

On the Path

Mountain Brook Roads, Old and New

By Keith Hammer

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My last couple articles about the history of the Mountain Brook area have been popular and garnered a number of positive comments. So I'll indulge in another article about this area of the Swan Foothills, this time focusing on the roads and trails folks continue to use while enjoying public lands between Lake Blaine and Echo Lake.

Those who hunt, hike or otherwise nose around the lower slopes of the Swan Range in this area have undoubtedly noticed a mixture of old roads, many abandoned and partially overgrown with trees and brush, and newer roads maintained by either the U.S. Forest Service or Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Local oral history and stories written in "Babblings from Mountain Brook" tell that the major transition to the newer public road system occurred following a big wind storm in 1960 that blew down large swaths of trees along Peters Ridge and northward.

Prior to this time, many narrow, winding and often steep roads spread out into public lands from numerous points on private lands, including from the Krause and Turner sawmills, as well as up Browns Gulch and other points further north toward Lake Blaine. Having walked many of these roads with the eye of a former truck driver and logger, I've often wondered what a rodeo it must have been hauling logs down these roads in old-model trucks!

Indeed, as Shirley Turner Brown wrote, "We logged with horses, but hauled with a 1937 Chevy truck . . . The truck was always loaded tail heavy, so Grandad put me on the front fender for more front-end weight. It was all down hill to home when loaded and Grandad just never seemed to get his foot on the brake in time for the gates. We lost more gates that summer. It became an afterwork chore for my Dad to fix gates."

As her stepmother Georgianna Turner wrote, "In the spring of 1960 a wild wind storm hit the Flathead Valley. It blew down sheds, knocked out the electricity, blew trees down across the roads, and generally acted up . . . The tornado-like winds hit the ridges above us and laid the trees over like jack-straws." In response, the Forest Service surveyed and put in a new, wide road up Peters Ridge, with a fork also running side-hill northward all the way to Trail Creek above Lake Blaine – and set about logging the blowdown trees.

Following completion of the new roads and logging, however, the Forest Service failed to reclaim and re-vegetate the unneeded old roads, as now required by the National Forest Management Act, and the area became overrun by motorized vehicles from full-size pickups to a rapidly evolving slew of off-road vehicles.

In response to growing controversy, the Forest Service in the mid-1980's conducted a public planning process to arrive at a more balanced use of many of the old roads and the reclamation of others. The resulting Noisy Face Recreation Management Plan was issued in 1988, reclaiming some old roads with vegetation, blocking some with boulders to allow off-road vehicles but not full-size vehicles, and closing some parts of Peters Ridge and Krause Basin during spring and fall to all motor vehicles to provide security for a broad array of wildlife including grizzly bear and calving elk.

The Recreation Plan also provided renewed opportunities for quiet recreation on what was to remain of the old road system as those roads were encouraged to grow partially shut with trees and brush to prohibit use by pickups - while being maintained wide enough to allow for hiking, skiing, mountain biking and summertime use by narrower off-road vehicles. Indeed, the Krause Basin area has become popular for cross-country skiing as most of the old roads are of gentle grade, but with a few steep pitches that give skiers a thrill similar to what early-day log truck drivers must have experienced on the way down!

In some ways, the Recreation Plan has provided the opportunity for folks to remember and return to some of the values and habits of the "good old days" documented so well in "Babblings from Mountain Brook." One need not have a lot of money nor a snowmobile or four-wheeler to enjoy their surroundings. The book is full of wonderful stories of kids and adults alike enjoying the Swan Foothills on foot, with a simple sled or cardboard box for snow sliding, perhaps a bicycle or horse, but most of all with a spirit of exploration and appreciation!

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 appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



A hiker enjoys the peace and quiet of an old road-turned-trail in Krause Basin. Pam Willison photo.