

# Baffling Indian Pits Line Columbia River

Mysterious excavations lie high on the mountains bordering the gorge. Were they for ancient signal fires, tribal lookouts or pagan religious rites?

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MUTE and mysterious evidence in stone of a way of life long gone from our region lies in the Indian-made rock pits found on high mountain slopes on both sides of the Columbia river and in the Mt Hood area even today.

Apparently just as the Indians left them, they dot the high rock slides on lonely lookout points, challenging the imagination. Built by backbreaking toil for purposes now only to be surmised, they remain inscrutable, in groups of three, four, six—and, in one case, a score or more.

Some are deep pits, some round, some oval. Some are shallow benches. Explanations gathered from old Indians are scarce and diverse.

The most amazing collection of this kind of rockwork we have seen is on a shoulder of Silver Star mountain, in the Gifford Pinchot national forest in Washington. It lies a mile below the summit, via rough trail through huckleberry brush, over loose rock and fallen timber.

There, on a bare, rocky point some 3500 feet above the distant river, are 21 circular pits about 4 feet deep and 4 or 5 feet across; three shallow rock trenches 10 feet long, and one long, narrow, zigzag runway or paved trench over 100 yards in length, leading downhill to a mountain meadow below.

The rock of the slide in which they were made is andesite, volcanic in origin, and many of the individual slabs would take more than one man to move.

Locally called by the very doubtful name of "rifle pits," this rockwork does nevertheless suggest a possible fortification of some kind, as it gives evidence of considerable use or occupancy, contributed to especially by a curious effect of paving stones between the pits and trenches, as though the surface had been carefully leveled.

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Too, it seems built to be well camouflaged from below. A man could even crawl or slide down that long trough without being observed.

Louis R. Caywood, national park service archeologist in charge of the excavating of old Ft. Vancouver, examined the pits last August, and came to the tentative conclusion that they may have been used for some sort of elaborate lookout while the Indians were in the high mountain area.

"Or," he adds, "they might well have been related to the puberty rites of the tribe."

The rockwork lies just below a good huckleberry area, where a few shallow rectangular depressions that were undoubtedly drying pits can still be seen in the rocky soil.

Caywood believes, however, that the rock pits probably antedate the huckleberry-picking period in this area, since previous to the turn of the century these mountain slopes were heavily forested.

There are remains of burned trees of some size even on the rock slide, and all the slopes near by are cov-

ered with burned snags, gaunt white skeletons of the forest destroyed in the terrible Yacolt burn of 1902, which swept over more than 600,000 acres of forest and farm land, and caused a loss of 35 lives in its fury.

Some 20 miles up the Columbia to the east stands Table mountain, with an elevation of 3420 feet, looking down on Bonneville. Just below the summit ridge of this massive, flat-topped headland that formed the north end of the legendary Bridge of the Gods, there are four more Indian pits in a rock slide.

Two are long and narrow; one is



FOUR well-defined pits lie just below summit ridge of Table mountain, on Washington side of Columbia, above. Left, Louis Caywood measures a pit on Silver Star mountain, east of Battleground, Wash. Most pits there were about four feet deep.

Situated on a knoll, and surrounded by trees, it was described as "a semicircular-sectioned trough in the 'slide rock,' 6 feet across the top, 6 feet deep an 50 feet long."

The stones that lined the trough were laid flat, and the sides were outlined by vertical stones. "At each end of the trough the slide rock has been worked over, and flat slabs laid down to make a fairly smooth trail," wrote Grace.

There were several separate mounds near by, at the edge of the knoll.

"The symmetry of the structure and the tremendous amount of labor that must have been performed by the aborigines is astonishing," commented Grace. The knoll was reported as in "the roughest country I have ever traveled," and at least a mile from the nearest water.

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An explanation of this extraordinary formation, quite different from the commoner rock pits, was given by an old Indian, whom Grace reported having described it as a place of vigil and fast during the ceremonies that marked the young Indian's coming of age.

Though we now have reports of Indian rock pits found at intervals all up and down the river, by far the largest number are reported by Earl A. Marshall, Portland civil engineer, to be in this same Red bluffs vicinity, on talus slopes approximately 1000 feet in elevation, and accessible now only by old logging roads.

large and round, sloping uphill, and one is very small—not over a foot deep and two across.

We sympathized with the Indian who built that last one, if that was the best he could do. After the long, hard climb of half a day, on a mountainside where the east wind down the gorge can all but knock a man down, that's all we'd feel like building in stone either!

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What did he see, a young Indian straightening up from his labor and looking out over the scene below, with Mt. Hood on the distant skyline? Not Bonneville dam, as we did, certainly, unless he could look into the future.

But just conceivably he saw a dam of his own time, at that. Geologists tell us it is entirely possible that the river was once blocked not far above

that point by a tremendous slide, remains of which, with its characteristic leaning trees, can still be seen below sliced-off Red bluffs just east of Table mountain.

And, according to some, the Indians' word for "bridge" was more or less synonymous with "dam." Like so many legends, that one, too, though generally dismissed as pure fancy, may have had a basis in fact after all.

In the same Red bluffs country, where a number of similar rock pits can be found, a most remarkable and different example of rockwork was discovered years ago by William Goepel, forest ranger of Stevenson, Wash., who in turn showed it to Richard J. Grace, Portland engineer.

The latter's account of the discovery appeared in The Oregonian of October 26, 1924.