

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

An Echo From the Past

By Keith Hammer

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Whoa! One minute we notice the muddy 1928 tracks of Bob Marshall at Birch Lake and now we are standing in a gravel pit at the base of Mount Aeneas along the Jewel Basin Road! Worry not fellow Swan Rangers, we were simply abducted by aliens. They know a good retracing of Bob Marshall's day hike from Echo Lake to Spotted Bear Ranger Station would have to begin at the base of Mount Aeneas.

Don't believe in aliens? Just close your right eye. How else do you explain that you are now standing in the midst of the Echo Ranger Station in 1928! Close your left eye - yes, the one implanted by aliens - and we are back in the present day gravel pit directly across the Jewel Basin Road from Broken Leg Trail #544 and its trailhead parking lot.

The only thing that beats a good bushwhack in the Swan Range is a bit of time travel! So let's stroll around a little with both eyes wide open.

During the 1920s and 1930s this was a hub of activity with a log house, barn, blacksmith shop, bunkhouse, outhouse and corral. It sat nestled next to a wonderful wet meadow fed by Rock Creek and Station Creek and had a small campground for visiting huckleberry pickers and hunters.

Today it is a scraped out gravel pit with a stockpile of gravel for use on the Jewel Basin Road. The pit is littered with spent rifle shell casings, beer bottles, beer cans, and just about any other sort of garbage that can either be shot at or left behind after shooting something else. Sadly, the wet meadow now includes a history of being used for unlawful four-wheel drive mud-bogging like you might see at the County Fair grounds. Makes a person want to close their right eye for good!

In its heyday, Echo Ranger Station was situated six miles from its closest neighbor near Echo Lake, at the hub of a robust trail system. Indeed, the Echo Ranger Station was a base for workers building trails in the Jewel Basin and surrounding area. During the winter, workers at the Echo Ranger Station did the tack and saddle repair for the entire Flathead National Forest.

When Bob Marshall paid a ten-minute visit to the Echo Ranger Station the morning of August 28, 1928 he likely met Ranger Ed Thompson. If Ed was already out on the trail somewhere, Bob likely met Ed's wife Mary who, in addition to being an unpaid alternative ranger, kept a vegetable garden, chickens, pigs, and a Jersey cow at the station - and regularly provided meals to both workers and visitors.

Bob Marshall's choices of trail at the station included a mid-slope trail heading north to Strawberry Lake, straight up Mount Aeneas on Switchback Trail #725, or southerly

along Crater Notch Trail #187 or Broken Leg Trail #544. The latter three trails are still maintained, but the mid-slope Strawberry Lake trail was abandoned after its lower stretch was replaced with the Jewel Basin Road and similar construction of the nearby Strawberry Lake Road came to provide quicker access to Strawberry Lake via Strawberry Lake Trail #54.

Bob Marshall, then an employee of the Forest Service's Northern Rocky Mountain Forest Experiment Station in Missoula, was setting off on foot to survey a big chunk of country in the South Fork Flathead and Swan Range. This area, unbeknownst to him then but later for good reason, would bear his name as one of the first Wilderness areas designated by the U.S. Congress.

In his usual habit, Bob Marshall didn't tarry at the Echo Ranger Station and chose the most direct route over the Swan Range, heading up the Switchback Trail. We Swan Rangers, being of sound mind and alien left eyeball, can see it is 9:00 AM on August 28, 1928 and high time to set out after the fast-paced Bob Marshall.

Before we set off to follow in the footsteps of Bob Marshall, however, I must give thanks and credit to more than the alien left eyeball that allows us to see into the past. Kathryn McKay has written two books relevant to our wanderings in the Swan Range: "Looking Back - A Pictorial History of the Flathead Valley, Montana" and "Trails of the Past - Historical Overview of the Flathead National Forest, Montana 1800-1960." The Flathead Chapter of the Sierra Club and National Geographic writer Mike Edwards deserve credit for extracting relevant portions of Bob Marshall's hiking logs, which reside in Berkeley's Bancroft Library.

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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The Echo Ranger Station as it looked in 1924. Photo courtesy of Flathead National Forest.