

1 Introduction: A vision fueled by fire



In 1907, Forest Elers Koch was with his wife on their honeymoon when they passed an abandoned homestead east of the creek. Koch recognized it as an excellent place for a tree nursery. Work began the following year. Tragically, historic fires of 1910 nearly destroyed it and 3 million forested acres across the West.

But the “Big Burn” didn’t destroy Koch’s dream. While mature trees were killed, irrigated seedlings survived — and were urgently needed to reforest burned land. By 1915, the nursery was home to 10 million young trees. By the mid-1930s, the nursery was the largest supplier of seedlings in the United States. Elers is remembered as a pioneer in the field of forestry and forest conservation, whose greatest satisfaction came from planting trees, an act he felt could “...offset many sins.”

2 Mullan Road and Yellowstone Bridge: Build it and they will come

This is the original of the Mullan Road, the first engineered road in the Pacific Northwest. It’s named for Lt. John Mullan, who led the military expedition that built it between 1859 and 1863. Mullan Road became the primary route leading prospectors and homesteaders into Montana, Idaho, and Canada. What you are standing on now is the Yellowstone Trail, which followed much of the same route and further connected existing roads and communities from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean from 1912 to 1916. Directly ahead lies the old Yellowstone Bridge over Savenac Creek. This road opened the nursery to automobile traffic and visitors, which influenced its present-day design. In 1932, the State of Montana abandoned the Yellowstone Trail and built Highway 10.

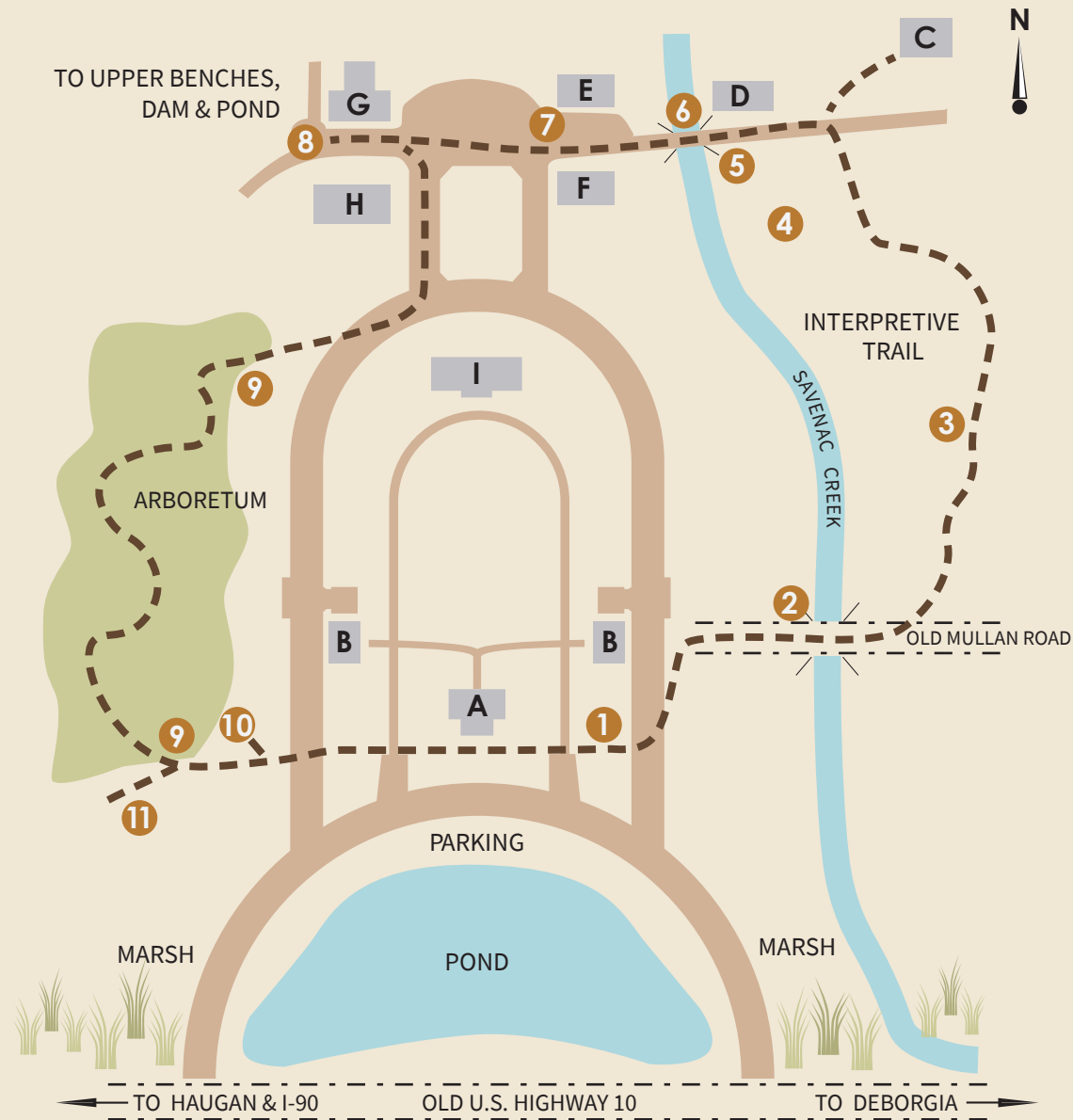


Savenac Historic Interpretive Trail

Our self-guided, interpretive trail follows old pathways with uneven surfaces, including stone, cement, grass, and gravel. Vehicle parking is in front of the Administration Office/Visitor Center. Please see map.

BUILDINGS

- A** Administrative Office
- B** Residence with Garage
- C** Seed Extractor
- D** Seed Storage
- E** Garage
- F** Shop
- G** Packing Plant
- H** Bunkhouse
- I** Cookhouse (former residence)



3 Plantation: 2 + 2 = Tree

In the early days, trees at the nursery were called “2-2 stock.” A tree spent 2 years in a seed bed like those that once stood in this field, and then 2 more years in a transplant bed. Notice the remains of the original irrigation system throughout the field. Although seed beds were irrigated by ditches from Savenac Creek as early as 1909, it wasn’t until 1933 that an underground irrigation system was installed. By 1938, that system also provided domestic water to newer buildings.

4 Elers Koch: Forestry at its finest

In addition to founding the Savenac Nursery, Elers Koch was an assistant regional forester for the Forest Service. Koch’s love for growing trees did not go unnoticed by his colleagues; the term “Koch Specials” was created for trees left uncut in harvest areas to provide a seed source for new trees. On the east side of Savenac Creek, one large western larch “Koch Special” stood until 2023, when it became a hazard to recreational users and was removed. The stump remains in place, in memory of Koch and his legacy.



5 Growing Innovation

Up the hill from here are the remains of the nursery’s original seed storage and extractory. In addition to being a leading supplier of seedlings, Savenac was a pioneer in research and development. Many techniques perfected at the nursery during its formative years are still in use today. For example, Savenac was the first to use burlap-covered bales instead of heavier wooden crates. Less weight and size reduced shipping costs and made it easier for pack mules to carry trees from the railroad to the planting camps. Savenac also developed the use of “shingle tow,” shredded sawdust that was available to the nursery at no cost from local sawmills, instead of sphagnum moss to keep seedlings moist when being shipped. Nurseries still use “shingle tow” for shipping seedlings today.

6 CCC Bridge: New jobs, lasting works

In 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps was established to provide jobs for young men during the Depression. In 1935, approximately 200 men were posted across the St. Regis River from Savenac, at Camp Taft. CCC enrollees cleared land and built a new administration building, cottages, a packing plant, a seed extractory, a garage, a shop, and the bridge on which you are standing. The CCC also improved the grounds, constructing the formal landscaped entrance and lagoon. These improvements created a unique destination for visitors at a time when automobile use was rising rapidly, transforming public access to outdoor recreation opportunities across the American West.

7 Nursery Operation Buildings: Form followed function

Where you are standing now was intentionally designed to keep people away from the work area. The designed plan separated service areas away from the administration area that provided a space to welcome visitors and showcase the nursery’s work. Service buildings at the north end of the site were constructed in the 1930s with a simple Craftsman design.

8 Road to Upper Benches and Dam: Benchmarks

Up the road about a quarter of a mile, you can see remnants of the upper benches where seedlings were first grown at Savenac. If you explore this area, give yourself an extra hour. You'll see the Engelmann and Colorado Blue Spruce Variation Project, which began after the nursery operations ended. Further along this road, you'll see the original irrigation dam, which was used to provide water to the entire nursery. If you go to the dam, approximately 1 mile from this location, you may see the nursery's oldest standing structure— an outhouse, built around 1930.

9 Arboretum: Living legacy

Growing automobile use turned Savenac into a tourist attraction. Improvements were made to accommodate visitors as early as 1916; ornamental trees and shrubs were planted, and an arboretum was built on the east side of Savenac Creek. Large signs along the Yellowstone Trail encouraged motorists to visit the nursery, which became a recreation destination. As word spread, foresters from around the country traveled to Montana to see the nursery and were requesting excess ornamental seedlings for their own facilities. In 1938, the CCC moved the arboretum to the nursery's west side, where it serves as a memorial to the firefighters who died in the 1910 fire. Take note of the species; subalpine fir, grand fir, ponderosa pine, and white pine grow alongside Colorado blue spruce, Englemann spruce, quaking aspen, and western larch. Savenac's arboretum is one of only a few places in this region where such a wide variety of trees grow in one place.

10 Weather Station: Watching the weather

Weather has always played a critical role in managing the Nation's public lands. After walking through the arboretum, look for the weather station at the south entrance. As early as 1912, nursery personnel began working with the U.S. Weather Bureau as cooperative weather observers. By 1919, a full-scale Forest Service weather station was established, complete with a Cotton Region Shelter to monitor temperature, an anemometer to measure the wind, and a rain gauge. In 1962, Savenac was recognized by the U.S. Weather Bureau for 50 years of service monitoring the weather (the award is displayed inside the Administration Office).



11 Fire Memorial: Remembering the Big Burn

From this spot, you can see what remains from a grove of 78 trees planted by the CCC in remembrance of the firefighters who died fighting the 1910 fires. They also wanted to memorialize the firefighters with a memorial rock that was brought down from Silver Creek several miles south of the nursery. The dedication was delayed by the start of WWII. By the end of the war, the heavy rock sunk into the soil where it lay—nearly forgotten—for decades. The memorial rock was rediscovered, raised with only using hand tools and placed on a newly poured concrete base by a team of employees and volunteers in 1996 as part of a Forest Service Passport in Time project.



Directions

The Savenac Historic Tree Nursery is located 90 miles west of Missoula, MT. Take I-90 to Exit 16 (Haugan).

Proceed east on De Borgia Haugen Frontage Rd. and enter the nursery via Savenac Creek Loop.

Visitor information

The Savenac Historic Tree Nursery Visitor Center is open seasonally, Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day.

Cabins and recreation opportunities are available year-round.

For more information, visit www.fs.usda.gov/r01/lolo/recreation/savenac-historic-tree-nursery-area

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SAVENAC HISTORIC TREE NURSERY HAUGAN, MONTANA



1909

Welcome to Savenac Historic Tree Nursery, one of the oldest U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service nurseries in the Western United States.

We invite you to take a 45-minute, self-guided tour to learn how a honeymoon on horseback resulted in one of the largest, most beautiful, and innovative nurseries in the West.

The map inside this brochure will guide you through Savenac's history. Follow the nursery's evolution from its establishment in 1907, its near-total destruction during the "Big Burn" of 1910, and its contributions to the area's recovery and continued reputation for forestry innovation through 1969, when nursery operations were transferred to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Since then, Savenac has continued to serve the public as a Forest Service administrative facility, recreation destination, and historic site.

Today, the facility offers cabin rentals, access to hiking and winter recreation activities, and hosts educational and environmental programs. The nursery—and the driving force behind its creation, Elers Koch—played important roles in the early history of the Forest Service. Savenac Nursery was determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1984 and was nominated for listing in 1998.

The Savenac Nursery was designed to usher visitors toward the public viewing areas and away from the workers' areas.

In front of you is the Administrative Office. Completed in 1939, this building features the simple-but-elegant Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) building style, but with unique additions, such as classical columns, side lights, and three group windows at the gable end of the building. The two houses east and west of the Administration Office have a similar design.

The buildings in the workers' area, at stop 7, have a more simplistic design than the Administration Office. Board and baton siding with simple windows sufficed to house the staff and provide working spaces.

The formal symmetry and elegance of the nursery surprised and delighted travelers through Montana in the 1930s, and continues to charm visitors today.