

**HISTORIC STRUCTURE REPORT**

**BIRCH CREEK RANCH**

**HISTORIC RURAL LANDSCAPE**

**MALHEUR COUNTY, OREGON**



# United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
Vale District Office  
100 Oregon Street  
Vale, Oregon 97918

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Dr. Leland Gilson, PhD  
State Historic Preservation Office  
1115 Commercial Street NE  
Salem, Oregon 97310

Dear Dr. Gilson:

Enclosed is the Historic Structure Report, Birch Creek Ranch Rural Landscape, Malheur County, Oregon, prepared by Heritage Research Associates to guide the BLM as they maintain and repair the contributing and non-contributing structures at the ranch.

Please review the document. If you concur with its findings and measures, the BLM will adopt it as the standard of non-intrusive repair and maintenance, in keeping with the historic values of the ranch.

If you have questions or require more information, please contact Alice Bronsdon at 541/473-3144.

Sincerely,

*Cathy B. Wilbanks* ACTING

Jerry L. Taylor  
Jordan Resource Area Manager

Enclosures (as stated)

# HISTORIC STRUCTURE REPORT

BIRCH CREEK RANCH  
HISTORIC RURAL LANDSCAPE

MALHEUR COUNTY, OREGON

by

Jill A. Chappel

Submitted to

Bureau of Land Management  
Vale District Office  
100 Oregon Street  
Vale, Oregon 97918

under terms of  
Purchase Order No. 1422H020-P5-0049

Heritage Research Associates, Inc.  
1997 Garden Avenue  
Eugene, Oregon 97403

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Heritage Research Associates Report No. 188



## *ABSTRACT*

This document presents technical data obtained through field observation of the materials, construction, and condition of selected buildings and structures within Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape, a National Register property managed by the Bureau of Land Management in the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River corridor in southeastern Oregon. The report serves as a management tool in the agency's effort to preserve, in a way that is consistent with the property's National Register status, those buildings that presently contribute to the National Register significance of the Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape. In addition, it will guide the BLM in maintenance and repair of the historic fabric of the buildings and preservation of their historic character.

The organization of this Historic Structure Report is consistent with the format currently used by the National Park Service, and one that is recommended by NPS for use by all federal agencies. The document is comprised of three main sections: Developmental History, discussing the historic context of Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape, the chronology of development and use of each building, and a physical description of each building; Treatment and Use, which identifies the causes of materials deterioration, suggests preservation treatment, and identifies how the buildings will be used in the future by the BLM; and Record of Treatment, which stresses the need to document all preservation work conducted on the buildings and offers recommendations for future preservation work at the Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape property.

## *PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

Preparation of this report was carried out under the terms of Purchase Order No. 1422H020-P5-0049 between the Vale District Office, Bureau of Land Management and Heritage Research Associates, Inc. (HRA) of Eugene, Oregon. Alice Bronsdon, Cultural Resource Specialist, served as the Contracting Officer's Representative, while Jill A. Chappel served as Principal Investigator for HRA. All portions of this report were written by Jill A. Chappel. Maps and measured drawings were prepared by Kevin McCornack and Jill A. Chappel. Fieldwork was conducted September 5-9, 1995 by Jill A. Chappel.

HRA thanks the BLM ranch caretakers at Birch Creek, Paul and Rita Krause, for their contribution of knowledge about the history of the property, their ambition to collect important historical information from local citizens, and their overwhelming hospitality. Alice Bronsdon helped the fieldwork run smoothly by offering maps, historical documentation, and lodging. Additional thanks are extended to Stephen Dow Beckham, Department of History, Lewis and Clark College, for sharing his fieldnotes from the 1988-89 National Register nomination work and to Donald Peting, Department of Architecture, University of Oregon, for technical assistance regarding materials deterioration. Lisa Sasser, Assistant Chief Historical Architect for the National Park Service in Washington, D.C., gave some of her precious time to answer questions regarding format and content of this Historic Structure Report.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Abstract .....	iii
Preface and Acknowledgements .....	iv
List of Figures .....	vii
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY .....	5
Historical Background and Context .....	5
Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract) .....	5
Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) .....	11
Chronology of Development and Use .....	13
Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract) .....	14
Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) .....	23
Physical Description .....	26
Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract) .....	26
Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) .....	33
3. TREATMENT AND USE .....	53
Ultimate Treatment and Use .....	54
Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract) .....	55
Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) .....	60
Requirements for Treatment .....	62
Alternatives for Treatment .....	63
4. RECORD OF TREATMENT .....	67
Recommendations for Future Work .....	68
Cultural Landscape Report .....	69
National Register Nomination Update .....	70
Preservation Maintenance Plan .....	70
References Cited .....	72

*TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONT.)*

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Appendix B: Historic Structure Report Standards

Appendix C: Technical Assistance Guides

Masonry Repointing

Documentation of Landscape Characteristics

Preservation Briefs 36--Protecting Cultural Landscapes

Principles for Preserving Historic Plant Material

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Preservation and Guidelines  
for Preserving Historic Buildings (Excerpts)

Appendix D: Measured Drawings and Field Notes

Appendix E: Birch Creek Ranch Root Cellar Repair and Maintenance Report

Appendix F: Maintenance and Repair Worksheets

VOLUME II: PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION



*LIST OF FIGURES*

<i>Figure</i>		<i>Page</i>
1	General location of Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape . .	2
2	Location of Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape on the Owyhee River . . . . .	3
3	Spatial relationship between ranch tracts . . . . .	6
4	Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract) site plan . . . . .	7
5	Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) site plan . . . . .	8
6	Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) site plan of north end . . . . .	9
7	Birch Creek barn, west and south elevations . . . . .	36
8	Birch Creek barn, north and west elevations . . . . .	36
9	Birch Creek barn, east elevation . . . . .	37
10	Typical strap hinge, barn . . . . .	15
11	Birch Creek barn, flood damage, north side . . . . .	37
12	Birch Creek barn, sill decay, west side . . . . .	38
13	Birch Creek tack room building, west and south elevations . . . . .	38
14	Birch Creek tack room building, east and north elevations . . . . .	39
15	Birch Creek tack room building, soil accumulation, south side . . . .	39
16	Birch Creek bunkhouse/shop, east and north elevations . . . . .	40
17	Birch Creek bunkhouse/shop, north and west elevations . . . . .	40
18	Birch Creek bunkhouse/shop, damage to siding, south side . . . . .	41
19	Birch Creek chicken house, south and east elevations . . . . .	41
20	Typical hinge, chicken house . . . . .	18
21	Birch Creek chicken house, sill deterioration, interior view . . . . .	42
22	Birch Creek chicken house, sill deterioration, interior view . . . . .	42
23	Birch Creek chicken house, roof failure . . . . .	43
24	Birch Creek root cellar, south and east elevations . . . . .	43
25	Birch Creek root cellar, rebuilt roof . . . . .	44
26	Birch Creek root cellar, north window . . . . .	44
27	Birch Creek root cellar, previous repointing . . . . .	45
28	Birch Creek cistern, sketch of north elevation . . . . .	21
29	Birch Creek cistern, east and north elevations . . . . .	45
30	Birch Creek cistern, saturated wall . . . . .	46
31	Birch Creek generator shed, east elevation . . . . .	46
32	Birch Creek outhouse, west elevation . . . . .	47
33	Morrison root cellar/bunkhouse, north and west elevations . . . . .	47
34	Morrison root cellar/bunkhouse, south and east elevations . . . . .	48
35	Morrison root cellar/bunkhouse, previous repointing . . . . .	48

*LIST OF FIGURES (CONT.)*

<i>Figure</i>		<i>Page</i>
36	Morrison root cellar/bunkhouse, southeast corner repair . . . . .	49
37	Morrison garage/shop, south and east elevations . . . . .	49
38	Morrison garage/shop, shed addition . . . . .	50
39	Morrison garage/shop, moisture damage, south wall . . . . .	50
40	Morrison stone dugout/root cellar, view to northwest . . . . .	51
41	Morrison stone dugout/root cellar, interior, northeast corner . . . . .	51
42	Morrison stone dugout/root cellar, interior, east wall . . . . .	52

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape, situated on the Owyhee River in central Malheur County, Oregon, is a National Register eligible *rural historic landscape* owned and managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The property was acquired under the stipulations of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act as part of a program to protect outstandingly remarkable resources of historic value within the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River corridor. The property is comprised of two separate historic ranches encompassing 288.11 acres, 122.63 of which define the Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract) and 165.48 acres of which define the Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract). For management purposes, they are collectively referred to as "Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape" by the BLM.

The property is located in T27S, R43E, Sections 6, 7, and 18 approximately 35 miles northwest of the town of Jordan Valley, the nearest commercial center (Figures 1 and 2). The property has limited accessibility by roadway, the only direct route being the Jordan Craters Road. This road is a gravel and dirt byway that traverses the rolling Owyhee Plateau and Jordan Craters lava field, then drops down dramatically into the Birch Creek drainage (an elevation decrease of 1,900 feet) to the creek's confluence with the Owyhee River. Access to the ranch is also achieved by boat via the Owyhee River or by horseback. The physical environment is characterized by the erosive effects of the river and fairly recent volcanic activity. Nestled in the heart of the Owyhee Canyon with its steep walls of weathered ash and lavas, Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape is surrounded by colorful geological scenery formed by episodes of intermittent volcanic eruptions and later occurrences of block-fault uplifting (Orr et al. 1992:98-99). The Birch Creek and Morrison ranches are watered by year-round flowing streams, thus creating a verdant oasis of brilliant green in contrast to the browns, tans, and pinks of the canyon walls.

As mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Executive Order 11593, and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, the BLM is required to protect and manage cultural resources on public lands in their jurisdiction. The National Historic Preservation Act in particular orders federal agencies to assume responsibility for historic properties preservation. This is accomplished through a program of identification, evaluation, and stewardship of all cultural resources on public lands. Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape was formally determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in January 1992; thus the BLM must ensure the future protection and preservation of the ranch property (Beckham 1989; Bronsdon 1992).

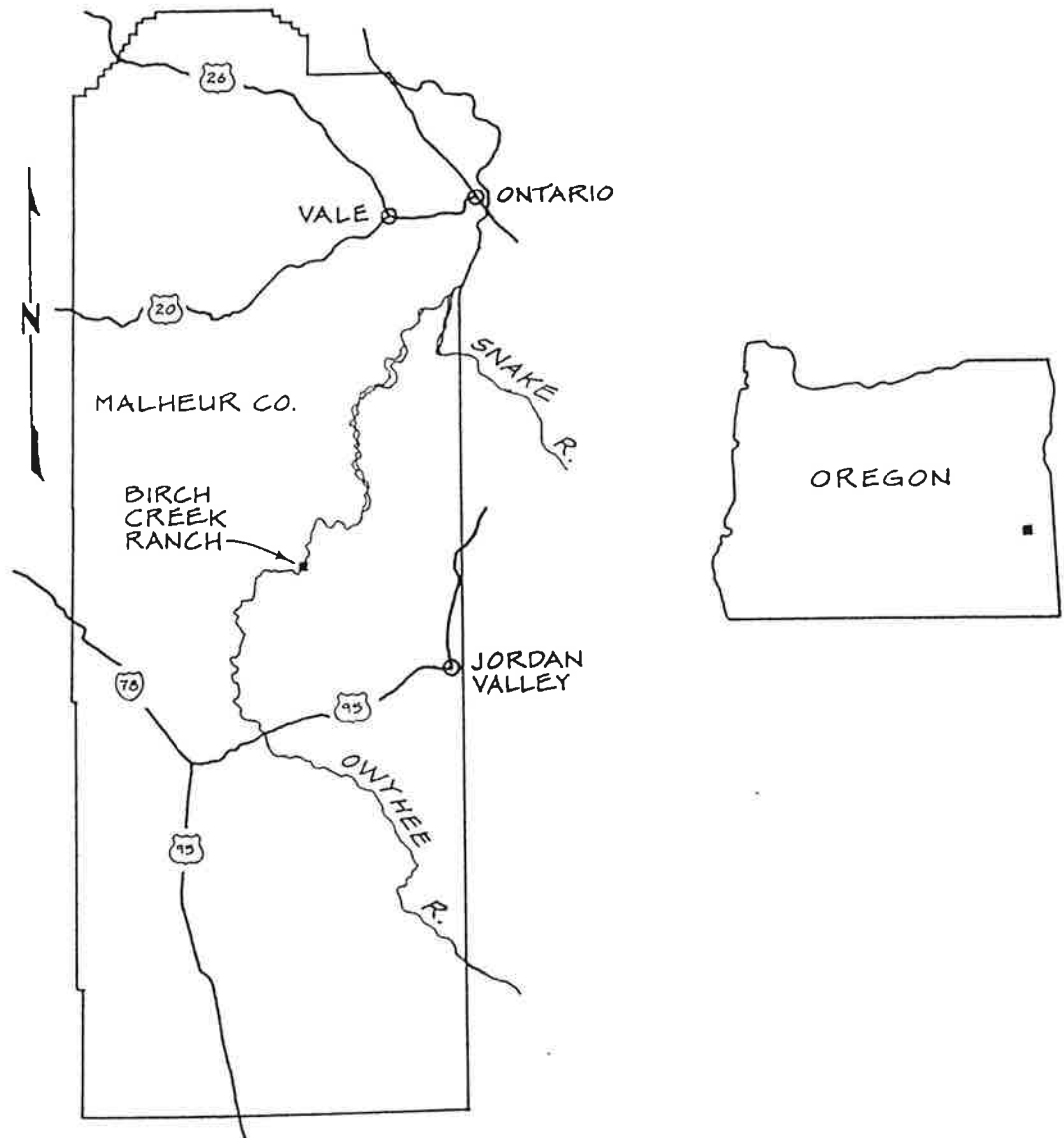


Figure 1. General location of Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape in Malheur County.

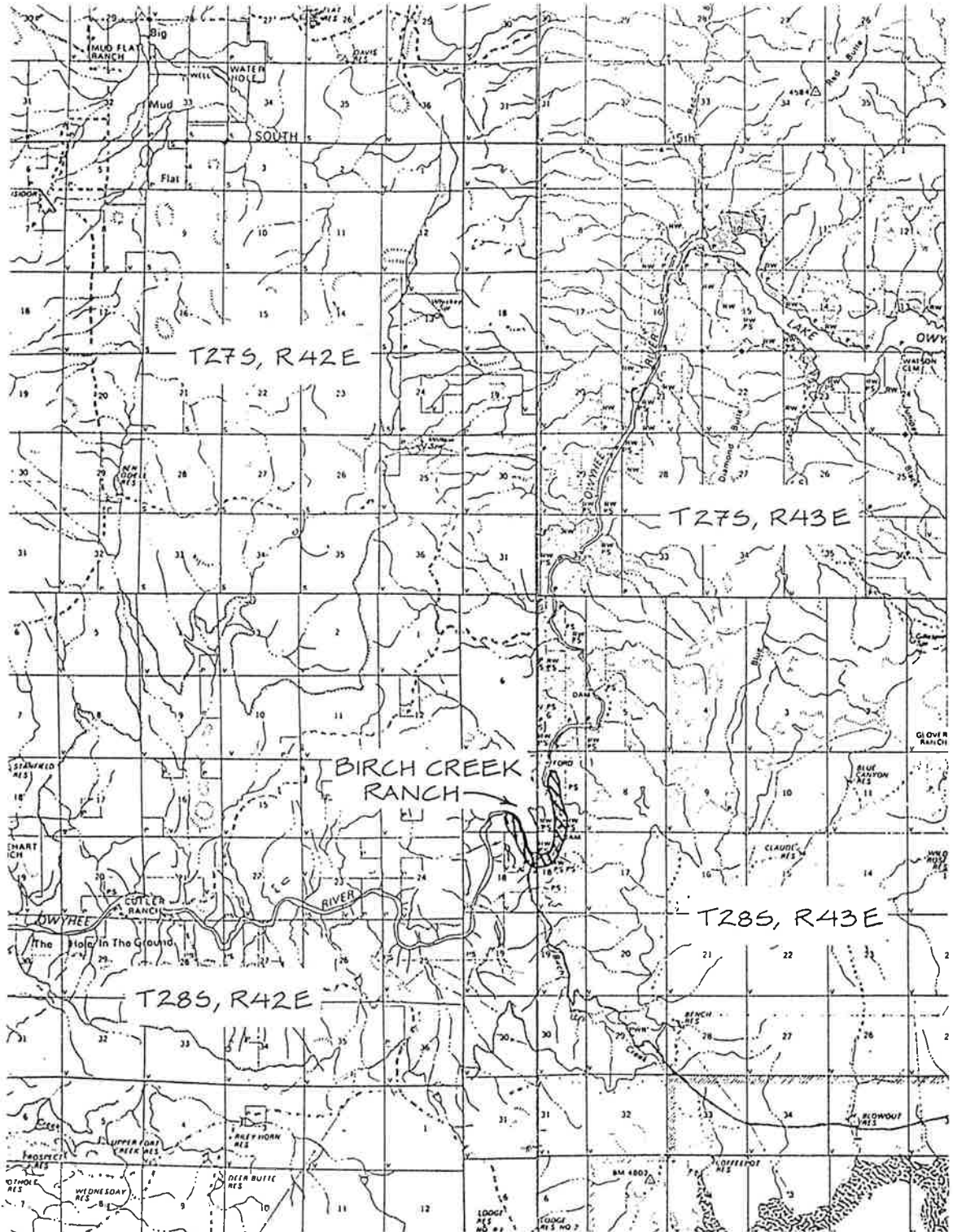


Figure 2. Location of Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape on the Owyhee River.

One of the objectives of the BLM's cultural resource management of Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape is to maintain the buildings in a manner consistent with the National Register status of the property, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the historic context of the ranch. The BLM has an additional obligation to manage the historic property in the best interests of the public, including maintaining certain health and safety requirements, accessibility, and providing interpretation of the ranch's history. In partial fulfillment of these goals, the BLM has undertaken a historic structures investigation to guide the agency in the preservation and appropriate treatment of specific buildings and structures that contribute to the National Register significance of the property. It is this goal of long-term preservation of contributing architectural features that has driven the BLM to request the drafting of this Historic Structure Report. It is one part of the three-phase program of research, planning, and stewardship that contributes to the preservation of historic buildings and structures by documenting and maintaining the historic character of architectural resources and by attempting to retard the processes of deterioration that eventually lead to the loss of historic fabric and historic character.

The National Park Service, the authority on the preservation of historic buildings, specifies that a historic structure report is prepared to "minimize loss of character-defining features and materials whenever existing information about the developmental history and condition of the historic structure does not provide an adequate basis upon which to address anticipated management objectives, whenever alternative courses of action for impending treatment and use could have adverse effects, or to record treatment" (National Park Service 1995:125). A historic structure report typically combines archival research with on-site investigative research and records the construction history, modifications in construction and use that have taken place through time, and the current condition of the structural system and materials through written descriptions and graphic documentation. The report lists any problems in a building caused by materials deterioration and structural inadequacy, evaluates those problems, and recommends treatment procedures to remedy the problems. The standards presently used by the National Park Service for historic structure reports are found in Appendix B. Photographic documentation for this report is provided in a separate volume.

This document is not intended to be a complete report for all contributing cultural features within Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape. As noted, only certain buildings and structures are addressed at this time, and the BLM should keep this document open-ended so that comparable data on the other contributing features at the ranch can be added to this report.

## 2. DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY

Establishing a historic context for Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape is important for understanding the development and characteristics of the built environment at the ranch, especially in prescribing treatment and appropriate uses for the buildings and structures. Knowledge of local settlement patterns, economics, and building traditions will aid the BLM in their overall management and preservation effort of the property. The developmental history of the buildings and structures in the Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape documents not only how the buildings were constructed, but also reports on their current condition and causes of deterioration that can be identified through physical examination.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Birch Creek Ranch Historic Rural Landscape property is comprised of two separate ranch complexes about a mile and a half distant from one another and linked by a historic road along the Owyhee River (Figure 3). Birch Creek Ranch, also referred to as the "Upper Tract," is located at the mouth of Birch Creek and was first settled by a Basque sheepherder (Domingo Lequerica) and subsequently operated by other Basques in the sheep industry (Donato Uberuaga and Simon and Mercedes Acordagoitia) through the historic period (Figure 4). The Morrison Ranch (the "Lower Tract") was settled by cattle and horse rancher James Morrison (Figures 5 and 6). Both properties were homesteaded between 1899 and 1901. The property was used as the headquarters for livestock ranching operations throughout the historic and early modern periods until 1968-1971 when the ranches were sold to Martin Rust II, who used the property strictly for recreation purposes. Both Birch Creek Ranch and the Morrison Ranch were acquired in 1988 by the Bureau of Land Management and were combined as one unit under a National Register of Historic Places eligibility study in 1988 that culminated in a formal determination of eligibility by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) as a *rural historic landscape*.

#### Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract)

The exact date when Domingo Lequerica initially came to Birch Creek and the Owyhee River is not known, but he and a friend, Martin Achavia, were the first Basques to come to the McDermitt, Nevada country looking for work in the late 1880s (Hanley and Lucia 1980:194). Domingo Lequerica arrived in New York City in 1886 and found his way to northern Nevada. It was in this country that Lequerica first

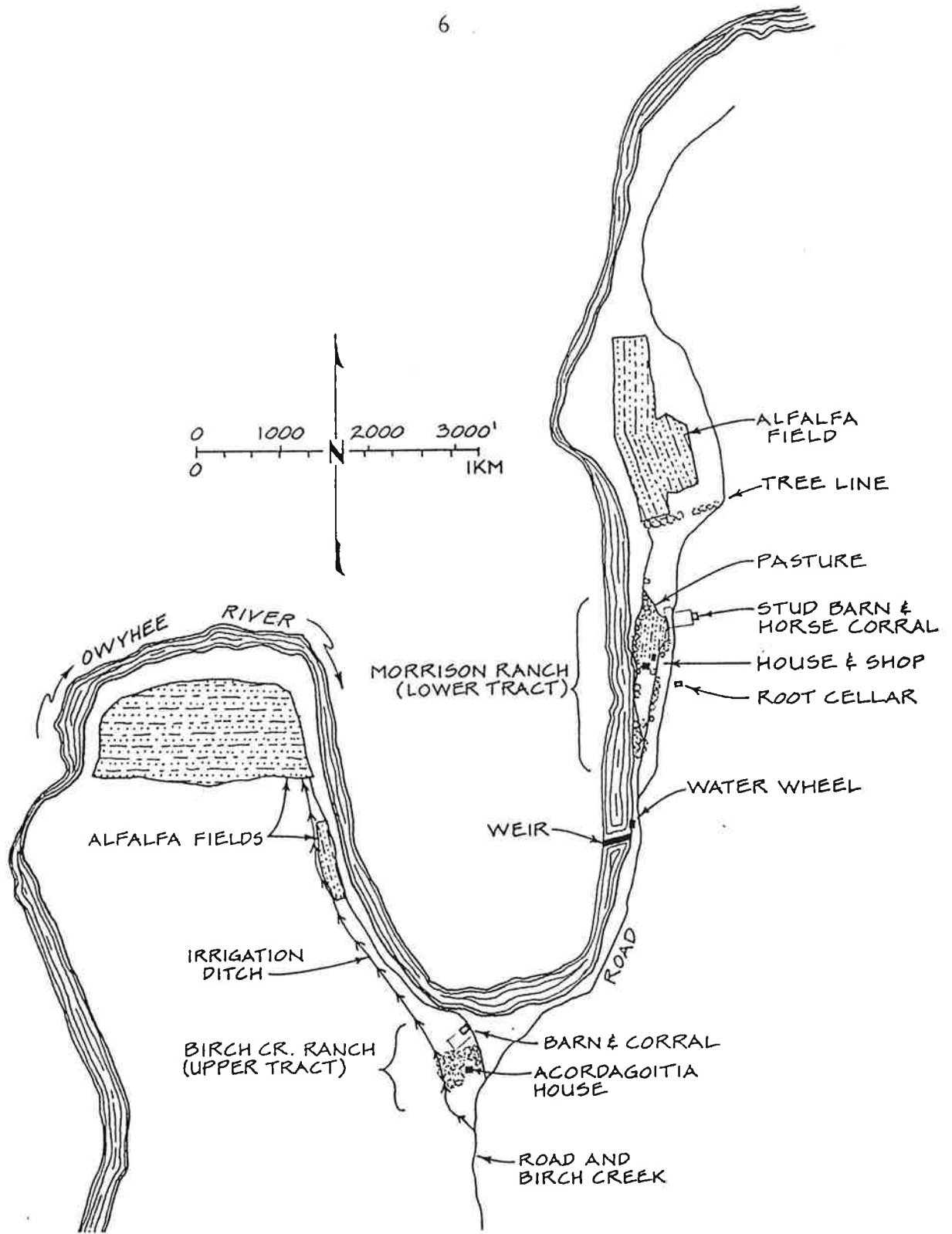


Figure 3. Spatial relationship between the two ranch tracts Birch Creek and Morrison.



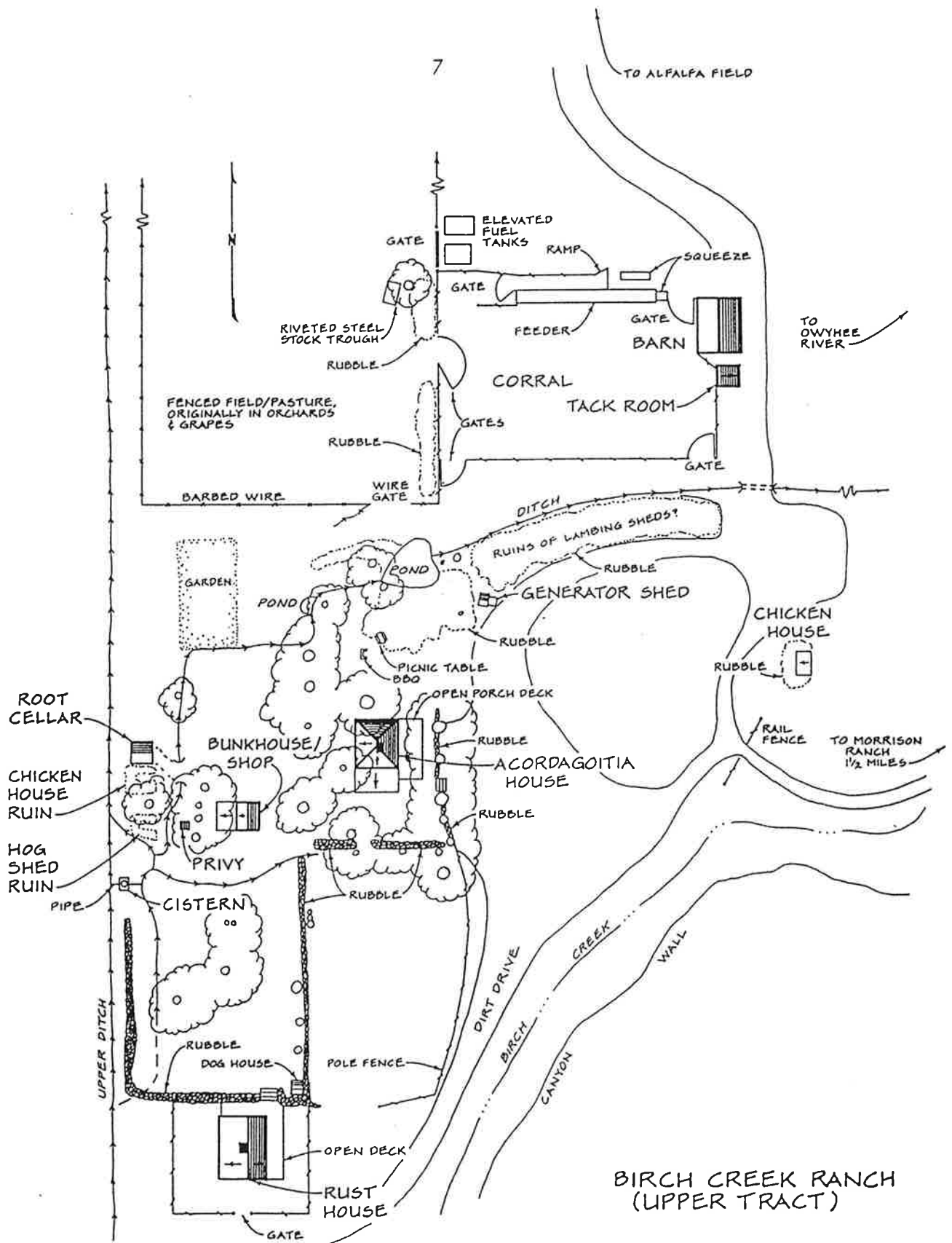


Figure 4. Birch Creek Ranch (Upper Tract) headquarters site plan (September 1995).

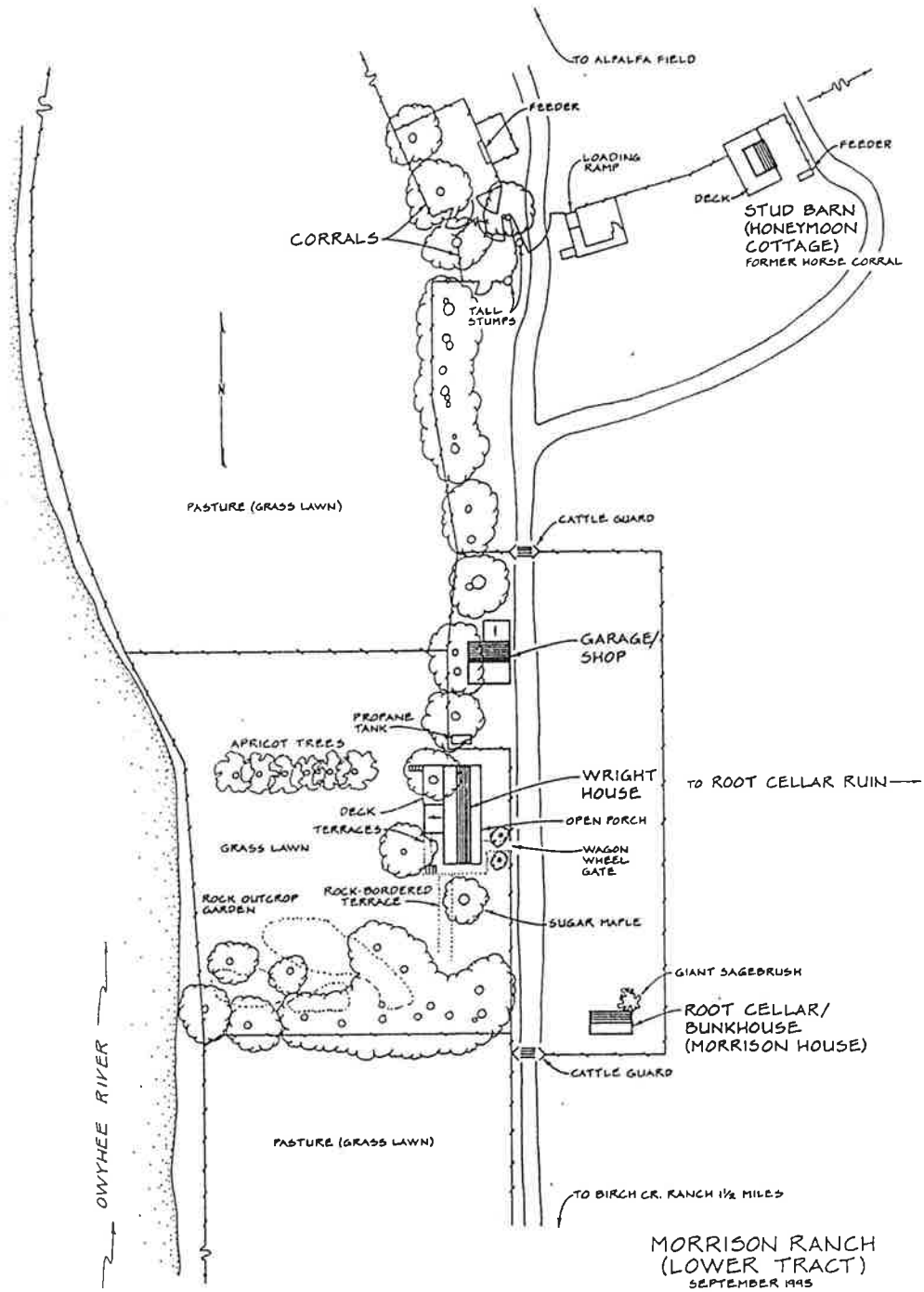


Figure 5. Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) headquarters site plan (September 1995).

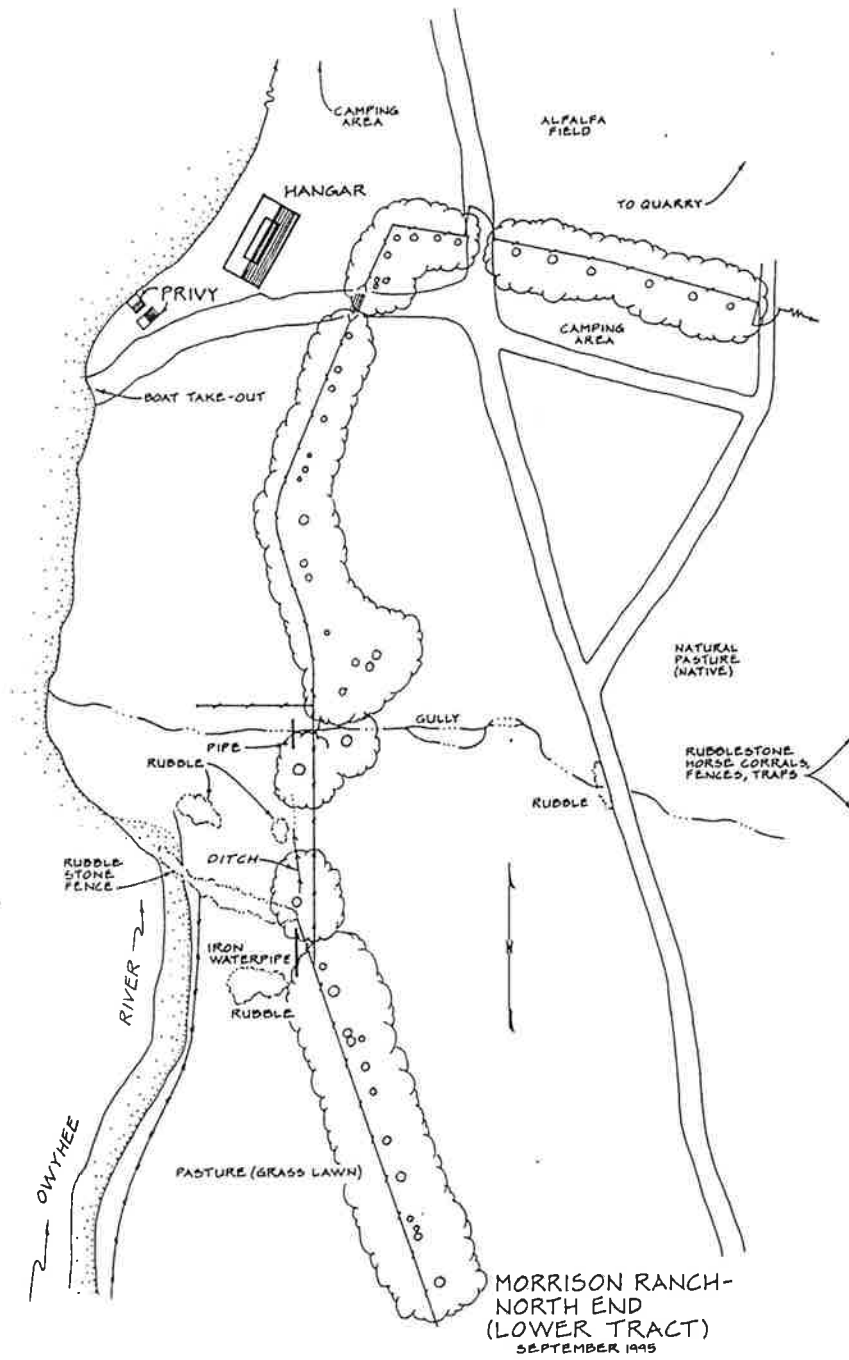


Figure 6. Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract) site plan of north end (September 1995).

learned the trade of sheepherding. He and his companion were originally hired by James Pickens "Pick" Anderson, one of the most influential cattle and sheep ranchers in the Winnemucca and Jordan Valley regions at that time (Hanley and Lucia 1980:103).

By 1889-90, Basques were migrating to the Snake River Valley and the Jordan Valley area to work in the nearby Idaho mines and in the sheep industry (Beers 1982:35-38). This migration was quite heavy throughout the 1890s until just after World War I, and Domingo Lequerica joined this movement into the Owyhee country at the turn of the century. Lequerica apparently lived in northern Nevada through 1898, returned to Spain following the Spanish-American War, and came to the Jordan Valley area shortly thereafter (Baker 1972:28). He was already established in the sheep industry and had staked a Desert Land Claim in the Owyhee Canyon on Birch Creek before 1903, because he had sent word back to Vizcaya, Spain for his son, Timothy, to join him. It is assumed then that Domingo Lequerica was living at Birch Creek Ranch probably no earlier than 1899. Tim arrived in the United States in 1903, but before Domingo could be reunited with his son, he was killed in a wagon accident descending the treacherously steep grade to Birch Creek Ranch (Beers 1982:52; Hanley and Lucia 1980:194-95).

J. R. Blackaby, local real estate promoter and owner of Blackaby's Mercantile in Jordan Valley, was designated as the administrator of the Lequerica estate and was thus assigned to dispose of the property. Tim Lequerica married in 1909 and went into partnership with Antonio Azcuenaga, one of the first Basques to settle in the Jordan Valley area, managing 12,000 sheep at Azcuenaga's ranch near Cow Lakes (Beers 1982:52; Hanley and Lucia 1980:187, 196). His father's Birch Creek Ranch was sold, along with water rights, in 1909 to Donato Uberuaga, one of the area's most respected sheep men, and Simon Acordagoitia. When the 1910 U.S. Census enumerator ventured into the Owyhee River canyon, Uberuaga--acknowledged as a "farmer"--and Acordagoitia--a "herder in sheep camp"--were the only two living at Birch Creek (Bureau of Census 1910). Uberuaga's involvement with the ranch property lasted only three years before he sold his share of the investment to Acordagoitia for nearly \$1,100 in 1912.

During the fall of that year, the federal cadastral surveyors of the General Land Office made their way through the Owyhee country noting the improvements Simon Acordagoitia and his wife Mercedes (who had then joined him at the ranch) had accomplished in the few years since settling on the property in 1909-10. These improvements included 40 acres of alfalfa, a half-acre of fruit-bearing orchard, over an acre of vegetable garden, and architectural improvements including a house, barn, sheds, and corrals (Collier and Joselyn 1912). The government surveyors specifically mentioned the extensive ditch system existing at Birch Creek Ranch for irrigating the

alfalfa field, orchard, and garden as well as a large current-driven water wheel and flume that was once located on the property. It was, for a large part, this watering system that made the ranch a success.

The Acordagoitias raised six children at Birch Creek Ranch before leaving the Owyhee River canyon in the late 1930s. The Depression was felt hard by the Basque people of the Jordan Valley vicinity, and a number of sheepmen lost all or most of their investment in the industry (Gaiser 1944:85). When the Bank of Jordan Valley failed during the 1930s, the ranching community's economic base was severely undermined. The sheep industry itself was declining even before the Depression hit, and the final blow, the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934, forced sheep ranchers to abide by rigid range restrictions and pay grazing fees. The Acordagoitias may have been one of those Jordan Valley area families economically affected by this turn of events when they sold their 123-acre Birch Creek Ranch for a mere \$2,000 in 1937.

The remains of the Acordagoitia's ranching heritage can be seen today everywhere in the surrounding landscape of Birch Creek Ranch. Though the ranch house itself was resided and reroofed in the last 20 years, the house retains much of its historic character in exterior form and interior spatial arrangement. The original historic windows still exist, though the porches were changed to match the recent alterations to the exterior of the house. A number of other early buildings and structures exist in fairly good repair. In addition to standing structures, the remains of those no longer extant are in themselves significant character-defining cultural features of the ranch.

### Morrison Ranch (Lower Tract)

James Morrison, the owner and developer of the Lower Tract property, was born in West Virginia in 1876 and began a life of transience at the age of nine (Field n.d.:1). He was sent to live with his grandfather in 1885 a few years following the death of his father, and until he was old enough to set out on his own, he lived between Kansas, Illinois, and West Virginia. In 1891, at the age of 15, Morrison migrated to Sacramento, California, then to Carson City, Nevada, picking up what work he could. A few years later, he wound up in Harney County, Oregon, received an education (courtesy of his neighbors), and secured a job with the county superintendent setting type for the Burns *Times-Herald*. Morrison saved enough money to find a place of his own, and was off for Malheur County with the intent to homestead. He "struck the Owyhee" in 1899, and at 23 years old, began a solitary ranching career that was to last throughout the remainder of his life: "[The homestead]