from The Dalles south to California and east to the John Day gold fields.

Gold? Yes, 50 miles upstream at Canyon City, a major strike was being dug out of the ground during the Civil War years. The gold helped fuel the Union war effort.

In the late 1860s, the Snake Indians launched a series of attacks in the area. They burned the Clarno Ranch fifteen miles to the north, and attacked the fortified stage station in the Antelope Valley, eighteen miles to the northwest. This was the last great Indian war in the Northwest, as the federal government poured troops into the area to pacify it for settlers and ranchers.

Big Muddy Ranch

As the individual homesteads failed, the land was purchased and consolidated into the Big Muddy Ranch. Sheep, not cattle, was the major stock grazed here. For a few years at the turn of the last century, more wool left the Shaniko train station than at any other train station in the world. With large companies controlling vast areas, there naturally were run-ins with the homesteaders (or squatters, as the sheep men called them).

In 1901, a man named Thomas Riley filed claim and built a crude cabin on Current Creek that blocked the natural roadway the Big Muddy boys used to drive sheep between Muddy Creek and the Black Rock Range several miles to the south. Riley and his partners would not budge and the Muddy needed to go through. The Muddy Ranch brought in a hired gun named Dave Bruner. One day, push came to shove and Riley threatened Bruner with a rifle. The hired gun drew and loosed two shots at Riley, who immediately dropped his carbine and ran for his cabin. Bruner calmly picked up Riley's weapon and proceeded to place a bullet in the back of Riley's head from a distance of 125 yards. Bruner pleaded self-defense, was convicted of second-degree murder, and so took the fall for following orders from higher ups. So much Old West history under our feet!

Rajneeshpuram

But that's not all. The Big Muddy made headlines again when an Indian guru and his followers bought it. The Baghwan Shree Rajneesh brought 5,000 followers to live and commune on this beautiful chunk of Central Oregon. The amount of infrastructure they built here is incredible-a city, really. The 'city' they built is just a few miles north of the Hash House, and might be worth exploring on your drive out of the area.

The rise and fall of the Rajneeshee are well documented, so I will go no further than to say their leaders were indicted in America's first domestic bioterrorism case involving the planned salmonella poisoning of the city of The Dalles to foster a take-over of the entire county government. The Baghwan himself was deported for immigration fraud. Since then, the ranch has gone through several owners, with the state of Oregon involved at some point, discussing a possible state park.

Current use

Young Life, a Christian youth ministry, now operates the ranch. Young Life runs 33 summer youth camps all over North America. Here at "Wildhorse Canyon" camp on the Washington Family Ranch, a staff of 40 full-time employees and their families manage and care for the ranch year-round. The camp's Outdoor Director, Craig Englesby, has been very helpful, providing us with access to whatever we need. Please treat the ranch and facilities with respect and care as honored guests. We would love to continue showing Craig the low-impact nature of rogaining and orienteering in general, and hope that you will help us assure that there will be more Big Muddy Rogaines in the future. Remember, you will be traversing only a portion of the ranch.

They had this ranch in mind when they wrote, "Home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play"

Have fun!

Les Stark

Mal Harding