

# *Stepping Out in the Swan Range*

## *The Battle for Bunker*

By Keith Hammer

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Once again we take to the trail behind Bob Marshall, we weary time-traveling Swan Rangers. He has just returned to Spotted Bear Ranger Station from a 16-mile morning jaunt up to Spotted Bear Lookout and back. We took the morning off to rest and still have trouble keeping up as he sets out again at a brisk pace to cover the 24 miles to Black Bear Ranger Station before dark!

Marshall is so intent on his afternoon trek that he doesn't pull out his notebook until we've reached Harrison Creek 8.5 miles later. Techno-Ranger, on the other hand, spent the morning downloading "history" from satellite, which is still "future" on this day of August 29, 1928 - and now he is running off at the mouth, pausing only to snatch a deep breath now and then.

Techno-Ranger, whom we've nicknamed TR, points across the South Fork Flathead River to Bunker Creek. Then he launches into a spiel about how Forest Service plans to road and log Bunker Creek would erupt into a big controversy that would strengthen support for the 1964 Wilderness Act.

"It was one of the earliest and biggest environmental controversies in Region One of the Forest Service," TR began. "The Flathead National Forest wanted to log 23 million board feet of timber up there in 1954. Man, that's like 5,000 log truck loads!"

"They wanted to build five miles of road along the northern border of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. And that would require another 30 miles of road to tie into the Spotted Bear Road!" TR glances back down the river toward Spotted Bear with his jaw hanging down near his chest, and continues.

"A local outfitter stirred up a hornets' nest of protest against that timber sale. The Forest Service backed off, saying it wasn't economical anyway unless they cut way more timber or came up with a lot more money from somewhere else to pay for the roads. Flathead Lake Wildlife Association petitioned to have the Bob Marshall Wilderness boundary extended to the north, but the Forest Service refused the petition and eventually built the roads up Bunker Creek."

With that, TR pulled his wallet from his shorts pocket, turned it upside down to show there was no money in it, and feigned "Gee, I wonder who paid for those roads?" He trotted a few steps to catch up, took a deep breath, and started in again.

"Well, that didn't build too much trust in the Forest Service," TR concluded. "So Bunker Creek became a poster child for a national Wilderness Act. Folks decided Congress needed to protect some Forest Service lands from the Forest Service itself."

Whoa! TR pulls up short to keep from walking into Marshall, or through him as time-travel would have it. Marshall has his notebook out and is scribbling "Meadow Creek; 4:50; 26 miles." TR finally notices we have been hiking along a remarkably deep, narrow gorge in the South Fork Flathead River. The rest of us shake our heads and head upriver after Marshall.

We hike the next hour in silence until we reach Mid Creek, where Marshall notes "Middle Creek; 5:50; 30 miles," then takes an unexpected left turn up the Mid Creek trail. We Rangers stare at each other and unanimously shake our heads side to side. It's already dinnertime, we have 10 miles left to Black Bear, and Marshall is headed off on a side hike!

We plop down to wait for Marshall. TR pulls out his laptop, uplinks to satellite, and we explore the area as it looks almost 80 years later on Google Earth. We look at the ugly old roads and clear cuts up Bunker Creek and spiral into depression. TR quickly switches to [www.swanrange.org](http://www.swanrange.org) in an effort to cheer us up.

"Look," TR rejoices, "in 1988 the U.S. Congress delivered a wilderness bill to President Reagan that would have declared 80,000 acres of the Swan Range new wilderness, including the upper forks of Bunker Creek, overgrown roads and all! Too bad Reagan vetoed it as a stunt to get Conrad Burns elected Senator in Montana."

"That's supposed to cheer us up?" another Ranger asks.

"The point," TR emphasizes with his index finger, "is that we must never give up. It's never too late to try again. The Bob Marshall was expanded by the Scapegoat and Great Bear Wilderness Areas in 1972 and 1978, which included a few old roads like those now abandoned in Bunker Creek."

Marshall comes bounding back down the Mid Creek Trail and turns left up the South Fork with a smile on his face and enthusiasm to match TR's. We jump to our feet and follow Marshall. TR calls over his shoulder, "ever heard of the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act?"

*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](http://www.swanrange.org). Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or [keith@swanview.org](mailto:keith@swanview.org).*

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The South Fork Flathead River flows through Meadow Creek Gorge and under a brand new pack bridge in 1922. Photo courtesy Flathead National Forest.