

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Coming Full Circle on Mount Aeneas

By Keith Hammer

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As we take in the view from atop Mount Aeneas, several mountain goats make their way toward us, moving nimbly up the ridge that separates the Graves Creek and Aeneas Creek watersheds. Their shaggy winter coats give way in places to the fresh white of summer sleekness, showing off muscles developed from climbing mountains for a living.

We are in no hurry to abandon the 360-degree vista, letting our eyes and minds wander. This is a good place to scan the surrounding landscape for clues to our past and ideas of where to go from here.

We trace an imaginary path from Birch Lake down Aeneas Creek, skip across Hungry Horse Reservoir, and continue up Logan Creek in the Flathead Range. This is the path Salish and Kootenai Indians took from the Flathead Valley to buffalo hunting grounds on the plains, continuing from the divide above Logan Creek down Dirtyface Creek to the Middle Fork Flathead River, then up Bear Creek where Highway 2 today leads to Marias Pass on the Continental Divide. Not only was this the shortest route, it also avoided Bad Rock Canyon near present day Columbia Falls, where Blackfoot Indians would ambush the Salish and Kootenai to keep them away from buffalo grounds claimed by the Blackfoot.

The part of that route immediately below our feet was taken by the legendary Bob Marshall in 1928 as he hiked the Jewel Basin on his way to the South Fork Flathead River country that would later bear his name as one of America's first congressionally designated Wilderness areas with passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964. This wonderful hunk of wild country, however, would impress many before Bob Marshall.

After standing in 1919 where we stand today, the Reverend Eugene Cosgrove would give a moving sermon on "The Secret of Wilderness" at the Unitarian Church in Helena:

"Hidden away by the Gods, like a necklace of pearls, among the crags and fastness of the [Swan] Mountains, lies the Jewel Basin, the enchanted land of this our Montana. Friends, I have seen the sun set on the minarets of Spain, and make splendid the dome of St. Sophia in Constantinople. I have watched the play of color upon the desert of Egypt, with the Sphinx and pyramids. I have made a trail through the hinterland of the Canadian Rockies, to where the Aurora Borealis from the polar skies make the northern night glorious... but for kaleidoscopic lights and shadows, for octaves of tone and color, for unending variety of the moods and forms of Nature, Jewel Basin is the most charmed and charming spot in all the world."

Others took a more utilitarian view of western U.S. forests in those days, but nonetheless took measures to protect them. Presidents from Harrison to Roosevelt set aside some 200 million acres as Forest Reserves in order to keep public resources from simply being stolen for private gain. Indeed, as Roosevelt on the one hand set out to “break up the tribal mass” of Indian reservations by opening them to private settlement, he on the other hand set out to prevent the privatization of the Forest Reserves that would become our National Forests and National Parks.

From our perch on Mount Aeneas, we can see a broad expanse of what was once the Flathead Forest Reserve and Lewis and Clark Forest Reserve. On the horizon to our north and east are the peaks of what is now Glacier National Park and, closer at hand, the mountains of the Flathead National Forest.

Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service, described the purpose of the reserves as to “save the timber for the use of the people, and to hold the mountain forests as great sponges to give out steady flows of water for use in the fertile valleys below.” For Pinchot, the Flathead would “hold some of the pleasantest memories of my life.” John Muir accompanied Pinchot on his trip to the Flathead and wrote “you will find yourself in the midst of what you are sure to say is the best care-killing scenery on the continent.”

Indeed, the public landscape we view from Mount Aeneas displays the hand of man in its logging roads, clear-cuts, and the 23,000-acre reservoir behind Hungry Horse dam. But it also displays pristine landscapes either protected from industrial development by law or spared thus far by virtue of their sheer ruggedness.

It seems the view of the reservation from Mount Aeneas has come full circle. For all the injustice the federal government dealt American Indians as it diminished their treaty reservations, it had the wisdom to simultaneously reserve for the American people lands it was not willing to simply hand over wholesale to private and corporate interests.

The goats have moved off the ridge so we begin our descent down their trail in what promises to be an interesting bush-whack through a back door entrance to Birch Lake.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

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A new generation of explorers takes in the view from Mount Aeneas, with Hungry Horse Reservoir below and the Flathead Range beyond. Photo courtesy of www.swanrange.org.