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SOME EARLY EXPERIENCES ON THE CARIBOU NATIONAL FOREST

By

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It was my privilege and pleasure to spend the summers of 1918 and 1919 on the Caribou National Forest. At that time the Caribou did not include the areas around Pocatello and Malad, Idaho, which were then part of the Cache National Forest. The Headquarters of the Caribou were at Montpelier, Idaho.

On May 18, 1918, I was assigned to an "improvement crew." My salary was \$75 a month and board. On this crew four or five of us worked under the supervision of Foreman Arthur Peterson, a capable man with much practical experience, who later became a Ranger on the Caribou. We started work in Montpelier Canyon, near the "elbow," building a range fence. We had a farm wagon loaded with materials to build or repair roads, bridges, fences, telephone lines, buildings, and whatever else needed attention, plus our bedrolls, grub, and camp equipment. From Montpelier Canyon, the crew worked northward, ending on Fall Creek near the north end of the Forest.

Shortly after joining the crew, I was taken off for special assignment. I helped a newly appointed Ranger build stock-watering troughs and do other work south of Montpelier Canyon. He had the typical equipment of those days, a team of lively horses that were used both for riding and packing and to pull a light buckboard.

He carried a Colt 45 automatic pistol and apparently relied on it, rather than diplomacy, to obtain compliance with Forest Service regulations. One time he forced a sheepherder, at gunpoint, to travel several miles to a Forest Service telephone. As I recall, the herder hadn't moved the sheep along the stock driveway as fast as the Ranger thought he should. He kept the gun pointed at the herder while he reported the case to Supervisor Charley Simpson. It was related to me that he asked Supervisor Simpson what he should do and that Simpson replied, "What the hell would you do – turn him loose." Anyway, the Ranger was released during his probationary period for several indiscretions and for general evidence that he was not cut out to be a forest officer. Several years later he probably used that same gun in a family tragedy.

I met Supervisor Simpson at the Trail Creek Guard Station for another assignment. Charley and Ranger Jim Bruce had been riding the range; and my first sight of these men, who were to become lifelong friends, was as they came splashing across the Blackfoot River on their fine saddle horses.

Charley and I headed for Caribou Basin the following morning in a Forest Service pickup truck. Along the way, through the small settlements of Wayan, Gray, and Herman, we met livestock permittees and others who had business to conduct with the Supervisor. I was impressed by the importance of Forest Service work and by the sagacity of the Supervisor in handling problems and dealing with people. Charley gave me some good career guidance on that trip.

Herman was pretty much a ghost town. The old saloon and several other empty buildings were still standing. I heard several stories about its rough and tough existence, including a man being buried alive up to his neck for some infraction. With Grays Lake's mosquito population, that could have been a terrible ordeal. I can't remember how long he was kept in his "grave."

East of Herman we passed through "Della's Basin," a tree-lined meadow along the road to Caribou Basin. Charley told me that the previous summer a "madame" named Della had brought some of her "soiled doves" from Salt Lake City and used this basin as a place of business. A pander covered the country for miles around, informing shepherders and other occupants of the mountains. In due time the forest officers declared this operation to be unlawful use of government and put an end to it. The local cattleman nailed a sign on a tree, "Della's Basin," by which it is still known. Several shepherders asked me that summer if Della and her crew had returned and were disappointed by my negative reply.

Ours was the first automobile to travel into Caribou Basin. We had to put rocks and brush in the ruts several places to clear the high centers.

In Caribou Basin Supervisor Simpson, Ranger Lewis C. Mathews of the Gray's Lake District, Ranger Spackman of the Freedom District, and I assisted Dave Shoemaker in one of the first larkspur grubbing projects. Dave, who was a Range Examiner from the Regional Office at Ogden, Utah, was experimenting with methods and practicability of larkspur eradication and came to the Caribou from a similar project on the Weiser National Forest. I was impressed with the need for it, as we found about eight dead cattle in patches of larkspur in Caribou Basin. I believe Dave's investigations were the basis for the bulletin "Larkspur Eradication on the National Forests." About ten years later I introduced larkspur eradication in Region 4 by use of herbicides and checked on the effectiveness of previous larkspur eradication projects. I found that in most cases the larkspur became reestablished, but cattle losses prevented for several years more than repaid the cost of eradication. This raised the question of whether the government or livestock permittees should pay the cost of future eradication projects.

Dave Shoemaker was one of the most capable and admirable forest officers I ever knew. Unfortunately, he died still a young man while serving in the Southwest Region of the Forest Service. The story was told that in

his youth he and his brother mounted broncos in a corral, I believe in South Dakota or Nebraska, opened the gate, rode their bucking broncs in different directions, and didn't see each other again for several months.

I would like to digress to state that Dave Shoemaker was one of many graduates from the University of Nebraska who became outstanding early leaders in conservation, both within and outside the Forest Service. Some of those who came to mind are W. R. Chapline, Chief of Range Research in the Forest Service for many years; C. L. Forsling, who became Assistant Chief of the Forest Service in charge of research; Paul Roberts, who headed the Shelter Belt Project and served as Assistant Regional Forester in charge of range and wildlife management in the Northern Region of the Forest Service; Lynn Douglas, who ended his career as Chief of Range and Wildlife Management in the Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service; Arthur Sampson, noted for basic range and watershed research as first head of the Great Basin Experiment Station and head of the Range Management Department many years at the University of California; L.J. Palmer, pioneer in reindeer research in Alaska; R.R. Hill, who did range Research at Fort Valley Experiment Station, served as Assistant Chief of the Division of Range Management in Washington, D.C., and was an Assistant Regional Forester in the lake States Region; C.E. Fleming, many years in charge of the Range Management Department at the University of Nevada; Art Upson, a leader in tropical forestry, Carl Kreuger, Assistant Regional Forester in charge of timber management at Denver, Colorado; Fred D. Douthitt, Assistant Chief of the Division of Range Management in the California Region; Leon Hurtt, active in range research in Montana; G.B. McDonald, well known dean of the College of Forestry at Iowa State University, R.P. Wollenberg, prominent in private forestry in the Pacific Northwest; and three Benedict brothers—one an early inspector out of the Washington Office, Miller S., a longtime Forest Supervisor in the Intermountain Region, and Maurice A., a prominent Forest Supervisor in the California Region of the Forest Service; Ralph Bodily; Ed Polson; L.L. Bishop; Carlo Bates; and doubtless other equally distinguished. All of these men filled important assignments in addition to those mentioned.

I feel sure, and other share my view, that Dr. Bessey, Dean of the Department, and his Assistant Professor Phillips, had the ability to inspire their students with a zeal for conservation, which contributed much to their success.

One Sunday I hiked from our camp in Caribou Basin up to the Caribou mine. In the open country at the south end of the basin, range cattle suddenly came running toward me from all directions. It gave me a queer feeling to be encircled by sniffing, staring cattle. There were no trees to climb, so I gathered up some throwing rocks and went straight ahead. The cows gave way to let me pass. Later I read in a report by Adolph Murie on losses of range cattle by grizzly bears in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, that cattle sometimes surround bears in this same manner. A bear will suddenly charge at a cow, and before the startled animal can turn and run, the bear will deliver a fatal blow with its paw.

I rejoined the improvement crew at Grays Lake. This was an interesting area in those days, with a number of “characters” left over from the mining boom days. One man invited us to spend the evening at his ranch home. Women’s clothing was hanging in the entrance hall. He frequently mentioned his wife and expressed regret that she was not a home that evening. Next day another rancher asked us where we had been. When I told him, he asked if the man’s wife was at home. When I said “no,” he laughed and said the man never had a wife.

The crew members formed a hillbilly orchestra. One man played a cornet, another hummed through tissue paper held tight over a comb, and I played a harmonica or mouth organ as then called, and other did a pretty good job of trap drumming, using an assortment of boxes, pans, and kettles for sound effects. We sang and played the old time tunes such as “Darling Nellie Gray,” “Redwing,” and “Jaunita.” We invited the local folks to an evening concert. People came from several miles and seemed to enjoy it.

One of those who attended was a girl called Tex Heath. She had a beautiful, spirited horse and would ride up and down the road in front of our tent several times with the horse at full speed before stopping to visit. I heard later that she became a top rodeo performer in Wyoming. We were told that her father had a large family and guided their destiny by the maxim “The Lord will provide.” He took them out on an island in Grays Lake to live. Local people feared the family would starve and insisted that he make other arrangements to provide for them.

Somewhere along the line a young dog joined us and made himself at home. As we traveled, he would trot along beside the wagon opposite the driver. The driver chewed tobacco and used the dog for a target. We had to throw the dog in a creek in the evening before we could stand having him around.

One evening we were camped at the Old Herman Guard Station. A large ditch ran around the hillside, and below it was a steep bank. The driver and I were kneeling on the lower bank cleaning some trout when the dog, some distance away, saw us and ran to us full speed. By the time he saw the ditch, he couldn’t stop and hurled himself through the air across it. He hit the driver in the chest and knocked him sprawling down the bank. I was glad it happened but didn’t say so.

About the first of August, all members of the crew but me had to go home to harvest hay, so the work was discontinued. Nobody could take or wanted the dog, and the majority decided the best thing to do was to shoot him. The executioner shot at the dog’s head but didn’t hit a vital spot. The dog let out fierce yelps and dashed about the camp like he was mad. The crew made it to safe spots in nothing flat – one on top the camp table, another into the wagon, and some up trees. After awhile the dog headed down the canyon. I learned later that he recovered and found a home at a ranch down country.

Fortunately for me, at that time an assistant was needed for the cattle herder on Brockman Creek, and I got the job. There were about 1100 cattle owned by ranchers around Paris, Bloomington, and St. Charles, Idaho. I believe the cattle had been taken off the Cache National Forest in that area to cure overgrazing. The herder was a likable Danishman. His method of making coffee was to pour a whole package in the pot and fill the pot with water. This would be boiled and the coffee poured off the top. Then more water would be poured into replace what had been used and the contents reboiled for subsequent use. After several days, a new package of coffee would replace the old. I thought I knew why the herder had stomach trouble.

I learned the hard way that one of the saddle horses in our string had a bad habit of rearing straight up when mounted and then falling over backwards. The herder enjoyed seeing me fall off and scramble out of the way twice, and then he showed me how to handle the horse. He would pass each bridle rein around a tree before mounting and thus restrain the horse until he got out of the notion of rearing, and then would reach down and unwrap the reins and be on his way.

While on this job, I learned something about the “wages of sin.” A sheep camp was located at the edge of our cattle range. We would occasionally pass by it. The camp tender was an old man, and his adult son was the herder. One day I saw the son crawling around on his hands and knees in front of the camp. He explained he was out of tobacco and was looking for cigarette butts to tide him over until he did returned from town with supplies. I couldn’t help him, as I did not smoke.

Next day the fellow rode by our camp, which was at the end of the wagon road, and said he couldn’t stand being without tobacco any longer and was on his way to meet his dad. He was in a highly nervous condition. Just then we heard his dad’s wagon coming up the road. The shepherd was off with his horse on a fast gallop. When he reached the wagon, his dad threw him a sack of Bull Durham, and he could barely roll a cigarette with his trembling hands.

Lager on I again passed this camp. The father told me his son was sick, so I got off my horse to visit him. He told me his horse had stumbled while he was riding it, and he was hurt in the groin. When I got outside, his dad told me this was “hot air” and the ailment was the result of a visit to wrong part of town when they trailed the sheep through Soda Springs. Anyway, next day they passed our camp on their way to see a doctor. The father was in front on a horse, leading a horse being ridden by the son who had the stirrups shortened as much as possible so he could stand up in them with a firm grip on the saddle horn and not have to sit.

In 1919, after graduating from high school, I again headed for the Caribou country. I worked a short time for the Forest Service in Caribou Basin as administrative guard, \$90 per month. It was intended that I

would have summer headquarters in a tin cabin in Brockman Creek, but I was offered and accepted a higher paying job at the Caribou Mine. Ranger Mathews wanted an opening for his brother and didn't mind my leaving, and I needed all the money I could earn.

A man named Mr. Stock, who had worked at the mine in its heyday, had it under lease. We lived in a large, frame, square, three-story, former hotel which later burned down. It was a placer operation and a destructive one. As I recall, on one area it was about five or six feet to bedrock and on another where I worked about ten or twelve feet to bedrock. Water was piped from springs or creeks high up on the mountain. The pipe became progressively smaller until, at the end, the water was under considerable pressure. The water was passed through a machine resembling a cannon, called a giant, and came out of the barrel with great force. The machine was located on the bedrock. The operator would direct the stream of water against the exposed soil bank and wash dirt, tree stumps, and rocks to the head of a flume of sluice boxes. One or more men would then roll or throw the tree stumps and large rocks out of the way so the dirt and smaller rocks could be washed down the flume. At the floor of the flume were cross cleats and chunks of burlap in which quicksilver, or mercury, had been placed to catch the particles of gold. At intervals of a few days the quicksilver-gold mixture was collected and stored until it could be marketed.

When I started this job, there were three of us on the crew besides Mr. Stock. As the summer progressed, the water decreased, and one man was released. The other crew member was a Finn called Gabe. He was a stocky man, built something like a gorilla, with long, strong arms. Gabe was a heavy tobacco chewer and seldom bathed. When his overalls or shirt became badly worn, he would put on new ones over the old. The result was a very odoriferous Gabe. I still remember working close to him at the head of the flume lifting rocks and stumps on hot, sweaty days. After awhile, as the water decreased, Gabe was released. He was a more experienced worker than I, but Mr. Stock didn't like to smell him either.

Then the water got so low it was my turn to go. A sheep permittee named Lewis White needed a shepherd just then, and I was glad to get the job. Shepherd's wages were relatively high, and Supervisor Simpson had advised me to learn all I could about range livestock, as I had decided to become a range examiner in the U.S. Forest Service. The range allotment was at the head of Jackknife Creek. There was one camp tender for two herds. He was a buddy of the other herder, so I seldom saw him except when I needed supplies or needed to have my camp moved. "Bedding out" and deferred and rotation grazing were not practiced then, or at least we didn't. I had to learn shepherding by myself but got along O.K. Bears were quite numerous in the area at that time.

I had the use of a dog that knew more about shepherding than I did. I could guide him as far as he could see me by motions of my arms. If the sheep needed to be turned or brought into camp, I would have him do most of the work. His only fault was that he was deaf. When I would sit down, he would lie down near me. If I walked away, he would stay where he was unless I made an arm motion for him to follow. Sometimes I would forget about him and walk away some distance, when I would hear his howling. He couldn't hear me call, so I had to walk back to where he could see me motion for him to come. I got in the habit of motioning for him to follow every time I started to go someplace. The habit became so fixed that I did it automatically for two or three weeks after I returned home, much to the amusement of people who saw me do it.

Later on, after attending Montana State University and Utah State University, I received an appointment as Forest Ranger on the Cache National Forest, April 1, 1923, and as a Junior Range Examiner on the Fishlake National Forest on June 1, 1924, which started my permanent career with the U.S. Forest Service. I have always cherished my early experiences on the Caribou.