

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

The Hub at Spotted Bear

By Keith Hammer

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It is 8:30 a.m. August 29, 1928 when we time-traveling Swan Rangers awake at Spotted Bear Ranger Station, having overslept following yesterday's hike of 30 miles. Bob Marshall is already out the door on a 16-mile hike up to Spotted Bear Lookout and back - before heading out on foot to Black Bear Ranger Station 24 miles up the South Fork Flathead River!

Our disappointment over missing Marshall's departure quickly fades as we attempt to make our legs get out of our sleeping bags. We decide we'll catch Marshall when he passes back through Spotted Bear later in the day.

Techno-Ranger strategically places his laptop computer in the shade of a tree while keeping its short-leashed folding solar panel in the sun, a process he has to repeat every few minutes as the sun moves across the sky. We prepare our time-travel breakfast of oatmeal and wait for the laptop batteries to charge. Techno-Ranger is determined to find out why Marshall is in such a hurry to hike this country.

Spotted Bear Ranger Station is a hub of activity and a major telephone hub for the Flathead National Forest. We'd noticed yesterday the bare wire along the new South Fork Road, strung through insulators on trees and poles. Here the bare wire runs into a telephone that has another wire running to a metal stake in the ground, completing the electric circuit.

In a time-travel paradox, Techno-Ranger finds his computer batteries charged by 1928 sun and again able to link up to a 2007 satellite while the rest of us are still wondering why we can smell but not eat 1928 bacon and eggs nor talk to the cook. Techno-Ranger immediately begins reciting facts from which emerge a rapidly changing Flathead National Forest.

In 1905, the headquarters for the Flathead National Forest was moved from Ovando to Kalispell and in 1908 the first phone line was run from Kalispell to Coram at the northern end of the Coram-Ovando packer supply line. From there it was continued to Spotted Bear in 1910 and on to Big Prairie in 1912. Lines also came into Spotted Bear from Swan Lake, the Middle Fork Flathead and the Spotted Bear Lookout, which was in 1914 the first permanent lookout on the Flathead.

While radios would not begin to replace these phones until the late 1940s, changes in transportation were rapid. As we learned yesterday, the Coram-Ovando trail nearly completed in 1906 began being replaced by the South Fork Road in the mid-1920s, soon

to be followed by the use of airplanes beginning in the 1930s. Region One of the Forest Service bought its first horses and mules in 1907 and bought its first automobile in 1917.

In other parts of the country, however, many people felt the country was already criss-crossed by too many roads and the Forest Service made its first commitment to protect wilderness from development in 1919 at Trapper Lake, Colorado. Bob Marshall's father, an attorney in New York City, was key in helping conserve the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains both for their wild beauty and as treasured water supply for the city.

Using Techno-Ranger's cyber crystal ball, we can now see where Bob Marshall is headed. He is in the process of seeing for himself many of the wild areas he will work to protect from rapidly approaching development. There is a move afoot in the Forest Service and Marshall has set his feet in motion!

Fellow Forest Service forester and wildlife biologist Aldo Leopold also worried about the need to protect wild lands for humans as well as wildlife. In 1925 he urged the protection of "wild regions big enough to absorb the average man's two-weeks' vacation without getting him tangled up in his own back track ... areas wild enough to be free from motor roads, summer cottages, or other manifestations of gasoline."

In 1927 the Forest Service first issued regulations to protect some areas as "primitive." In the Spotted Bear neck of the woods, the South Fork, Pentagon, and Sun River Primitive Areas would be established in 1931, 1933, and 1934.

As head of recreation for the Forest Service, Marshall would in 1939 revise those regulations to provide better and more lasting protection to primitive areas as "wilderness." Although he would die just two months later, the South Fork, Pentagon, and Sun River Primitive Areas will be combined in 1940 as the 950,000 acre Bob Marshall Wilderness Area in his honor.

But we've gotten plenty far ahead of ourselves. It's now 2:00 p.m. Marshall returns from Spotted Bear Lookout and pauses just long enough to splash water on his face. We scramble to gather up our gear and follow him up the trail toward Black Bear Ranger Station!

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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Telephones like this one in Spotted Bear Lookout were the mainstay of communication on the Flathead in the early 1900s. Photo courtesy Flathead National Forest.