Environmental History Narrative:
Middle Fork Applegate River Watershed Analysis Area

(C.R. Job RR-1098)

Report for: Rogue River National Forest

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1. Prehistory (Ca. 10,000 years before present to ca. A.D. 1830)

The area embraced by the Middle Fork of the Applegate River watershed analysis area (W.A.A.) is composed of rugged mountainous terrain. It is situated immediately north of the "Siskiyou Crest," the divide between the Rogue (Applegate) River watershed on the north and the Klamath River watershed to the south. The stream bottoms of the Middle Fork and Butte Fork canyons are prone to erosive floods and contain only a few areas of flood-free, level alluvial-terrace land.

The Middle Fork watershed's generally high elevation terrain, its ruggedness and relative remoteness from major valleys, served to keep prehistoric human uses of the area both seasonal and light. However, the presence of the Siskiyou Crest along the area's southern edge--although the crest is approachable only by travel across steep slopes and up narrow stream canyons--provides a comparatively easily followed high-elevation travel route; the Crest gave access to an extensive summer/fall hunting territory for groups inhabiting adjacent areas such as the Klamath River Canyon and the lower Applegate Valley. Thus, perhaps somewhat ironically, the highest and seemingly most "distant" part of the W.A.A.--the Siskiyou Crest--may have attracted much of the prehistoric use that did occur within the W.A.A.

Small "lithic scatter" archaeological sites are documented for several of the "flats" along the lower-most Middle Fork, as well as at mid-to-high elevation meadows. Smaller lithic scatters and isolated artifacts have been found at ridge-crest locations (i.e., the main Siskiyou Crest and its spur ridges). Additional flats and benches found along the lower Middle Fork and Butte Fork canyons may contain remnant prehistoric cultural deposits (from light seasonal use), but historic period activities at these locations (e.g., mining cabins, recreation use) has probably obliterated most surface evidence. Aside from limited test investigations at one site along the lower Middle Fork in 1979 (conducted by Oregon State University for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), no sites within the W.A.A. have been excavated by archaeologists.

During the several millennia of human prehistory in the area, populations within the Middle Fork W.A.A. were probably very low in numbers, extremely mobile, and present only during portions of the year. By late prehistoric times, it is likely that during most winters the area was virtually uninhabited; during the late spring through early fall, the average number of people within the W.A.A. may have been no more than a few hundred, quite possibly far fewer. A few extended family bands hunting and gathering along the Siskiyou Crest each summer would have found little to entice them down onto the adjacent steep slopes.
except for localized resources: huckleberries, Sadler oak acorns, an occasional deer drive (aided by the use of fire and dogs). The waters of the Middle Fork and Butte Fork, although they contained native and anadromous fish, were probably only lightly used in comparison to lower elevation, more productive fishery sites well outside of the W.A.A.

Five major groups that inhabited the surrounding area during the Late Archaic period (i.e., the last 1,000 years before Euro-Americans arrived) were the Dakubetede, the Takelma (both of whom inhabited areas to the north), the Shasta (living to the east), the Gamutwa/Watido (apparently an ethnically "mixed" Shasta/Karok group, occupying the Seiad Valley vicinity of the Klamath River Canyon to the south), and the Karok (of the Klamath River canyon to the southwest). All of these groups probably used portions of the W.A.A. at least to some degree, but the Dakubetede seem to have been the most common seasonal occupants of the area. Periodic burning (particularly of berry fields, meadows, and perhaps Sadler oak patches) certainly would have been a long-term form of land management employed by these groups. However, it is unknown just how extensive anthropogenic fire (i.e., relative to natural fire) was within this area. (Compared to lower-elevation portions of the Applegate River drainage, where human-set fires would have been a very important factor in the creation and maintenance of particular vegetation communities, anthropogenic fire within the Middle Fork W.A.A. may have been less frequent, less extensive, and more concentrated within a few favored locales.)

2. Early Euro-American Exploration (ca. 1775-1855)

The Middle Fork W.A.A., as the headwaters of the Applegate River, was the last portion of that drainage to be explored by Euro-Americans. Maritime exploration of the Oregon Coast began in the 1770s and increased during the 1790s, but no exploration of the interior of southwestern Oregon occurred until the fur trappers of the Hudson's Bay Company arrived in the late 1820s. These trappers undoubtedly saw the peaks of the Siskiyou Crest--Red Buttes, Kangaroo Mountain, etc.--from the Applegate Valley during their first visit, in 1827. However, there is no indication that the trappers actually entered the area at that time or later; early trapping was done in the winter by fast-moving "brigades" that concentrated on more accessible streams. Therefore, the first actual penetration of the area by Euro-Americans may not have occurred until 1852-53, when gold miners arrived in the Applegate Valley.

3. Mining and Other Early Resource Extraction (1852-1910)

Prospecting for gold in the stream placers of the uppermost Applegate River drainage began in 1852-53. Miners certainly investigated the gravel deposits of the W.A.A. during the early mining period of the 1850s-70s. However, because of geological factors, placer mining in the Middle Fork W.A.A. has always been significantly less than has occurred in the adjacent Elliott Creek, Carberry Creek, and main stem of the upper Applegate River areas. Large-scale hydraulic gold mining, for example, took place during the 1880s-90s along lower Elliott Creek, along upper Carberry Creek and Steve Fork, and along the Applegate River near the mouths of Carberry Creek and Squaw Creek; all of these mines were located less than five miles from the Middle Fork W.A.A. boundary, but only a single, small, short-lived hydraulic mine operated along the lower-most Middle Fork. Virtually no lode or hard-rock gold mines were located within the W.A.A. during this time. Gold was indeed present, but in very small amounts and in
Also unlike adjacent drainages of the upper Applegate River watershed, no agricultural settlement occurred within the W.A.A. Again, the area's physical geography, especially its almost total lack of level arable land, was the primary factor. During the last half of the nineteenth century, settlers living in the upper Applegate Valley definitely visited and used the W.A.A. However, they ranged hogs on the brushy slopes and, later, they grazed cattle in the meadows of the Siskiyou Crest. (As with mining, the W.A.A.'s geographic character limited grazing to small numbers of stock in very localized areas such as Cameron Meadows; cattle grazing was more feasible along portions of the Siskiyou Crest to the east and northwest of the W.A.A.) Settlers hunted deer, elk, bear and other game within the area; they trapped fur-bearing mammals such as marten; and they may have harvested an occasional sugar pine from the steep Middle Fork canyon for manufacture into shakes.

When Oregonians passed a state-wide alcoholic prohibition law in the first decade of the twentieth century, moonshining likely became another seasonal activity within the Middle Fork area (evidence of at least one moonshine still is documented for a cabin sit on the upper Middle Fork). Because most of the people using the W.A.A., which is located in California but far from the nearest state/county authorities, were Oregon residents, the area may have begun its legal "noman's land" reputation at this time.

Note: In addition to Stricklin Gulch, several other place-names within the W.A.A. evidently date to the 19th-century mining and grazing era: Cook-and-Green Creek/Pass, French Gulch, Cameron Meadows, Goff Butte, and Whisky Ridge/Creek. A number of W.A.A. place-names date to early 20th-century Forest Service rangers: Abney Butte (named for a ranger's survey instrument lost on the mountainside), Fruit Mountain (for ranger Bill Fruit), Mt. Emily (for the initials of Forest Supervisor Martin L. Erickson), Buck Peak (for Regional Forester Cecil Buck, not for a male deer); Kangaroo Mtn., Pyramid Peak, Figurhead Mtn., and Phantom Meadows may have been named by ForestService employees as well.

4. Early Forest Service Period and the Depression Era (Ca. 1910-1940)

Early-day Forest Service activities within the Middle Fork W.A.A. consisted largely of fire detection, fire suppression, trail building, periodic contact with the area's small population of nomadic prospectors, and limited administration of grazing along the Siskiyou Crest. After a large 1910 fire swept up the west-aspect slopes of the lower Middle Fork canyon (jumping over the ridge and threatening the Elliott Creek community of Joe Bar), fire lookouts were erected on Windy Peak and on Whisky Peak. The Middle Fork area was the last large section of the Applegate Ranger District to be "trailed" by the Forest Service; as late as 1920 the lower Middle Fork canyon remained the only portion of the W.A.A. to have a "USFS system trail." During the 1920s, the agency built additional trails up the Butte Fork canyon and along the Siskiyou Crest (the "Boundary Trail"). (The Butte Fork Landslide, one of the largest recent mass-wasting events in the upper Applegate drainage, occurred in the 1920s; it was apparently an entirely natural event, unaffected by road building or logging.)

During the 1905-1920 period, not far to the east of the Middle Fork W.A.A.,
copper mining brought relatively large numbers of people and extensive infrastructure development to parts of the Elliott Creek drainage. However, the low-grade copper ore deposits did not extend into the Middle Fork area, and none of this mining activity occurred within the W.A.A. Only the "Mohawk Mine," a small placer gold operation on Knox Gulch, had any semblance of long-term mining activity. During the Great Depression, stimulated by both lack of jobs and the federally-supported high price of gold, a number of men arrived in the upper Applegate drainage to prospect and work very small placer mines. Some of them lived in or seasonally mined in the Middle Fork W.A.A. (A few of these individuals remained into the postwar years, achieving a measure of local fame as "hermits" and "solitary sourdoughs" representative of a bygone era.) By the late 1930s, virtually each of the small flats along the lower Middle Fork as far upstream as the mouth of Marble Gulch contained a miner's tent, shack, or small cabin, and perhaps a fruit tree and small garden plot. These sites were connected to the "outside world" by a Forest Service road (built by the Civilian Conservation Corps) in the mid-1930s. Built upstream almost to Marble Gulch, the Middle Fork road remained the only vehicular travel route within the entire W.A.A. until the early 1960s.

5. World War II and After (1940-1980s)

America's entry into the Second World War brought a federally mandated shut-down of almost all gold-mining operations nationwide. Mining of various "strategic minerals," however, was encouraged and financially supported by the government. In the early 1940s, the U.S. Army funded and assisted in construction of a crude truck road to a complex of small chromite and asbestos deposits in the Red Buttes vicinity. Although this road (which accessed the Red Buttes mines from Seiad Valley via Cook and Green Pass) was tributary to the Klamath River canyon highway, a short spur was extended north over the Siskiyou Crest to reach the Kubli chromite mine in upper Hello Canyon. (Aside from the Kubli mine, all of the war-time mining activity was located on the Klamath River side of the crest.) The road from Cook and Green Pass to Hello Canyon continues to serve as the main travelway used by Klamath River ranchers' cattle grazing at Bee Flat, Lilypad Lake, Kangaroo Springs, and (as a grazing trespass) Hello Canyon.

Due to high road-building costs and the available of timber from more accessible drainages, the remote timber of the Middle Fork W.A.A. did not become economical to harvest until well after the war. In the early 1960s, the Forest Service extended a timber-haul road from near the terminus of the old Middle Fork road north up the spine of Whisky Ridge almost to the California/Oregon boundary (this road was not connected through to the upper Whisky Creek/Carberry Creek road system until over a decade later). In the mid-1960s, the Middle Fork road was built south to the Middle Fork/Butte Fork divide; from there, the Forest Service extended the road during the late 1960s almost the full length of the upper Middle Fork to Sweaty Gulch. A number of clearcut and shelterwood units were harvested (using highlead and then skyline cable systems with mobile yarders) on the steep slopes along these roads during the 1960s-70s. (The upper Middle Fork road's tie-through to the Steve Fork/Carberry Creek road system, via Low Gap, was not built until about 1980.) During the 1970s, Forest Service contractors pushed the Elliott Creek/Joe Creek road system over Bloomfield Pass and into the Middle Fork W.A.A. to the old Seiad Valley mining road at Cook and Green Pass. (Transportation plans for the early 1970s called for almost twenty miles of additional roads in the Butte Fork canyon and high up along the Middle Fork side of the Fruit Mountain/Mt. Emily ridge system.)
By the 1960s, the various mining cabins along the Middle Fork, some of them occupied since the Depression, had become "occupancy trespass" structures situated on invalid mining claims. Years of legal measures by the Forest Service eventually resulted in the abandonment of most claims and the removal of all but a few of the oldest structures. The Army Corps of Engineers removed the last of the Middle Fork's "Depression era" mining cabins, a cluster of buildings near the mouth of Elliott Creek, in about 1979. The flats where miner's cabins once stood, (many of them situated at good swimming holes) continue to serve as popular dispersed camping and picnicking sites, used primarily by Jackson County residents.

As a "backcountry" area, the Middle Fork W.A.A. (especially the unroaded Butte Fork canyon and Siskiyou Crest) attracted increasing numbers of equestrians, hikers, and motorcyclists during the postwar years. (The area was prominently featured in a popular 1970s backpacking guide, "Hiking the Big Foot Country"; this publication probably brought more people to the W.A.A.'s backcountry trails, including some who lived significantly longer distances away than previously.) In 1984, Congress designated much of the W.A.A. (including almost the entire Butte Fork drainage) as the Red Buttes Wilderness. Although use of the unroaded portions of the W.A.A. over the years by recreationists has been light compared to many other similar areas, use-concentration at popular lakes (Azalea lake and Lonesome Lake in particular) has resulted in vegetation loss and other impacts. In the early 1990s, much of the rest of the W.A.A. was allocated to "Late Successional Reserve" under the Northwest Forest Plan. As in prehistoric and early historic times, the Middle Fork area's ruggedness, remoteness, and ecological uniqueness continue to be dominant factors in the kinds of human uses that occur (or are legally permitted to occur).