

Audio Tour, Stop 4, Berkeley Tuolumne Camp:

People form close ties to natural places on the Stanislaus National Forest. As you wander through the mountains and river valleys of this National Forest, there are remnants of past cultures that confront us and remind us of the centuries-old relationship between people and the land. That heritage holds clues to our past and adds richness and depth to where we live. It also helps people to create memories focused around the landscapes they love.

Since 1922, residents of Berkeley, California and the surrounding urban area have been building memories on the Stanislaus National Forest at their special use camp, located near Harden Flat. As early as 1890, people were starting to feel the need to venture into the mountains, to relax and find respite from civilization. National Forests welcomed these urban dwellers by allowing them to establish camps, under special use permits, where families could come and enjoy the great outdoors.

In May of 1922, Berkeley Tuolumne Camp opened its camp doors to visitors. Though they had obtained their permit in 1921 it took a while to erect some basic facilities. In the early days, campers helped with building projects while staying at the camp as guests. They cut firewood, built tables and stools, set up tents and even helped to cook and clean. Oil lamps and campfires were used for light in the evenings and it was common for groups to hold campfire programs or sing-alongs for entertainment. For all of this joy, adults paid a dollar a day and the price for children ranged from 60 to 80 cents, depending upon age. So it was an affordable way for families to enjoy the woods together and share some family time.

Some of the finer amenities such as showers and bathrooms were lacking when the camp first started and yet families flocked to the area to breathe the fresh air, hike out to Breakfast Rock, and ride horses to Bower Cave. Baseball games and a quiet hour after lunch helped to bring families even closer. All one needed to do was to catch a rail train into the mountains and then complete the journey to the camp either by bus or donkey, to enjoy the fun.

Over time, the face of the camp changed. By 1930, the camp had 59 buildings and tent platforms on site. There was a stage for performances, a toboggan slide, shower facilities and even a laundry. In 1979, faulty electrical wiring burned down the camp stage but this would not be the last time fire was to visit the area.

Much of Berkeley Camp was destroyed by the Rim Fire, a historic event that consumed 154,530 acres on the Stanislaus in August of 2013. The fire, which grew to be the third largest in the state of California, as well as the largest fire in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, necessitated the evacuation of the camp as it grew closer. After the passage of the flaming front, it was discovered that many of the camp's buildings were burned to the ground. Fans of the area claim that along with the buildings nearly a century of memories were lost as well.

In late August of 2013, 250 people joined together to mourn the loss of their camp for such are the ties we have to the land. Hope is, however, in the air for the Friends of Berkeley Camp do plan to rebuild at least a portion of what was lost.

This sense of loss points to a larger issue and that is the human part of the Rim Fire story. There is an emotional component to any large scale fire for it hits people on a gut level. Like landscapes, it takes time for people to heal. Imagine the worry involved in leaving your home

during an evacuation, left to wonder what will ensue. Picture school children creating artwork to process their emotions regarding the fire and you begin to see that this fire not only affected Berkeley Camp but the community as a whole.

The personal part of the story rarely gets told and yet it is important for others to understand what took place. It is a part of the history of this area and it is these feelings and memories that forge an undeniable link with the landscape...even when that landscape undergoes change and that change is hard to accept.