

## **A Saint In The Campground**

By Kate Vasha, Saguache Ranger District

When Jean Ward was a little girl, she wanted to be a forest ranger. But that was back in the 1930s, and her mother told her only men could go into that profession, and that she would end up as a secretary behind a desk.

“It took me 60-plus years, but I finally made it to the forest.”

To the Buffalo Pass Campground in the Rio Grande National Forest, to be more precise. Jean is the volunteer host at the campground, which perches at 9,000 feet just west of North Pass on Highway 114.

At 83, Jean has been the campground host there for a dozen years now, arriving around Memorial Day in her RV, towing her car—all the way from her home base in Toledo, Ohio.

She spends the summer tending the campground, feeding the hummingbirds and visiting with the 1,000 or so people who stay at Buffalo Pass during any given summer—many for a week or two. Around Labor Day, she retraces her route, then spends the winter volunteering with the United Methodist Church’s NOMADS (“Nomads On A Mission in Divine Service”) program.

“Jean is a treasure,” says Kristi Murphy, recreation manager for the Saguache Ranger District. “Not only does she keep everything spotless, but her presence has made Buffalo Pass a destination for people who come year after year to see her.”

Jean has missed two summers—once when she had both knees replaced and once when one of her daughters was very ill—and both times the Saguache office heard from

members of her fan club, who said that the campground was not the same without her, asking how she was and when she would be back. This summer a man stopped by the office just to let people know that, “Jean Ward is a saint. A saint.”

A saint with a rollicking sense of humor and unquenchable zest for life.

She was born in Akron, Ohio, and graduated from the University of Akron with a BA. She also has a Master’s in education from Bowling Green State University and a specialist degree in reading from the University of Toledo. She spent five years as a regional director for the Girl Scouts and followed that with a 20-year career as an educator, teaching first special education, and then English. She also raised four children, two boys and two girls.

After her retirement and the death of her husband, Jean started looking for a new adventure. Fate intervened when a friend saw a tiny notice in the Winterhaven, Florida newspaper. The notice said that the U.S. Forest Service was looking for campground hosts, half a continent away in southern Colorado.

“I called the first number listed, and that’s how I ended up at Buffalo Pass. It was love at first sight—so peaceful, so beautiful,” Jean says. “I should pay the Forest Service for being able to stay here.”

She’s been at the campground just about every summer since, talking to visitors who become friends and get their names added to her Christmas list, spreading the word on the history and beauty of the forest and keeping “the cleanest restrooms west of the Pecos.” “If the place is kept nice, people will keep it that way,” she adds.

In her spare time, she searches out local history. A favorite jaunt is Saguache Park. “When I first went there, I expected to see swing sets and maybe a merry-go-

round,” she says. “That was before I knew that *park* doesn’t mean amusement park, but really means a wide open space with forest all around it.”

Jean left for the season just after Labor Day this year. Once she recovers from cataract surgery, she will spend the winter with the NOMADS, who are sort of a Habitat for Humanity on wheels, with volunteers traveling south for the winter to work on rehabilitation projects at homes, churches, agencies and campgrounds. “I always say NOMADS really stands for ‘Nasty Old Methodists Avoiding Deep Snow,’” she jokes. She spends four days a week volunteering, and the other three exploring new places.

Then when summer rolls around again, she will roll west to Buffalo Pass.

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