

## Historic Period



Photo above: Remnants of historic sites occur across the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

On 28 July 1805 Meriwether Lewis ushered in the historic period in southwestern Montana when he noted in his journal that he was naming streams he had recently encountered (at what became known as the “Three Forks”) after President Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Albert Gallatin.

Tribal distributions in what is now southwestern Montana were significantly different 160 years prior to the arrival of Lewis and Clark. Before about AD 1640, the Salish speaking Flathead Indians claimed most of southwestern Montana from the Continental Divide to the Three Forks of the Missouri and south almost to Yellowstone Park, as their territory. They hunted far to the east along the Yellowstone River, perhaps as far as Powder River. By about AD 1730 several hundred years of Shoshone incursions into southwestern Montana culminated in a rapid northward expansion of the Shoshone (due principally to their acquisition of the horse) almost to the Canadian border. This Shoshone expansion forced the Flathead west across the Continental Divide and left southwestern Montana under Northern Shoshone control. In a very few years however, the Shoshone themselves were pushed back into the Lemhi River country west of the Continental Divide by nomadic Plains tribes who had recently acquired the horse and firearms from Canadian traders. Chief among these were the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre, and to a lesser extent Assiniboine, Cree and the Crow.

Ethnographic and historic data indicates that the aggressive raiding of the Blackfeet, and other Plains tribes, made southwestern Montana a very

risky place to live during a period from about 1790 to at least the early 1860's. During this time some anthropologists have called southwestern Montana "contested territory". Hunting parties of Shoshone, Flathead and Nez Perce traveled through the area on their way to hunt buffalo in eastern Montana. The Flathead continued to use at least the Big Hole and Deerlodge Valleys, and the Shoshone continued to hunt and gather throughout most of southwestern Montana. But neither tribal group felt completely safe from the Blackfeet until the mid to late 1860's when white settlements at Bannack, Alder Gulch and a host of other Euro-American communities served to reduce native conflicts and eventually stabilize the area.

### **Early Exploration**

Early exploration of southwestern Montana by Euro-Americans began with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. This was the only pure effort at scientific exploration and geographic discovery to touch Forest lands unless one includes the efforts of land surveyors and military explorers between the 1870's and the early 1900's. Several important outcomes for the United States are attributed to the efforts of the Corps of Discovery. Among the first was the opening of Montana to fur trade interests who were seeking to expand operations beyond the Great Lakes region and eastern Canada. The Lewis and Clark Expedition has been very well documented and a plethora of new books and articles have been stimulated by the Expedition's Bicentennial celebration. The reader is referred to this vast volume of literature for more details on the Corps of Discovery and its importance in American history.

One Lewis and Clark campsite has been identified on the Forest.

### **Fur Trade**

The fur trade era in southwestern Montana began a few short years after Lewis and Clark. The efforts of fur trade companies often included important elements of exploration and description, but their primary thrust was the exploitation of the region's fur bearing animals, especially beaver.

Between 1810 and the late 1840's every major fur trading company in the west passed through lands that are now on or adjacent to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. Though their journals primarily refer to camps along the major rivers and streams (e.g. Jefferson, Ruby, Beaverhead, Big Hole, Blacktail Deer Creek, Horse Prairie Creek, Silver Bow Creek) they doubtless trapped and hunted on what are now Forest lands also. Many trapper's journals and fur company records mention specific places on or near the Forest including Reynolds Pass, Monida Pass, Bannock Pass, Lemhi Pass, Gibbon's Pass, Blacktail Deer Creek, Horse Prairie Creek,

Trail Creek, Big Sheep Creek basin, Medicine Lodge Pass and the “deer’s house” in the Deer Lodge Valley.

No archaeological sites attributable to the fur trade era have been found. Considering the length of time fur trade activity lasted and the number of free traders and company representatives that hunted western Montana it is probably only a matter of time before some of these sites are identified. By the height of the fur trade (ca. AD 1810 to AD 1835) Indians often traveled with fur traders on their hunting expeditions and fur traders frequently resided with Indian bands. Based on fur trade journals it appears the fur traders and many Indians shared a material cultural that was an amalgam of Euro-American frontier culture and American Indian tribal culture. Archaeologically, it will prove difficult to separate those sites that represented Indian bands owning a variety of trade goods from a predominantly Euro-American fur trade brigade traveling with Indian people.

## **Mining**

The first paying quantities of gold in Montana were discovered in 1860 on Gold Creek, a tributary of the Clark Fork River in what is now Deer Lodge County. The small settlement of Pioneer (also called American Fork) grew quickly. In addition to becoming a small population center for miners working the surrounding mountains Pioneer became a regular way point for travelers journeying the Clark Fork River corridor between western Montana and the Deerlodge and Beaverhead Valleys. Eventually the free gold in Gold Creek was depleted and most of Pioneer’s population moved east into the Deer Lodge Valley where the town of Cottonwood City (now Deer Lodge) was growing into a center supporting ranching in the valley and mining in the surrounding mountains.

Gold was also discovered in 1862 on upper Ruby Creek, a tributary of the Big Hole River. The diggings, called "Pioneer," (not to be confused with the “Pioneer” or “American Fork” settlement on Gold Creek) were eclipsed the following year by the discovery of rich placer deposits on Grasshopper Creek by John White and a small party of prospectors from the Lemhi Valley in Idaho. As the rich diggings on Grasshopper Creek were declining other wealthy placer deposits were found in Alder Gulch in the Ruby Valley. Virginia City, on Alder Creek, and Bannack, on Grasshopper Creek, Deer Lodge City and Silver Bow became centers from which miners spread out over the countryside to prospect virtually all drainages in southwestern Montana.

The free gold in placer deposits was soon exhausted and miners were forced to change their recovery strategies to lode mining. The wide-spread advent of lode mining in southwestern Montana by the mid-1870s gave

rise to a truly industrial mining frontier with its emphasis on hard rock mining, complex ore milling and eventually smelting technology, a level of urbanization not in keeping with the remoteness of the Montana mining frontier and the entry of frontier Montana into the world industrial and marketing system.

The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest has one of the most extensive and best-preserved compliments of historic mining resources in the region. They run the gamut from isolated miner's cabins, to full-blown ghost towns and regional transportation networks of remarkable complexity. Historic mining sites represent the most common site type in our database.

## **Ranching**

Sheep and cattle ranching have played an important role in southwestern Montana's history beginning almost coincidentally with the gold rush. Early ranching operations, like Beaverhead County's Poindexter and Orr Livestock Company, provided meat to the throngs of busy miners at Bannack and Virginia City.

The ranching pattern in southwestern Montana included home ranches and winter ranges in the valleys, and rider's cabins (sometimes with corrals and roundup grounds associated) on the summer ranges in the adjacent mountains. Consequently, the forest has recorded no large home ranch facilities among our historic ranching sites. We have recorded rider's cabins (some with barns or sheds), corrals and historic water development facilities.

## **Homesteading**

Homestead sites seem to be among the least likely site types on the Forest. There was certainly no lack of historic homestead activity in southwestern Montana, but we may lack actual sites for many of the same reasons we lack "home ranch" sites. Homesteads were usually taken up in favored valley locations and successful operations were patented. National Forest lands usually have examples of only the failed homestead efforts on what would be considered marginal and sub-marginal land for growing crops.

It is possible that some of the extensive historic logging activity noted during archaeological survey is the result of domestic use by nearby homesteaders.

## **Logging**

In one sense historic logging activity began with the earliest Euro-American settlement in southwestern Montana. Miners were rapacious

users of timber for mine studs, mine lagging, building material and cord wood for charcoal, domestic heating, cooking and to fire early industrial boilers. Sawmills operated in larger settlements like Bannack, Virginia City, Argenta, Glendale and Butte. Small operations were established very early in isolated locations in drainages all over southwestern Montana. Most of these small operations used portable saw milling equipment. When the local market declined or saw logs became scarce sawmills were moved to new locations.

The Forest shows the effects of historic logging activity in many locations. Extensive areas with the stumps of trees felled by axe and crosscut saw are evidence of aggressive timber harvest. Some of the old wagon roads we see likely acted as haul roads to move the timber to sawmills in larger settlements.

### **Forest Service**

The National Forest System grew out of an earlier conservation effort established by Congress in the Department of the Interior. In the late 1890's a series of "Forest Reserves" were created, primarily in the western United States, in answer to a growing national concern that the country's water, timber and grazing resources were being depleted at an alarming and unacceptable rate. In 1905 the Forest Reserves were renamed National Forests and responsibility for their administration was transferred to the newly formed Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture. The Beaverhead National Forest was established in 1908 and the Deerlodge National Forest in 1910.

No historic resources on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest have been recorded that date to the earliest establishment of the Beaverhead or Deerlodge National Forests, beyond some trails that were built in the early 1920s. Most of the historic Forest Service resources remaining are derived from the 1930s and are discussed below.

### **The Great Depression**

This time of great economic stress in the United States led to specific kinds of effects to some historic sites. The price of gold doubled during the 1920's and that sent significant numbers of unemployed or poorly paid men to National Forest lands to prospect for gold and other precious metals. The result was a reoccupation of many mining claims and the modification of early 20th century historic mining sites by subsistence miners during the 1930s. Many historic mining sites demonstrate the adaptive reuse of previously established placer and lode mining operations.

## CCC

The Civilian Conservation Corps represented one example of monumental social programs instituted in the 1930s as a response to the Great Depression. It was designed to put men made jobless by the Depression back to work on public projects beneficial to the nation. While these public service programs operated under a number of names and a variety of specific goals, the CCC program was designed to put young men to work in National Forests to improve the infrastructure of the Forest Service and help manage resources. CCC crews fought forest fires, built roads, trails, bridges and fire lookouts, worked to eradicate insect pests, built furniture for use in Forest Service facilities and a host of other projects.

On the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Civilian Conservation Corps work is notable for the large number of administrative sites they helped to construct during this period. These administrative sites include multi-building Ranger Stations and isolated Guard Stations used by Forest Officers to patrol remote areas of the Forest. Most were built in some form of the rustic architectural style specifically employed by Forest Service designers of the period to make administrative sites as compatible and sympathetic to their natural surroundings as possible. We have 22 CCC-built administrative buildings eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Additionally, the Birch Creek CCC camp in the east Pioneer Mountains is a National Register listed historic site that represents one of the best remaining examples of a CCC camp remaining in the Forest Service today.