In the 1940s, a young cowboy named Waldo Wilcox stumbled upon an ancient treasure in a remote area in Utah called Range Creek Canyon. He found an elegant woven basket of grass and willow in an old stone-walled house. When he looked around some more, the young cowpoke couldn't believe his eyes. Pottery, weapons, and other ancient houses dotted the area.

"I thought, this stuff has got to be protected," he told The Washington Post. Wilcox was afraid that if word got out about his discovery, tourists, collectors, and vandals would ravage the site, as they had done other ancient sites of the Southwest.

So Wilcox protected the 4,200-acre area the best way he knew how: He didn't tell a soul. He even bought the land in 1951 to raise cattle. He and his family went to great lengths to keep the secret. They even built gates to keep people out.

When Wilcox decided to sell his land, he wanted to make sure that whoever bought the property would preserve the site. To do that, he sold the ranch to a local preservation group. The group then transferred the land to the state of Utah.
Scientists immediately knew that the site was littered with historic relics. Once Wilcox's secret was out of the bag, they began visiting the remote canyon. Scientists hoped to unravel the mysteries of an ancient Native American culture that had roamed Utah thousands of years ago. Those Native Americans were called the Fremont people.

**Meet the Fremont**

The Fremont were hunter-gatherers and farmers who inhabited the high-desert Book Cliffs in present-day Utah from about A.D. 500 to 1300.

In the canyon, the ruins of small villages are spread out along a 12-mile stretch of Range Creek, about two hours southeast of Salt Lake City.

"We've documented about 225 sites, and it's just scratching the surface," said Kevin Jones, a state of Utah archaeologist.

Almost all the sites include **granaries**, beehive-shaped storehouses for grain. Some granaries are the size of cupboards. Others are several yards across. Many of the granaries are perfectly preserved. Some were still filled with grass seed and corn—just the way the Fremont had left them.

Archaeologists also found granaries on cliff ledges. They suspect the Fremont put the granaries there to protect the food supply from rodents and raiders. Scientists say the granaries are evidence that the Fremont moved from place to place, leaving stashes of food at each stop.
Arrowheads, pottery fragments, and other artifacts lie on the ground at other village sites. Most of the homes are intact too, although the roofs of the houses in which the Fremont people lived collapsed long ago. The dwellings were once "warm and snug in the winter and cool in the summer," Jones said.

**Where Did They Go?**

Scientists say the Fremont people disappeared about 800 years ago. No one knows exactly why. Jones guesses they might have starved to death or joined other tribes.

Archaeologists hope to unravel the mysteries of the Fremont, but it could take many years of research. Only some scientists, college students, and government officials are now allowed to visit the Fremont village sites.

Meanwhile, government officials are trying to decide how to allow public access to Range Creek without damaging the ancient village sites. "If everyone in Utah came down here," Jones said, "it would be loved to death."

Scientists say if Waldo Wilcox had not kept his mouth shut all these years, the ruins would have been ransacked.

"I was cussed all my life for locking those gates," the 74-year-old Wilcox told a reporter. "Now the archaeologists tell me we were heroes for doing that."