

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

A Stroll Through History and Place

By Keith Hammer

December 7, 2006, Lakeshore Country Journal

Today we head down a trail in the Swan Range together, to explore the beauty of the place and to ponder those who have tread here before us. As our trail winds its way through this column over the coming months, we will come across much more than the fresh tracks of deer, elk, mountain goat, lynx, wolverine, and grizzly bear.

We will encounter the namesakes of American Indians that lived here as we climb to the peak of Mount Aeneas, wonder at the spring wildflowers along the Broken Leg Trail, and skinny-dip in Lamoose Lake. If we listen carefully, we may hear a story or two about their lives and legacy along the way.

Perhaps we will stumble across the path of the legendary Bob Marshall as he hiked from Echo Lake to Spotted Bear in a single day! Indeed, we probably should follow the Swan Crest south to the wilderness area that bears his name and see what we find there.

While we are up there on the Swan Crest, we can look around for signs of the preacher that long ago gave a sermon in Helena about the beauty and inspiration he experienced in Jewel Basin. Maybe we'll cross paths with one of the folks that helped Jewel Basin earn an official designation as a Hiking Area.

As my hiking companions will readily tell you, there may be times in this column we leave the beaten path for an all-out bushwhack in pursuit of something we've totally forgotten about by the time we regain our composure and the path. But rest assured those are likely to be the forays we remember most with the passage of time for we will have discovered something totally unexpected.

We in the Flathead and Swan Valleys are blessed with an abundance of public lands here in our back yard. I am pleased to have this opportunity to step outdoors with you no matter where you live, take in a grand view of the Swan Mountains, and head off in pursuit of all things of interest there. If we accomplish nothing else together, we will have fostered a greater appreciation of these lands and each other.

Indeed, there exists a thread that binds us together and to the American Indians that tread here before us. That thread is our public lands, truly our common ground, which are held in trust by the whole lot of us - the rag-tag tribe that we may be in this cultural melting pot known as the USA.

So let's set out and explore the Swan Range together. Let us begin by putting one foot in front of the other and fall into that gentle rhythm that heals the mind, body and soul - picking up these words as we pick up the scent of balsam and laying others back down as footprints and ski tracks in new fallen snow.

Unlike Hansel and Gretel, I have not laid these words down so I can find my way back home. I lay them down instead to encourage you to step out into the Swan Range that is our past, our present and our future. I hope you'll put these little pebbles in your pocket and share them with your friends.

I welcome your help and ideas as we walk and ski together. If you have suggestions for one of these columns or a bit of history or knowledge to share, please contact me.

And now, a bit of a teaser for the next issue of this column: Was it American Indians or Jesuit Missionaries that first brought Christianity to western Montana in the early 1800s? We might just have to take a hike or ski to Lamoose Lake, nestled along historic Alpine Trail #7 in the peaks of the northern Swan Crest, to find out!

Thanks for joining me today and I hope you'll be on the lookout for the next issue of this column so we can continue to hike and ski the Swan Range together.

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.



Swan View Coalition Photo: Keith Hammer shares time with Zack and other friends at Jewel Basin's Crater Lake.