



**By Ann Bond**

**DURANGO** - On June 3, 1905, Teddy Roosevelt signed a Presidential Proclamation creating almost two million acres of National Forest in southwestern Colorado. Known by different names over the past century, including the Montezuma National Forest and Durango National Forest, this federal land is now the San Juan National Forest, measuring more than 120 miles wide and 60 miles from north to south. Earlier that same year, Roosevelt had transferred the Forest Reserves, which were formed in 1891, into the Department of Agriculture and created the U.S. Forest Service. Over the years, 156 National Forests would be proclaimed, giving birth to a new conservation ethic and a professional workforce to manage 193 million acres of federal land.

Until then, there had been little government oversight over how this massive horn of plenty was being used. With the creation of the National Forests, Forest Rangers arrived on the scene to oversee the cutting of timber and grazing of livestock. They were also charged with putting out forest fires and preventing trespass, among a myriad of other duties.



### **EARLY DURANGO**

At the same time, the town of Durango was busy building an economy based on the natural resources supplied by these federal lands. Lumber was needed to construct everything from schools to railroads. Durango's smelters were processing ore shipments from mines in the San Juan Mountains. The Tacoma hydroelectric plant had just started up, furnishing electricity to the Silverton area. Local coal mines were booming. Ranchers were raising cattle, horses, and sheep.

Durango was growing quickly. In 1900, the census reported 3,317 residents. Bicycles, horses, wagons, and a handful of automobiles churned mud or kicked up dust in the unpaved streets. La Plata County schools employed 100 teachers. A man's suit cost less than \$20, and you could buy a house on Third Avenue for \$600. Residents could ride the train to Silverton for a special rate of \$2 round trip to watch baseball games in summer, and a new rail line to Farmington meant the mail didn't have to be delivered by horse-drawn stage. But life was far from easy. Women still gave birth at home, the average wage was 22 cents an hour, and only eight percent of Durango homes had a telephone. The skies were darkened by smoke from the smelter or the burning of coal and wood. Livestock running at large through town was a problem, and the Animas River was so polluted that the city council passed a law against bathing in the river within the city limits.



### **THE EARLY FOREST RANGER**

Meanwhile, in the high country, the new Forest Rangers began setting up shop in remote Ranger Stations. The early National Forest was divided into 20 Ranger Districts, each with a radius of about 15 miles, so a Ranger could cover his District in one day's ride. He had to pass an exam on proficiency in the use of a rifle, pistol, and axe; stock handling; and tying a diamond hitch. Once hired, the Ranger was given a bucket, a rake, an axe, a map, and a badge, and sent out to be the lone steward of several thousand acres for a yearly salary of \$900 to \$1,500. He had to buy his own horse, sidearm, and clothing. And he had to ride a horse or wagon everywhere, to town for supplies and meetings, and into the high country to find sheep camps, check fire boxes, and monitor planting areas, among other things.

An early San Juan Ranger spent most of his time keeping an eye on livestock grazing. He drew up boundaries and made sure ranchers kept their stock within their allotted areas. He kept the peace between sheep and cattle operations. He cleared stock driveways, secured permission for herds to cross private land, and helped ranchers when their sheep suffered foot rot or their cattle were poisoned by larkspur.

On August 6, 1917, Upper Piedra Ranger George B. Kleckner rode out from the Bridge Ranger Station up the Piedra River to check on a sheep camp. In his daybook, he wrote; "That bunch ... has not been using the range in a stockman-like manner. The parks above the forks of the creek have not been grazed, they are grubbed. Even the big bunch grass is eaten down, it looks like they thought that that was the last grass and they wanted to get it all ... That is the worst abused range since I have been in the service that I have found ..."



Kleckner, like all the early Rangers, kept a daily journal. He worked six days a week clearing trails, covering culverts, stocking fish, surveying sites for trails and bridges, serving as a game and fish warden, and monitoring lightning strikes. He wrote of forging his own steel blades, surveying for trail locations, and marking the Forest boundary. He broke his own horses and kept them shod. His duties at the ranger station included telephone repair, reading and writing letters, filing documents, and other chores.



"Aug 24 - Cleaned the office furniture and put polish on it. Cleaned and oiled the typewriter, took the yard gates off and painted them. Put shoes on in front on one of the horses, tightened up the yard fence and braces so the gates swung better."

Ray C. Montgomery, who was Bell District Ranger near Rockwood, north of Durango, from 1915-20, concentrated on the loftier goals of the job in his writings.

"A Forest officer can serve the public in a very useful way by constituting himself a sort of bureau of information. He should be a student, a reader, at all times on the alert for information that he can pass on to the users and general public that will help them," Montgomery opined.



The early Rangers knew how important the National Forest was to nearby communities. Their job entailed a delicate balancing act – imposing the first real rules on how the public land was to be used, while remaining acutely aware of how their management affected others' livelihoods.

"If we have a permittee is waiting to have his sheep counted in, it is our business to do it at the earliest possible moment within reason so that he may go on to good range," Montgomery wrote. "If a sawmill is waiting on a Forest officer to scale a small bunch of logs, it is our duty to do anything within reason to get to it as soon as possible. The time of the small sawmill man or the poor Mexican with a little bunch of sheep is as important and as valuable to him as ours is to us."



Montgomery was also keenly aware of the value the public land held for recreation. "The use of the National Forests as playgrounds for the public is on the increase and is something for which we must prepare," he conjectured. "We can render great service by making it our business to have valuable information about camp sites, scenic attractions, fishing grounds, etc., and giving it out in the right spirit and, at the same time, we can help out our own work by tactful caution concerning care with fire and camp sanitation."

## TODAY'S FOREST RANGER

Just as Montgomery predicted, today's Forest Rangers do indeed spend more and more of their time managing recreational use of the National Forest. The San Juan's natural resources are still essential in supplying raw materials to growing populations, but its vast acres are now perhaps even more important in defining our quality of life in southwestern Colorado. And firefighting remains as essential an effort as ever, especially as communities grow into the surrounding backcountry.

Today, the San Juan's Ranger Districts have been consolidated into three, which means Rangers have to cover a lot more ground – that is, when they can get out of the office. This entails the use of a four-wheel-drive truck, cell phone, and computer instead of a horse, rifle, and manual typewriter. And they're not lone rangers anymore, but managers with several specialists on their staffs.

For example, Matt Janowiak, current Columbine District Ranger for the San Juan National Forest, manages a district larger than the state of Rhode Island at almost 700,000 acres. His permanent staff of about three dozen employees doubles in summertime. Working out of nine work centers and one district office to manage public lands straddling four counties, he and his staff manage campgrounds, ski areas, archaeological sites, hundreds of miles of road and trails, and the largest Wilderness Area in Colorado.

In addition to the more historical pastimes of timber harvest, livestock grazing, firefighting and mining, the Columbine Ranger District also watches over more modern public lands activities, such as, energy development, special-use permitting, commercial outfitter/guide operations and fuels reduction.

*(Ann Bond has been Public Affairs Specialist for the San Juan National Forest since 1987. Her own history with the U.S. Forest Service dates back to the 1920s, when her great uncle, Claude Barker, was Deputy Supervisor of the San Bernadino National Forest, and her grandfather, Jim Barker, worked on a timber crew in Northern California.)*

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