

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Down the Road with Bob Marshall

By Keith Hammer

May 10, 2007, Lakeshore Country Journal

Elk Park Ranger Station is just a small log cabin and a few canvas tents, but we time-traveling Swan Rangers are enjoying the smell of dinner cooking. Bob Marshall returns from his stroll down the South Fork Flathead Road, writes this in his notebook while adding two miles to the 28 miles we just hiked from Echo Ranger Station over the Swan Range, and strikes up conversation with Flathead Forest Supervisor Lloyd Hornby.

Hornby is here on this warm evening of August 28, 1928 to give Marshall a car tour ride up the relatively new road to Spotted Bear Ranger Station. He asks Marshall what he thinks of the new road. Marshall says it is overbuilt to an average width of 15', when it was supposed to be only 9' wide. We Swan Rangers sit back to watch the sparks fly.

The two sit down to dinner and Marshall notes that the first trail had been cleared to Spotted Bear in 1906 and later connected to Black Bear, Big Prairie and points further up the South Fork Flathead. This provided a satisfactory packer supply line all the way from Coram to Ovando, Marshall argued. Why gouge roads through this beautiful country?

Before Hornby can reply, Marshall adds that the Ranger Stations carry their own weight in terms of horses and mules, with Coram, Spotted Bear and Big Prairie all putting up their own hay on-site. Marshall punctuates his argument with the fact that forest inspector Elers Koch had recommended full-time packers be hired to pack supplies along the Coram-Ovando route.

Hornby counters by noting that Koch had also written in 1906 "There is an excellent opportunity on this reserve to open up to large bodies of timber by construction of roads up the main valleys. The Swan River and the South Fork of the Flathead are the two best propositions for work of this sort." And there, Marshall figures, is why the road ended up 15' wide instead of the 9' thought necessary to simply haul supplies.

We Swan Rangers can see Hornby and Marshall will remain at a standoff. Our larger discomfort, however, is in smelling their savory dinner while eating our own time-traveling rations of beef jerky. But this paradox of time travel pales when one of the Rangers pulls a laptop computer from his daypack, uplinks to satellite, and points out that Marshall wasn't alone in his concerns.

In 1923 the Montana legislature created the Spotted Bear Game Preserve because it feared the new road to Spotted Bear would diminish the South Fork elk herd. State and federal agencies set about manipulating the elk herds by hiring hunters to shoot elk-eating mountain lions and by providing the elk salt licks.

The Forest Service started using airplanes in the 1930s and landing fields were established at Big Prairie and Spotted Bear. When discussion would later turn to opening these new landing fields to the public for elk hunting, however, Bob Marshall himself would nix the idea.

In 1936, amidst arguments of excessive numbers of elk in the South Fork, the Spotted Bear Game Preserve was eliminated. In 1953, Hungry Horse Dam was completed and flooded 23,000 acres of the South Fork Flathead, including 8,750 acres of winter range habitat critical for elk survival. Research in the latter half of the century would confirm that roads and traffic indeed displace elk from their preferred habitats, not just dams.

Marshall's mind is not yet bothered by the details of Hungry Horse Dam or the arrival of airplanes in the 1930s. At 8:30 he climbs into a Model A Ford alongside Hornby, we Swan Rangers jump on the rear bumper and fenders, and we're off to Spotted Bear.

We can see Marshall note our departure in his notebook but can't hear his discussions with Hornby. Marshall repeatedly points through the car window and Hornby repeatedly steers with one hand while turning his free palm upwards as if wishing a good answer would light there real soon.

As we bump along, Techno-Ranger finds a perch atop the spare tire and continues to glean facts from his laptop computer. "Wow, in 1936 there were 360 miles of highways and roads on the Flathead National Forest, by 1959 there were over 1,000 miles, and by 1985 there were 4,000 miles!" Marshall looks out his car window as though he already knows this and we pull into Spotted Bear Ranger Station at 9:20, near dark.

Marshall thanks Hornby for the ride and invites him along on the 40-mile hike he has planned for the next day. Hornby declines with a polite "thanks anyway."

(While these accounts of Marshall's travels are animated, they are based in facts provided by his notes and by Flathead National Forest.)

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.

- Photo on next page -



South Fork Road between Elk Park and Spotted Bear Ranger Stations, 1926. Photo courtesy Flathead National Forest.