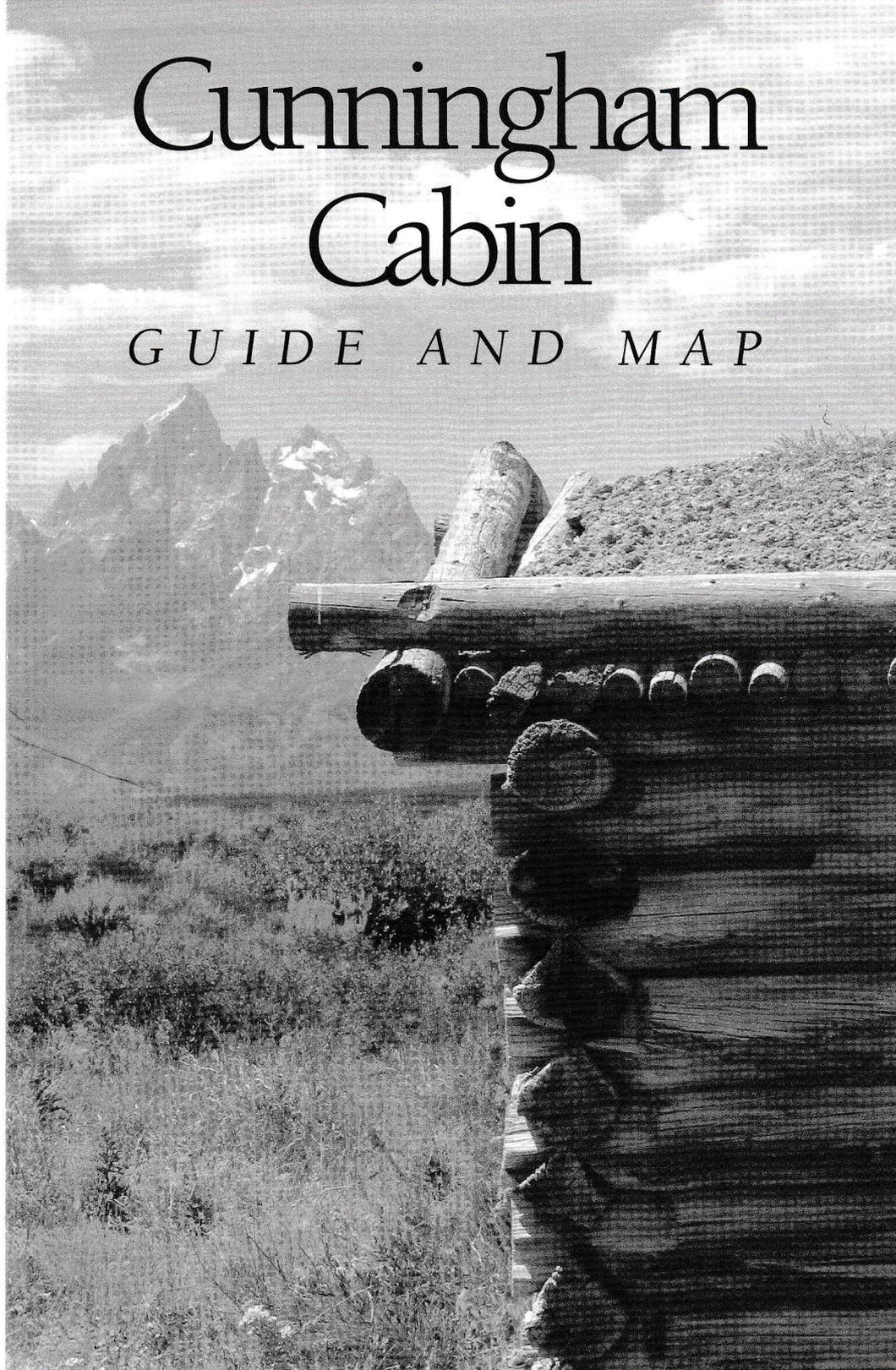
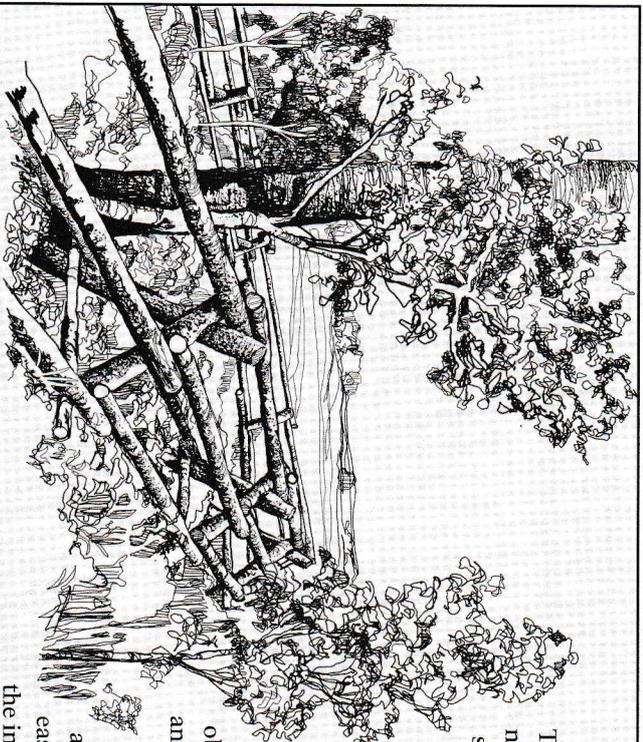


# Cunningham Cabin

GUIDE AND MAP





## Buck-and-Rail Fences

Along the Cunningham homestead and throughout Jackson Hole we see “buck-and-rail” fences which were an innovation of the first pioneer ranchers.

This fencing system is named for the X-shaped braces or “cross bucks” used to support the horizontal “rails.” The fences are self-supporting and used where rails were easily obtained. Snow anchors the fences rather than toppling them and the “buck-and-rail” fences are easily repaired. With the invention of barbed wire after 1900, post-and-wire became commonly used for ranchers who could afford it. Later, with dude ranching and tourism, there was a resurgence in the use of the rustic buck-and-rail fences.

## Incident at the Bar Flying U Ranch

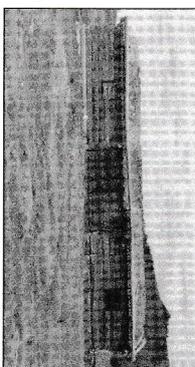
A violent, dark side of the ranch involves a gunfight in April of 1893. Two wranglers from Montana, George Spencer and Mike Burnett, approached Pierce Cunningham in the fall of '92 looking to buy hay for their horses. A deal was struck that included the strangers wintering over on the ranch. During the winter, rumors spread in town that the two men were horse thieves. In the spring, a man claiming to be a US Marshall accompanied by three deputies rode into Jackson from Idaho.

They convinced several men from Jackson to join them as a posse to apprehend the alleged rustlers. Under the cover of darkness the vigilante posse surrounded the cabin and waited for daybreak. In the morning as Spencer and Burnett left the cabin, they were gunned down in a hail of bullets after refusing to give themselves up. While Cunningham was not directly involved in the incident, he did feel that the horses' brands had been altered. The truth of the Marshall's identity and allegations was never proven.

## Hard Times

Beginning in 1900, cattle ranching actually proved profitable for Cunningham as calf prices steadily increased. Starting in 1910 calf prices increased from \$730 per hundredweight climbing steadily to \$12.00 in 1917. With those profits, Cunningham invested in his ranch by purchasing an additional 240 acres from the Ulls in 1918.

The summer of 1918 was dry and records indicate Jackson Hole went one hundred days without any significant precipitation. Despite irrigation, most hay crops shriveled in the drought. To compound the problem, the end of World War I caused calf prices to



*Cunningham Cabin*

plunge, when demand and government price supports for all farm products dropped. The drought continued through 1919 and suddenly the cattle business collapsed with ruined crops and falling cattle prices.

The agricultural depression continued through the 1920s as calf prices continued to fall. Ranch foreclosures became common in the valley as ranches were lost under a burden of debt, back-taxes and attorneys' fees. Some enterprising ranchers converted their holdings to “dude” ranches where wealthy guests from the East paid good money for quaint vacations on a “working ranch” surrounded by splendid views.

## Making Hay

In 1897, Cunningham claimed 100 cattle and eight horses and was raising hay on two hundred acres. Assuming that one acre of cultivated land produces about two tons of hay and that one cow (or horse) consumes about twenty pounds per day, we can figure that:

$$1 \text{ COW} \times 20 \text{ LBS HAY} \times 180 \text{ DAYS} = 1.8 \text{ TONS HAY/COW/WINTER}$$

$$100 \text{ COWS} \times 1.8 \text{ TONS HAY/COW/WINTER} = 180 \text{ TONS/WINTER FOR CATTLE}$$

$$8 \text{ HORSES} \times 1.8 \text{ TONS HAY/HORSE/WINTER} = 14.4 \text{ TONS HAY/WINTER FOR HORSES}$$

$$180 \text{ TONS HAY FOR CATTLE} + 14.4 \text{ TONS HAY FOR HORSES} = 194.4 \text{ TONS HAY FOR WINTER}$$

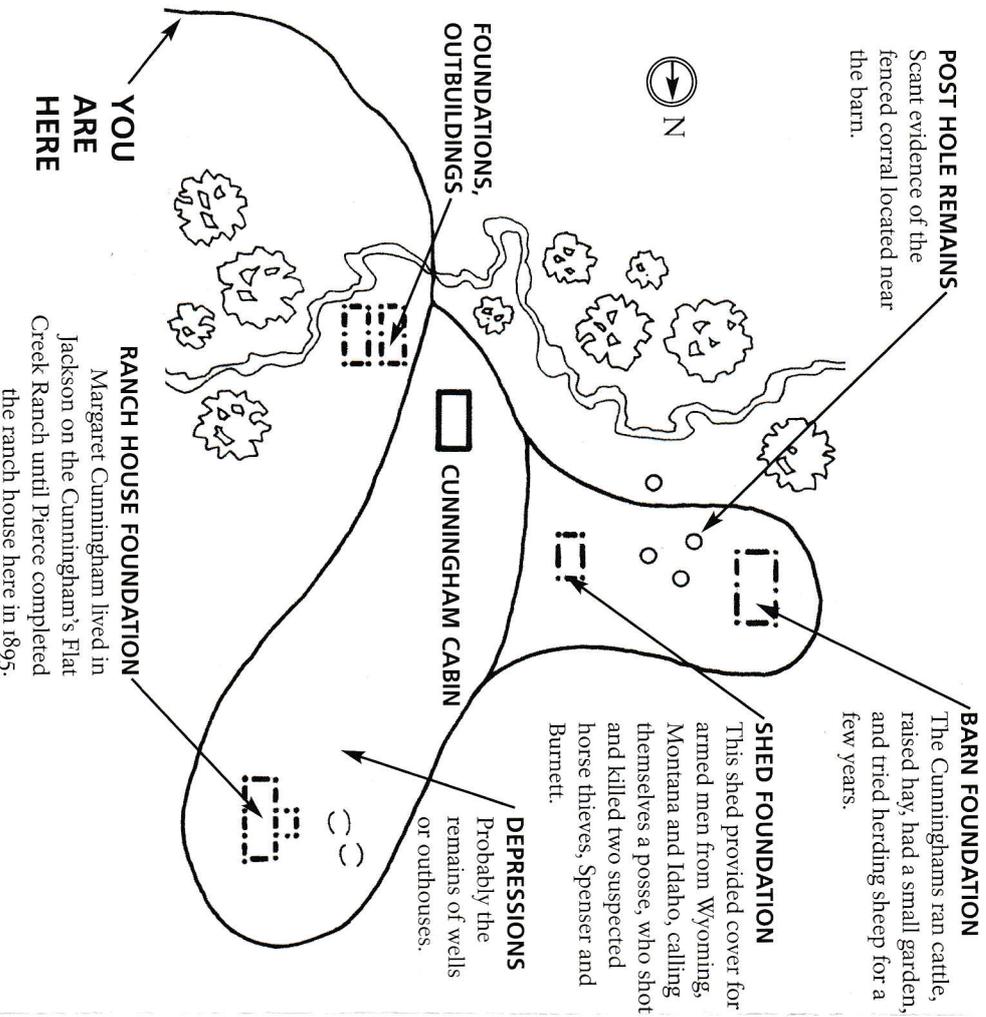
Cunningham needed to cultivate and store about two hundred tons of hay to feed his livestock for one winter!

While the soil on the Flying Bar U

Ranch was better than most in the valley, Cunningham was still challenged with rocky, porous soils combined with a short growing season. At first he cultivated native grasses, but later, introduced plants more palatable to livestock such as alfalfa and Timothy grass. To increase the productivity of his ranch, Cunningham, like other Jackson Hole ranchers, manipulated the environment by constructing irrigation canals and ditches. Notice the irrigation ditches, some of which are still in use today, that diverted water from mountain streams to the valley's crops and livestock.

Still, despite all the unique challenges of ranching in Jackson Hole, from small ranch size to long winters and extremely high operating costs, some ranchers managed to eke out hardscrabble cattle businesses. The perseverance of a few pioneer ranchers was rewarded with success but most efforts resulted in failure.

The cabin and surrounding land was established as the Bar Flying U Ranch by J. Pierce Cunningham in the 1880s. The Cunningham Cabin is one of the best of the few remaining homestead cabins in Jackson Hole. As you walk the grounds on the obscure 1/2 mile trail, one gets a glimpse of the difficult life of the homesteading ranchers who shaped the character of Jackson Hole. This booklet tells Cunningham's story. Walk the trail in a counterclockwise direction to best understand the few remaining features. The walk takes about 30 minutes.



The Cunninghams selected this land overlooking the Snake River because of the character of the soils. The geology of the valley determines what lives here and ranching was no exception. Most of the valley's floor consists of quartzite cobbles and very porous soils deposited from the melting glaciers of the Ice Ages. Cunningham's land, however, was covered with silt sediments deposited from an ancient lake that formed from the glaciers' meltwater. Cunningham recognized that these soils retained moisture and provided better nutrients for raising lush grasses and forbs.

## Cabin Architecture and Construction

Shelter was the first concern of settlers and the environment influenced the architectural style. In many regions of the West, local building materials were scarce. In Jackson Hole, the surrounding forests of conifer trees provided abundant materials for constructing homes, barns and fences. The long, straight logs from lodgepole pine trees became the preferred choice of enterprising settlers. At first, small, single room cabins were constructed.

This cabin was the first building Cunningham constructed. This "dogtrot" style, common in eastern states, consists of two small cabins joined with an open, covered breezeway. Logs were secured and joined at the corners with saddle notches. Cracks between the logs were chinked with dirt mortar and often reinforced with willow wands. Sapling poles were

## Mountain Valley Ranching

Ranching in Jackson Hole first began when about 100 head of cattle were introduced to the valley around 1883. Large cattle companies were not interested in Jackson Hole because of the limited "open range" and high operating costs. The mountain valley's environment required owners to feed their livestock during the long, hard winters resulting in expensive operating costs. The days of free-ranging cattle in the West were coming to an end partly because of the tremendous losses of livestock during the terrible winter of 1886-1887. Consequently, Jackson Hole ranches evolved into relatively small cattle operations.

Cunningham, like all ranchers in Jackson Hole, learned to adapt to mountain valley ranching that contrasted sharply with farming or ranching in the eastern states. While 80 acres may have been more than sufficient for raising cattle in the east, the 160 acres allowed under the Homestead Act proved to be insufficient for Jackson Hole ranchers. Less productive soils required larger ranches, but federal homesteading laws restricted ranch size. Recognizing these drawbacks to western ranchers, Congress passed the Desert Land Act in 1877 allowing ranchers to increase the size of their ranches by purchasing additional acreage for \$1.25 per acre. In 1897 Cunningham filed a Desert Land Entry for an additional 140 acres for grazing and cultivating hay. Later, in 1918, Cunningham increased his ranch size further by purchasing 240 acres from James and Lydia Uhl's property to

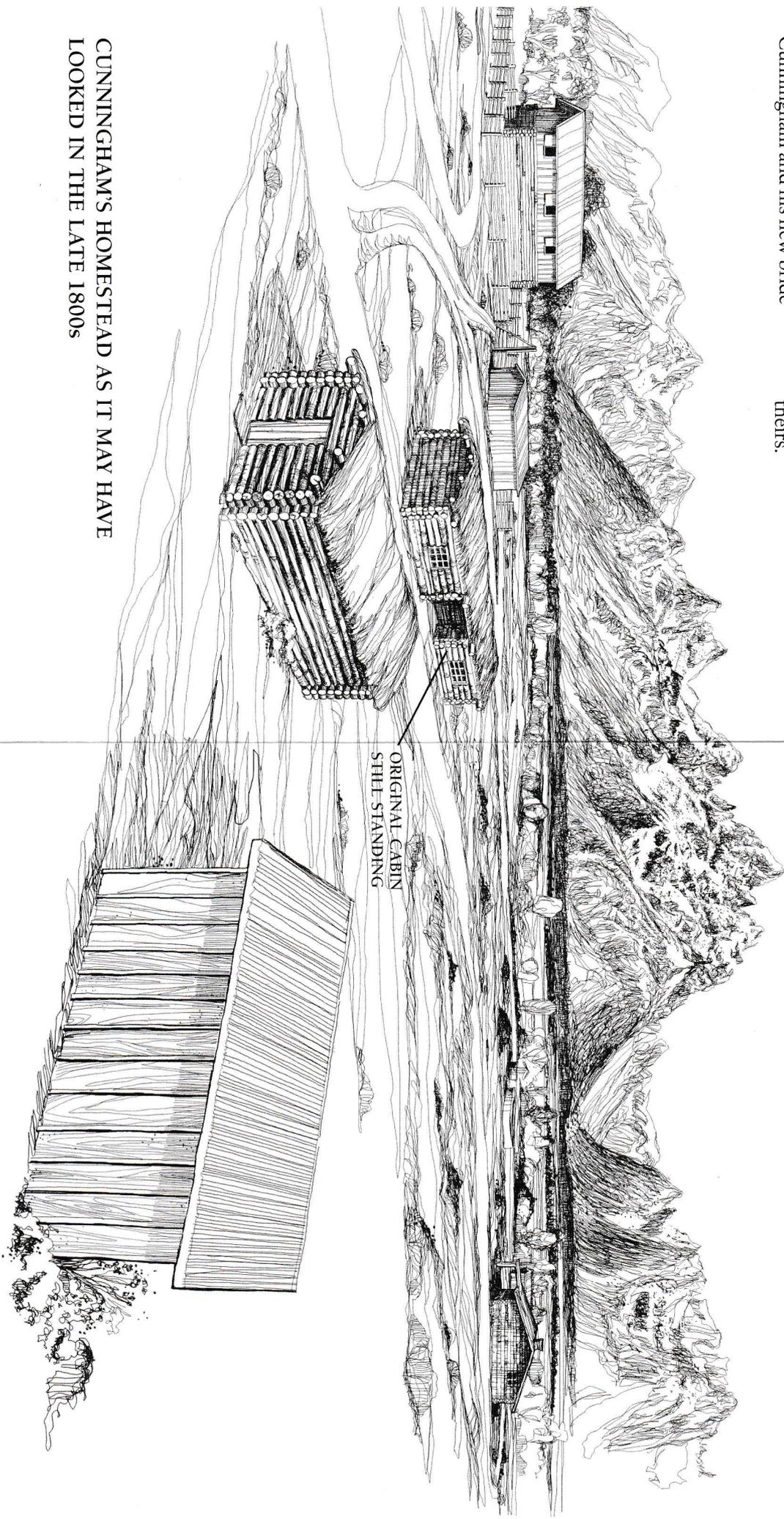
# Homesteading in Jackson Hole

J. Pierce Cunningham arrived in Jackson Hole about 1885 from New York when he was twenty years old. His early years in the valley were spent trapping. He was later destined to become one of the valley's prominent and respected citizens.  
Sometime between 1888 and 1890 Cunningham and his new bride

Margaret staked a homestead claim at this location just south of Spread Creek. The original ranch was 160 acres as allowed by the Homestead Act of 1862. The Act required the pioneers to live on the land for five years and to meet certain requirements, including building a cabin at least twelve feet by twelve feet and cultivating a few acres of crops. Once homesteaders "proved up" their claim, title to the land was theirs.

dirt that was wetted with water, compacted and swept.

snow created the greatest challenge to the Jackson Hole cattle ranchers. Ranches needed to be large enough to produce hay to feed livestock for six months of the year, yet, too large a ranch drove up operating costs. Consequently, herd size was limited by the tremendous amounts of feed that were needed for the long winters.



ORIGINAL CABIN STILL STANDING

CUNNINGHAM'S HOMESTEAD AS IT MAY HAVE LOOKED IN THE LATE 1800s