

100 YEARS OF CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC SERVICE ON THE ROUTT NATIONAL FOREST

“My Personal History on the Routt National Forest” by Mary Peterson, Forest Supervisor

My own history on the Routt National Forest started 30 years ago in June 1975 when I was a seasonal forestry technician hired to do stand exams on the Bears Ears Ranger District, located in Craig, Colorado. I was a forestry student at the University of Minnesota and it was my second season working for the Forest Service; my first season was spent doing timber inventory on the Challis National Forest in Idaho.

The number of permanent district employees on the Bears Ears Ranger District then was small. There was the ranger, a forester, a log scaler, a range con, a trail crew foreman, and a district clerk. I think the log scaler and the trail crew foreman were on less than permanent full time appointments. The Ranger was Sam Scanga. The Forester was Will Dietzel, and the range con was John Sundberg. Dan McIntire was the trail crew foreman. I don't remember the names of the district clerk or the scaler, because back then, seasonals didn't spend "any" time in the district office for any reason. We were either working at the shop or from a guard station all week.

As far as I know it was the first year the Bears Ears Ranger District hired "females" in seasonal field positions. They hired a local second grade school teacher, LuAnn Olson, to be my stand exam "partner". 1975 must have also been the first year for affirmative action policy as the district also hired two African American young men who were going to Tuskegee University to do timber marking and cruising and two young Navajo men from Arizona to do trail work. The district also hired several local young men who also worked on the timber and trail crews.

When I got to the Forest in June 1975, the roads on the forest were not open yet, due to snow pack, so my first pay period was spent at the Craig shop helping John Sundberg in the sign shop, painting signs. Even back then, I think the Bears Ears District provided the signs for the entire Routt NF. John and others must have spent the whole winter working on making and routing wooden signs and my job when I got to the shop every day was to paint them a rich chocolate brown on both sides as they laid on the shop floor, and then when they were fully dry, take an oil can filled with buttermilk-colored paint and pour the paint in the routed letters and numbers to dry. I painted and moved signs for days. One day we poured a cement slab with a drain in it near the shop, which we later used to wash Forest Service vehicles. I helped John and Dan pour the cement and level it out.

When the roads to California Park were finally open, it was June 27th. California Park, we were told, was to be our guard station for the summer. LuAnn and I drove up to California Park with John Sundberg in an old Willy's Jeep we had been assigned for the summer. The road to California Park was not surfaced with rock and had a gumbo surface when wet. After a rain shower it was almost impossible to move and the tires coated with a thick coat of adobe. I remember a few times we had to chain up to make any progress after a summer thunderstorm.

Of course, California Park was beautiful with wildflowers abounding everywhere-- lupine, paintbrush, columbine, mule's ears. When we got to the guard station, we found that starlings had gotten in sometime after it was closed up. They had made a real mess, so our first job was to clean and survey our new home for the summer. There were no curtains so John decided we should have some since there were going to be women living in the guard station, so we measured all the windows in the kitchen, small bedroom, bathroom, and crew bedroom. Then we headed back to town. The next day, the district clerk went with me to the fabric store and we selected fabric for each room to make curtains. We also bought curtain rods. I picked out a farm print for the kitchen, a western print for the small bedroom, and a wildlife print of higher quality material for the bathroom and the back crew bedroom.

At that time I was staying at the home of Will and Sandy Dietzel and their two girls. Sandy was a home economics teacher with a nice sewing machine she let me use, so the next day I made rod pocket curtains for all the windows at the California Park Guard Station using Sandy's sewing machine. They looked cheerful when LuAnn and I put them up. What a surprise it was when I returned to the California Park Guard Station in 2002 and found out that the curtains I had made 27 years earlier were still hanging in the bathroom! All the other curtains had been replaced or were gone.

LuAnn and I enjoyed our summer jobs in California Park that summer. After a day of doing stand exams we would come back to the guard station and one of us would go down in the garage and smash a bucket of coal while the other one of us went in the back yard and split a big armful of aspen. Then we would light fires in the stove in the middle hall, the bathroom and the kitchen wood stove so we would have some heat through the night and also so that we would have some hot water for our showers. The guard station was fed by cold spring water, so without heating the water in the shower, it was an experience to yodel about!

The guard station back then had no electricity or propane lights, so we used a lantern in the kitchen at night and then flashlights for the bedroom and bathroom. (I see now that propane lights were later installed.) We had two propane burners on a shelf in the kitchen wall to cook on, a propane refrigerator, and the wood stove. LuAnn and I made many attempts at baking things in the wood stove that summer. After several disappointing attempts, we finally figured out how to keep an even heat in the wood stove and we successfully made several cakes and breads to eat and share with the trail crew or John Sundberg when he came up. We even baked John a cake for his birthday one week. I have a photo of LuAnn and me holding John's birthday cake on the front porch of the guard station in the evening light. John must have snapped the photo.

When we went to stay the summer at the guard station, the ranger and the forester told all seasonal crews they would be making "surprise" inspections on the California Park and Lost Park guard stations, so we had better keep them clean and ready for inspection. I remember one week, Sam and Will, came up early before we left to do stand exams. They were doing an inspection, but I think they were also checking to see if we actually

left the guard station at 8 a.m. too. The ranger, who had not been there since we started, was impressed at how good the place looked. We had a mobile we had hung in the entry made from elk horn, feathers, and other natural materials we had found during our days in the woods doing stand exams. We had cheery curtains on the windows and the guard station was clean and homey. The ranger noted that "it was quite a difference having women in the guard station, as he could remember the days when he had to 'kick his way through trash in the entry to get to the kitchen, only to sort through the dirty dishes in the sink to find the water dipper and discover that someone had fried an egg in it!" He was referring to prior years when male crews were stationed at California Park. By that remark, we guessed we had passed inspection. He never came up to inspect us again that summer.

We stayed up at California Park most of the summer. On weekends we stayed with the Dietzels in Hayden, CO or at LuAnn's in Steamboat Springs. We drove up to California Park every Sunday afternoon in our government jeep (which I believe was an army surplus vehicle) and came back to Hayden on Friday evenings to turn in our aerial photos and stand exam plot sheets to Will. He would give us our stand exam assignments for the next week every Sunday afternoon. We would fill the gas tank of the jeep and two five gallon jerry cans which we would put in the racks on the back of the jeep and that was our gasoline for the week. There were several weeks we were concerned that we would run out of gas before we got back to Hayden on Friday nights. We laughed that it was a good thing it was all downhill on the way out.

John Sundberg and the trail crew stayed with us at California Park for a night or two occasionally during the summer. Otherwise they camped out on the trail. They used the back bunk room to sleep and LuAnn and I had the small separate bedroom with twin beds. It was great to have company when they did stay there. We played cards and went fishing in the evenings. We always liked it when John Sundberg stayed there because he would make coffee and breakfast for us. He made sheepherder's coffee and he taught us how to make good coffee too. He also carried a little crock of sourdough starter with him and he would get his water and flour out the night before and get the batter going. He would generally make sourdough pancakes for us in the morning. He was proud that his sourdough starter dated back to the 1890's or some such time. Every morning John was there, he would religiously dip a little bit of the dough back into his crock and close it up. His sourdough pancakes were always delicious.

The trail crew loved to fish, so they generally went off after getting in at night and would fish the creeks in California Park and bring home a willow branch full of trout. LuAnn and I went fishing with them many times and when we got back we would throw together a good dinner of fried trout, hominy, skillet cornbread, and vegetables. LuAnn and I didn't know what hominy was before that summer, so the first time we cooked it, we mixed it with canned corn. The fellows gave us some heartfelt cooking tips after ruining their hominy. After that John made a rule, whoever complained about the cooking had to do the cooking next time. LuAnn and I never cooked hominy the wrong way again, but no one ever complained about what we cooked. And, when the trail crew cooked, LuAnn and I didn't complain either.

We got a lot of stand exam work done in the California Park area that summer. There was a lot of road building being done on the district that summer as I recall. We were working in an area where we had to share the roads with the big trucks on our way to our stand exam stands. There were some close calls that summer as those big trucks drove way too fast for the road conditions.

As the summer progressed, LuAnn and I heard word that the timber crew stationed out of Lost Park was getting to go on fires on the district. When we saw the forester, we asked if we were going to get to go on fires too. He said he would ask the ranger. Meanwhile we heard that the marking crew was continuing to go to small fires on the district. On Friday nights when we drove back to Hayden to turn in our stand exams, we would ask again. He said we had to be step tested first, and he thought he would come up to do that soon. We never did get step tested that summer or go on any fires. I am pretty sure the ranger didn't want women on the fire line, though it might have been a forest policy too. It was lucky we didn't come across any fires ourselves that summer as we worked alone most of the summer and had no fire fighting training.

I have great memories of California Park--the bleating bands of sheep as they moved in the Park, the wildflowers, the hummingbirds, the aspen, the sunsets, the peace and quiet. It was a great summer where we worked hard and appreciated each summer night and the great dark night sky we could view from the Park. It was a summer of simple perfection.

Later in the summer we were asked to go work with the marking crew out of Lost Park. We marked three stage shelterwood harvests in Englemann Spruce stands. LuAnn and I were told we could not stay overnight in the Lost Park guard station because there was only one bunk room over there and we could not share it with the men. So, we had to drive back and forth to California Park each night. Late in the week though, we realized between the gas we had remaining and the gas the marking crew had we would not have enough gas to finish the week and get back to town, so LuAnn and I stayed at the Lost Park Guard station one Thursday night and slept on the kitchen floor in our sleeping bags. The next week, the forester brought up some extra jerry cans of gasoline to put in our garage, so that would not happen again. We probably would not have done it again anyway, regardless of the gasoline, because there were mice in the Lost Park Guard Station and we were awake all night fearing that the mice would run across the top of us while we were sleeping or try to nest in our hair.

One of the other jobs I remember we did while we worked over in Lost Park was to help pour concrete foundations for the old historic building behind the Lost Park Guard Station. Dan McIntire helped with this project also. We had to mix cement and then drag/carry buckets full of cement as we crawled on our bellies under the jacked-up building to pour them in the forms. We made many trips under that building until all four corners of the foundation were completed. While I was under the building one day, dragging buckets of cement, I decided to leave a little bit of my history under that historic ranger station. I buried a glass jar in the dirt there with a note in it about who I was, where I was going to school, what I was studying, and what I was doing that summer.

Little did I imagine then that 26 years later I would come back to the Routt National Forest to be its Forest Supervisor!