



NORTHERN ROCKY MOUNTAIN RETIREE ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

FALL 2023

VICE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Forest Service Retirees:

Our President Tim Love asked me to fill in for him this month in preparing a letter to our members and future members while he takes a short break from his very busy summer. Now that we have a little snow on the peaks, we can assume summer is over.

While trying to figure out what I wanted to share I thought I would mention some recent activities I have been involved with. The reason I missed the last meeting was because I was involved with a program at the Historic Lochsa Ranger Station teaching 4th – 6th graders from Nez Perce, Grangeville, and Clearwater Valley Elementary schools over 2 days. I was assisted by 2 other retirees Willis Curdy and Mike Oliver. We tried to impart some information about Smokejumping and firefighting as it related to the Wilderness. We talked about the first actual fire jump by Earl Cooley and Rufus Robinson in the Moose Creek district in Marten Creek in 1940. Willis and Mike really carried the load by handling the second day without my help. For all you retirees out there who have information to share these educational opportunities are really fun and rewarding.

This past week I was able to attend a gathering at Elk Summit Ranger Station hosted by Bill Moore, son of Bud Moore, who also taught a session at the

Lochsa gathering about lookouts and how they work. At Elk Summit I was able to spend some time talking with Bob Mckee, a retiree from the Bitterroot, and meet Bob's son who is a current employee of the FS. We met several current employees who gave us a briefing about current activities. For those of you who are unaware Bob Mckee is the nephew of Bill Bell who was an early ranger in the FS and there is a fair amount of information that has been written about Bill Bell. I was able to share a little information about Bud Moore and how important he was to me and my career.

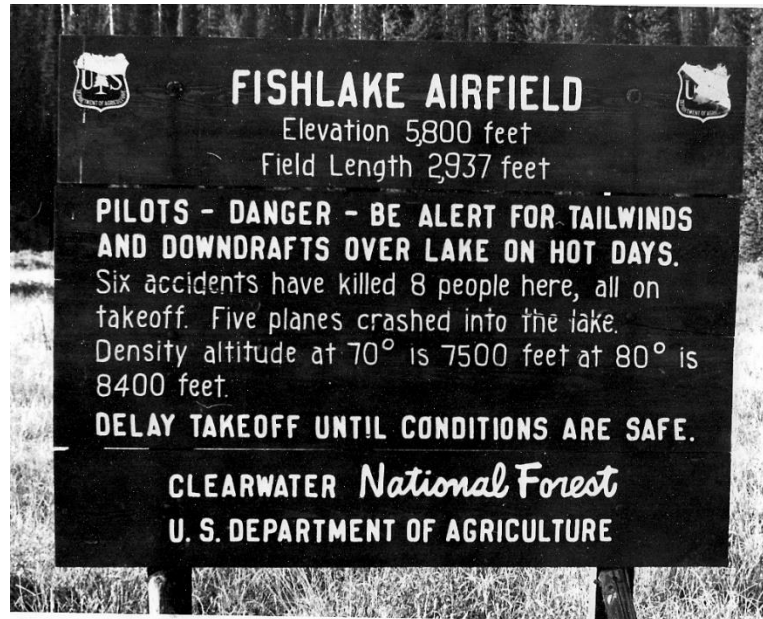
I did want to mention that the National Retiree reunion will be held in Missoula in 2025 and our group is looking into developing a web site to help us share information and perhaps recruit new members to our group. We would appreciate your feedback on this idea.

We are always looking for more ways to encourage more participation in our once a month in person meetings. We typically meet the first Tuesday of the month unless it falls on a holiday. When the weather is nice, we meet outdoors usually at Fort Missoula and during winter month we have been meeting at the Museum of Mountain Flying and that is really nice for us.

If you have thoughts, please feel free to share them with me or Tim Love, Vicky Maclean, Tom Blunn. My email is hickswil@gmail.com and my number.

is 406-531-6912. If you call and I don't answer leave a message because I get a lot of spam calls.

Barry Hicks



Fishlake Airfield sign, USFS.

AN INCIDENT AT FISH LAKE AIRSTRIP

by Frank Fowler

Al Hammond and I left Missoula International Airport with our Forest Service pilot, Ardie Holt, early in the morning. The Cessna 182 effortlessly lifted off the runway, quickly gained elevation, and I welcomed the elation that always comes with a birds-eye view of Missoula, Montana. While the city is situated on a flat valley floor, steep mountains abruptly rise from its edges. It was discovered in recent times that 12,000 years ago western Montana was under 2,000 feet of water due to a dam created by Glacial Lake Missoula. Rising water ate through the ice dam freeing a volume of water equal to that of Lakes Erie and Ontario combined and ripped its way

across miles of terrain in a cataclysmic race to the Pacific Ocean. Knowledge of the event helps explain why Missoula is so flat, i.e., it was once a lakebed.

As we climbed, Ardie banked to the southwest heading in the direction of the newly proclaimed Selway/Bitterroot Wilderness, a portion of which was in my district. It was August 1965 and my thoughts raced back to a time a dozen years earlier when Al and I flew a similar route as smokejumpers, only we were then flying in a Ford Trimotor, and he was the spotter, and I was going to jump on a fire in Marion Meadows.

I left the smokejumper organization in 1954 and Al in 1960; however, we both continued working for the Forest Service: Al as Air Operations Officer in the Regional Office, and me working in management of the national forests. I was now the ranger on the Powell Ranger District of the Clearwater National Forest. We were headed for the airstrip at Fish Lake located on the edge of my district and well within the Selway/Bitterroot Wilderness. It was a scant 63 air miles from Missoula but twice that distance via ground travel; however, the distance seemed much farther because a significant portion had to be traveled by trail.

In short order we were flying over mountains and headed on a beeline for Fish Lake. I settled back and thought of the events leading to the scheduling of this trip. I had ridden horseback to Fish Lake several times but had never flown there. On each visit I always spent at least one night in the cabin located forty yards beyond the end of the airstrip. The setting was impressive, but I was always keenly aware that negative feelings crept into my psyche. Six small aircraft had crashed at several locations in the vicinity of the airstrip. Most of them splashed into the lake, but some had been extracted to the shore by insurance companies. They languished hauntingly in the brush, each one a metaphor for a grave marker, but more: they were testaments to pilot error. Instead of taking off to the northeast across Fish Lake, one pilot decided to depart by flying to the southwest into the box canyon and up through Fish Lake saddle, a climb of 800 feet. He couldn't climb fast enough and with insufficient space to turn, his demise ensued. Other victims had attempted a lift-off in the proper direction, but unfortunately at a time of day when high

temperatures resulted in air too thin to support a successful departure.

A large sign, resplendent with a thermometer and a chart showing the density altitude for various temperatures, was erected at the end of the airfield. What this conveyed to a pilot was that if you attempt to take off at such-and-such a temperature, it would be like you were taking off at an elevation of such-and-such. Of course, the higher the temperature, the higher the density altitude. Since the capability of a safe takeoff varied with different aircraft, no specific density altitude could be suggested as safe, but the sign clearly warned of the dangers associated with attempting a takeoff in warm temperatures. Even though the sign could not be overlooked, the pilot of a Cessna 185 evidently ignored it and crashed shortly after installation. The hazardous conditions at this high-altitude airfield were deceptive and too often pilots were seduced into believing that they could negotiate a take-off even when conditions were risky. The airstrip is 2,650 feet long and the lake about the same length, but when the weather is warm down-drafts over the lake are often prevalent causing aircraft to “mush-in” when flying low over the water. Even though the sign warned of this impending danger, and crashed planes attested to the veracity of the message, some pilots continued to push the envelope. It was my conviction that the field should be closed, and I felt a responsibility to take the lead in working toward that end.

I had written several documents on the subject and sent them up the ladder with my recommendation for closure. When private pilots concerned with public use of back country airstrips became aware of this effort, they immediately voiced their concern. An on-sight meeting was requested. Keith Thompson, my

supervisor, had arranged to fly from his headquarters in Orofino, Idaho, and Al and I would come from Missoula – Al representing the Regional Office. I had no idea how many recreational pilots planned to attend but suspected their strategy would likely include a show of force to demonstrate strong support for continued use of the strip.

From my seat it was difficult to see forward in the plane, but I had no difficulty finding Lolo Pass through the side window. We were leaving Montana and entering Idaho. The Powell Ranger Station would soon be below us, but difficult to see because of the steep terrain, heavy timber cover, and plane position. At this point we flew across the Lochsa River approaching the Warm Springs Creek Drainage, easily noted because of its breadth. When Bear Mountain Lookout appeared out the right window, I knew exactly where we were in relation to our destination. Even though I couldn't see forward, I could visualize our flight being lined up on Fish Lake Creek leading to the lake and the airstrip – all three were in a straight line from our position, ten miles ahead.

The airstrip was at 5,800 feet of elevation, higher than most airstrips located in back country areas of the national forests. Moose Creek, located 15 miles away, for instance, was at about 2300 feet, a significant difference in hot weather.

But our landing at Fish Lake Airstrip was soft since the early morning air was heavy and the flying weather perfect. Most of those who planned to attend had already landed and the upper portion of the runway was attended by a dozen or so planes on either side, all bigger and more powerful than our Cessna 182.

We gathered at the west end of the airstrip where the cautionary sign was located. Since I had caused the need for the meeting, I was prepared to give our discussion some structure. Keith had displayed no inclination one way or the other for the disposition of the field. I had hoped he would lean more positively towards my view but was grateful that he hadn't simply scuttled my efforts when I first made my case. I gave a brief history of the Fish Lake Complex, that is, the various early buildings and the construction of the airstrip.

There had never been a large presence of manpower station there. For several years after construction, a fire guard was in residence for the summer until sometime in the 1950s. Since then, the cabin was occasionally used by trail crews, packers with their mule strings, and smokejumpers on special assignment to maintain the airstrip, but the Forest Service made no routine use of the field. On the other hand, recreational use by private pilots was becoming increasingly popular. And because of the inherent dangers brought by a combination of high elevation, temperature and subsiding air over the lake, fatal crashes continued to occur.

Al had a good handle on the number and nature of the crashes that had taken place. All this was discussed in detail by the pilot's association. "There's no reason for anyone to crash if certain basic rules are followed," asserted one of the pilots. I countered with, "Well, we have already posted some rules, but obviously they are not being accepted as realistic." Then I added, "The day is quickly warming up and we don't have much time before we must leave."

"No danger yet," someone said. But we had drifted away from the sign where the

thermometer was located, so this was more a matter of opinion than fact.

There followed a lengthy discussion about the importance of the strip for recreational use, and how the pilots would be willing to do something more with publicizing the hazardous conditions. They also talked about the fact that they would be willing to consider helping with maintenance on the field if it would help to keep it open.

I felt the discussion had digressed from the primary purpose of the meeting, so I asked, "What is it that you fellows feel should additionally be said to a recreational pilot that would affect his decision to attempt a lift-off from the strip?"

"Well, a very basic rule should be that you will abort an attempted lift-off if you pass the mid-point of the runway, and your wheels are not off the ground. The Forest Service has marked the mid-point with a large concrete 'zero' painted in orange, so there is no difficulty knowing when that point is reached," one of the more vocal pilots asserted. All agreed that this was a reasonable precautionary rule-of-thumb.

I believe it was Al who then said, "The hour is getting late, and we need to be leaving."

Without any discussion everyone headed for their respective planes. I don't recall that any ran, but I had the distinct feeling that the entire gathering felt an urgency to "saddle up." In short order all engines roared to life and pilots queued up at the end of the strip. It was amazing how quickly they each powered down the runway and shot out high across the lake. We were last. Ardie gave full throttle and rapidly accelerated down the strip, but it was not sufficient to be airborne at the midway marker. When at last he pulled back on

the yoke, the stall speed indicator began to beep. The lake loomed menacingly close. Quickly, Ardie relaxed the yoke, cut the power, and applied the brakes. I didn't think we would avoid scooting into the drink...but we did.

After turning the Cessna around, Ardie said, "We're packing too much weight; somebody has to get out."

"I will!" volunteered Al, somehow leaving me with the feeling that I just pulled the short straw. We taxied back down the strip toward the cabin. I looked up in the sky and saw that all the other planes were circling in a wide pattern. I couldn't help but think that they lingered because they were wondering whether or not we'd make it. Ardie taxied twenty or thirty yards in the "rough," past the end of the runway, closer to the cabin – then turned. Al got out and I got in the co-pilot seat. Ardie braked while revving the engine to full power. It was a dramatic moment accentuated by the high whine of the engine. Then he released the brake and shot through the rough so that by the time he reached the runway he was already traveling with considerable speed. Still, when he reached mid-field, he was not airborne, but he was determined to make it. He waited to pull back on the yoke to be certain he was traveling at top speed, but when he did the stall speed indicator blared in an alarming tone, "Beep, Beep, Beep..."

Ardie eased back on the yoke, but unhesitatingly continued. The derisive sound of the small wheels on the tricycle gear joined with the roar of the engine to scream in chaotic discord. Again, he pulled back on the yoke, and we were airborne. As we struggled above the lake, Ardie tried to gain elevation, but the plane complained with its

diabolical shrill of beeps. We started to mush, and Ardie blurted, “Oh my god!”

My response was, “If you’re scared, what the hell am I ’sposed to be?”

Gradually, however, we picked up enough elevation to clear the trees surrounding the lake. Once over solid ground we quickly gained elevation and gratefully completed an uneventful rest-of-the-trip back to Missoula. Later in the day Ardie returned with a different Cessna 182 to pick up Al-- one with bigger wheels.

I couldn’t help but speculate that if we had not made it, the field may have been closed, but I was naturally relieved that it didn’t turn out that way. I was convinced that the crashes would continue. In righteous indignation I wrote a memo to Keith stating that I was going to erect a one-foot-high wall across the airstrip at midfield. “A pilot either clears the wall or he won’t leave the field,” I wrote with a bit of rancor. Of course, I wasn’t serious, but it did allow me to vent my frustrations.

While Al and I both supported closing the airstrip, there was no other interest to do so. Keith felt no compulsion to champion the cause. I believe he felt that an attempt to close it would be a losing battle. The issue was dropped.

I made several more trips to Fish Lake, but only one by air – and it was by helicopter.

Sometime after I left the Powell Ranger District, the wrecked planes were removed. To my knowledge there has never been another effort to close the airstrip, nor have there been any additional crashes.

In a review of some of the information on the internet I found the following notation: “Fish Lake is one of the most beautiful and remote strips in Idaho. It has also been responsible for the loss of many unwary pilots. PLEASE pay heed to the local advice concerning this strip.”

I also noted that there were two warnings concerning take-offs. The first said that down drafts over the lake were prevalent. The second recommended early morning and late evening operations during summer months. There was no mention of the advisability to abort takeoff if lift-off had not occurred by the time midfield was passed.

It also came to my attention that the sign at the end of the airstrip had changed as shown on the photo in this story. Perhaps our meeting in 1965 had nothing to do with these postings on the internet or on the sign, but on the other hand...

**If you google “You tube fish lake airstrips” there are several good videos of landing at the Fish Lake airstrip.*

Frank Fowler started his career in fire. He was a smoke jumper and a graduate of the University of Montana Forestry School. He worked on the Colville, Clearwater, Flathead, St Joe, and Beaverhead Forests. He lives in Dillon Montana

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PICK YOUR OWN TREE

by Roger Cox (Missoula '69)

Timber Jumps are not uncommon in the tool kit of smoke jumping techniques. My experience landing in a tree was usually uneventful if you can say that parachuting intentionally into treetops is ever uneventful. Most of my treetop landings were not planned, just bad steering or as Bernie Hilde (Missoula 69) would say, “a product of the devil winds”. The worst part of tree landings was usually damage to your main chute and the effort required to retrieve your chute. The value of timber jumps was if there was no opening nearby it still gave you the option of manning the fire. Our jumpsuits were designed for such events as landing in a tree. Every jumper carried 100 to 150 feet of tubular nylon in the event it was needed to descend the last few yards to the ground. And every jump suit was built with D-rings to accommodate the “let down” as it was coined. Climbing spurs were standard equipment in every jump aircraft to aid in chute retrieval. Rookie training included at least one timber jump. We were prepared and trained. That did not mean there was no room for error. It is in the smokejumpers DNA to occasionally have a brainstorm and snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory. This story is an example of that.

August of 1973: I was the last man in a ten-man load over the Nez Perce forest. The fire season was in full swing, and we were having a good summer with lots of jumps. The fire we were circling had some potential. It was in old growth in rugged terrain and would require the entire load of jumpers for control. Our selected jump spot was an area of old growth fir just below the fire. There were no openings nearby, so the timber appeared to be our best bet. Fir trees were among the more desirable species to land in; needles were soft

compared to spruce, limbs were flexible, and the branches were oriented for easy climbing. And although old growth, this stand was not all that tall. Our 100-foot letdown ropes would reach the ground even if we hung in the very top.

By the time I got in the door there were multi canopies scattered in a tight group in the trees. Wind drift was not a problem, and it appeared that we could concentrate our landings in a small area. So, the decision was made for me to where I was going to land. I saw no problems. The jump was going to have a routine landing in timber. After opening I begin to steer my way into the area. I did remember from past experience that the chute retrieval would require some effort from timber this size. Probably involved climbing 50 feet or so with spurs to the first limb and then working my way to just below the chute where I would cut the top, chute included, out of the tree. But what if I landed in the same tree where another chute was already hung. We could retrieve two chutes at the same time. Now what could go wrong with that?

I steered into the area with no difficulty and picked a tree that seemed to fit the bill for an easy hang-up. I did not make any last-minute corrections for this was an untired theory and the specifics were yet to be determined. I went directly into another canopy just below the top of the fir. As usual everything was limbs and needles as I descended through the treetop. In a moment I was successfully hung up where the limbs were bare of needles and seemed to be quite secure except for a screaming sound. It wasn't me. I was quite comfortable suspended some 60 feet or so above

the ground. But it was quite obvious someone was unhappy about something.

I recognized Frank Solf's voice a few seconds later expressing discontent about his situation. I could not locate him, so I yelled a "are you alright" comment. Frank was obviously upset and stated he thought his chute was breaking free. That can result in a nasty ride to the ground. Frank seemed to be fairly close, but I still could not locate him. As I looked around, I discovered I had good visibility for some distance from where I was hung. Still, I couldn't find Frank. Frank spoke again saying that he couldn't find me, but I sounded very close. I started the process of doing a letdown, clearing lines, and getting out my rope. Frank continued to be concerned about his chute tearing out of the tree. I figured the best I could do was get on the ground where I could give him assistance if necessary.

While I was threading my letdown rope through my D-rings a couple of other jumpers came down the slope and walked under the tree I was hanging in. They immediately started laughing. I didn't understand what was so funny and Frank definitely was not in the mood for humor. Frank shouted he wasn't hung well and that he didn't know where I was. The jumpers, still laughing said "Frank, look up." At that statement I spread my feet and looked down at Frank's face about two feet below looking up at me. This discovery was even funnier to those not hung in the tree. I felt stupid and Frank, well Frank is easy has a sense of humor and needed both at this point in time.

We did our letdowns, Frank first. Not much was said, we had work to do. The next afternoon while

finishing the mop up a jumper told me they had retrieved our chute, but they were hopelessly tangled and would untangle them back in the loft. Apparently, I had gone through his chutes slot and weaved my way down his lines. No wonder he thought his chute was slipping. I never got the chance to ask Frank what it felt like having me dive bomb his tree. Maybe that was the scream I heard when burrowing down through the tree's canopy.

The fire season put us right back in action and there was no time to dwell on past action. I never did talk to Frank about the event. He apparently forgave me, and we remained the best of friends. Wherever you are Frank, thanks for your understanding. If a new jumper or any jumper ever asked me about hanging up my advice is to pick your own tree.

Roger trained as a new man in Missoula in the class of 1969. He was a junior at the University of Washington and one year out of the Marine Corps and Vietnam. He jumped seasonally to 1978. At that time Roger finished his PhD at the University of Washington and accepted a job as an assistant professor at Washington State University in Pullman. In 1982 he returned to Smoke jumping for 4 more years, retiring in 1986. Roger finished with 203 jumps including fire, rescue, and training jumps serving 7 years on the Region 3 crew and 2 years in Alaska out of Fairbanks. Roger changed his career to financial management and lives in Kamas Utah.



BOOK REVIEWS—SUGGESTED READING

by Vicky MacLean



- **Above it All** by John Crawford. John Crawford of Lolo Montana spent nearly five decades as a lookout starting in 1974 on the Indian Hill Lookout in central Idaho. His memoir details his summers until he retired in 2008. This book is available through Stoneydale Press in Stevensville Montana. www.stoneydale.com
- **The Forest Ranger on Horseback** by Sterling Justice. Ranger Justice was an early ranger starting his career in Pocatello Idaho in 1908. His book shares stories of the early days and the work of Forest Supervisors and the RO. This is an older (1967), out of print book that I have not been able to find a copy of. It is, however, available in a downloadable web archive format. [The Forest Ranger on Horseback](#)
- **Bound for the Backcountry, a History of Idaho's Remote Airstrips** and **Bound for the Back Country II, A History of Airstrips in the Wallowas, Hells Canyon and the Lower Salmon River** by Richard Holm Jr. These books have extensive, detailed histories about the private and USFS airstrips in the central Idaho area. Both volumes include numerous photographs and maps detailed by area.
- **Fly the Biggest Piece Back** by Steve Smith. This is a history of the Missoula based Johnson Flying Service which for years played an important part of the Forest Service's fire history in this region.
- **Where Roads Will Never Reach, Wilderness and its Visionaries in the Northern Rockies** by Frederick Swanson. This is a very detailed history of the quest and the fights for wilderness in Idaho and Montana. It goes back to the early history of the area and the controversy of development (timber) versus the wilderness experience and the economic impacts of outdoor recreation. It covers the development of the RARE, RARE II, and RARE III efforts. It details a lot of the politics that were involved with our representatives in Washington and within the Forest Service. The local driving forces behind establishment of wildernesses were a formidable group of determined citizens who were behind the effort and especially with regards to establishment of the Scapegoat Wilderness. Many of our retirees probably knew these people.

The book has good reference maps as well as a fairly extensive collection of photos of many of these wilderness areas and the people who fought to establish the wilderness areas, we are fortunate to have in Idaho and Montana.



FRANK CHURCH RIVER OF NO RETURN AIRSTRIPS AND THE WILDERNESS ACT

Information taken from a 2013 article by Nez Perce Archeologist, Cindy (Schacher) Bartholf

In 1964 Senator Frank Church sponsored the Wilderness Act on the floor of the United States Senate. The Passage of the act designated nine million acres of federal land as wilderness.

Church argued for the rights of aircraft and landing strips within the bounds of the River of No Return Wilderness stating that, “because of the vastness of the River of No Return area, without continued access by air, few people could see and enjoy the remote and less accessible parts of the region. Therefore, in the Senate bill we provided that the landing of aircraft shall be permitted to continue.”

With the creation of the River of No Return Wilderness in 1980, Congress grandfathered-in seven public and ten private airstrips in the wilderness (on the Nez Perce, Payette, and Salmon-Challis National Forests.)

Four years later in 1984 Church was diagnosed with cancer. Prior to his death in 1984, to honor his efforts to preserve Idaho land, Church’s name was added to the wilderness title.

Odds and ends: Four groups have jointly sued the Forest Service over allegations that the agency is illegally maintaining and allowing public use within

the wilderness. These are Dewey Moore, Simonds, Vines, and Mile High. For more info check out:

https://missoulia.com/news/local/lawsuit-filed-frank-church-wilderness-airstrips/article_b09dbfa2-1063-11ee-bf60-4f6d1e26e72a.html

An article from the Idaho Aviation Association discusses concerns about the Forest Service closing airstrips as well as increasing violations by back country pilots.

<https://www.aopa.org/-/media/Files/AOPA/Home/Training-and-Safety/Air-Safety/BackcountryResourceCenter/Idaho-Backcountry-Flying-Wilderness-Use-and-Stewardship.pdf>

A May 2022 memo to Region One Supervisors from the Regional Aviation Officer lists seventeen airstrips that are considered “back country airstrips” owned by the Forest Service. These are not necessarily in wilderness or roadless areas but are considered back country because they are not paved.



NORTH-CENTRAL IDAHO BACKCOUNTRY AVIATION HISTORY

By Cindy (Schacher) Bartholf

North-central Idaho's backcountry contains some of the most unique mountain and canyon flying found in the United States. Aircraft enthusiasts have long valued this experience and the challenge of using the area's many landing strips. The construction of Idaho's backcountry airstrips began in the 1920s. The United States Forest Service built on average at least one backcountry airstrip per year prior to World War II.

In 1964 Senator Frank Church sponsored The Wilderness Act on the floor of the United States Senate. The passage of the bill instantly designated nine million acres of federal land as wilderness. The use of aircraft and existing airstrips within wilderness areas was a previously established use protected by the Act. Many of north-central Idaho's remote airfields are located within designated wilderness areas, including the Selway-Bitterroot and Frank Church-River of No Return Wildernesses.

In addition to the Forest Service use of aviation in the fight against wildfire and to supply remote Forest Service facilities, the recreation industry came to rely on aircraft. Airplanes were used to fly hunters, fisherman, rafters, and hikers to remote backcountry locations.

The following are brief histories of a few special backcountry airfields.

Dixie Ranger Station Airfield

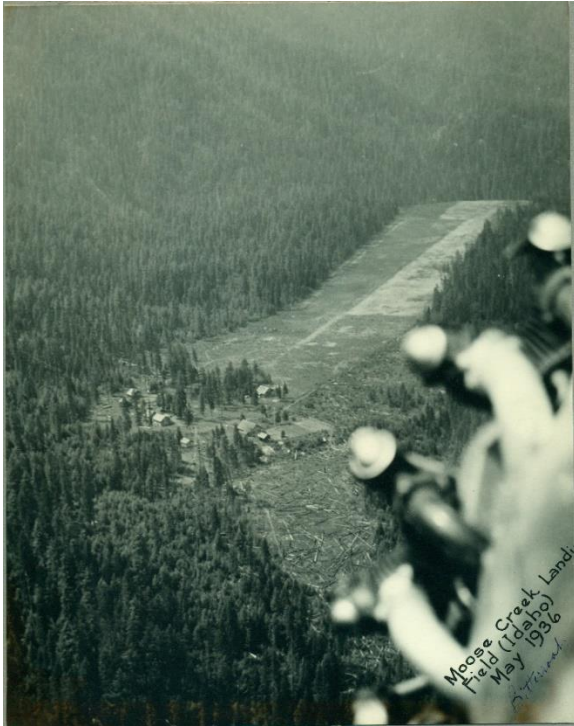
In 1930 construction of the Dixie Ranger Station airfield began, one of the first constructed in the Forest Service's Region One. The 2,400-foot-long airfield would accommodate transport planes used for fire protection services. In 1942 the airstrip was extended to 3,200 feet enabling the Johnson Flying Service's Ford Tri-Motors to land there. The field was further improved in 1955, extending its length to 4,500 feet.



The first Ford Tri-Motors to land at Dixie Ranger Station Airfield in 1942. Bill Wilson photograph.

Moose Creek Ranger Station Airfield

Moose Creek Ranger Station is located in the heart of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness at the confluence of Moose Creek and the Selway River. This unique ranger station is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and has been vital to the back country management of the area since the early 1920's.



1936 view of the Moose Creek Ranger Station and airfield.

The existing airfield was once heavily timbered. The short runway was constructed with "muscle power and mules" in 1930 and 1931 when backcountry flying was in its infancy. Construction of the long runway began in 1957 and was completed in 1958. This airfield, with its two crossing runways, has provided access for thousands of people and tons of cargo to the heart of this remote area.



Unloading cargo from Ford Tri-Motor at Moose Creek in the mid-1930s. John Forsman photo – Dick Walker Collection. (Photo has been colorized).

The first smokejumper base in Forest Service history was established at Moose Creek in 1940. On July 12, a fire call came through, requesting jumpers to make their first jump to a fire located on the Moose Creek Ranger District of the Nez Perce National Forest. Dick Johnson was dispatched to Moose Creek in Travel Air NC8112 to pick up the jumpers. Rufus Robinson of Kooskia, Idaho and Earl Cooley of Hamilton, Montana made the first "live" smokejump in the history of the Forest Service on the Rock Pillar Fire in the Marten Creek drainage. Moose Creek continued to be used as a jump base through the 1943 season when it was moved to Nine Mile outside of Missoula.



First parachute loft built by the 1940 crew at Moose Creek Ranger Station in July. Chutes were stored on shelves at right. Note sewing machine and long packing table. Frank made the original static line design on this table in July 1940, Nez Perce National Forest. Alexander, James A. "Smokey" photo from the National Museum of Forest Service History Collection.



Moose Creek Ranches Airfield

The Moose Creek Ranches, located at the three forks of Moose Creek within what is now the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, was a hunting lodge and dude ranch. Clientele were flown into the ranch's backcountry airstrip or traveled to the ranch by horseback. Guests included hunters, fisherman, trail riders, photographers and those seeking seclusion, relaxation, and it is also rumored-gambling. The ranch was consolidated between 1944 and 1962 into a 745-acre parcel by purchasing adjacent homesteads. The Forest Service purchased the ranch in 1966 and all the buildings were removed, returning the area to a more natural condition. The Moose Creek Ranch airstrip has been closed for many years.

The following paragraphs are from an early 1960s brochure enticing visitors to the Moose Creek Ranch--“The unique Moose Creek Ranch blend of primitive and civilized is made possible by our excellent 3200-foot dirt and sod airstrip. This strip, 2400 feet in elevation, is served by commercial pilots, experienced in mountain flying, from their bases in Missoula, Montana; Spokane, Washington; Orofino, Grangeville and Lewiston, Idaho. Many of our guests arrive in their own planes.

Besides featuring its own airstrip, the ranch has its own hydroelectric plant for its own lights, walk-in cooler, deep freeze, and electric heaters for the cabins. We operate our own sawmill with which we cut all the squared logs used in construction of the lodge and guest cabins. The cabins are modern, with individual showers, to refresh after an active day.

Located on 700 acres of deeded land, surrounded by wilderness on four sides, everything we eat and wear, our furniture, appliances, even much of the horse feed, is flown in. Our choice is forty minutes

by plane or two days by pack train for no road reaches within thirty-two miles of the ranch.”



Moose Creek Ranches plane. April 1957 photo by Moose Creek District Ranger Glenn Boy. Glenn Boy Collection.

Elk City Airfield

After the discovery of gold in 1861, the town of Elk City sprang to life. Its namesake being the elk that lived in the adjacent mountain meadow. The first airfield in Elk City, circa 1930, was located two miles north of town below and parallel to Ericson Ridge. It was used by the Forest Service as an emergency landing field. In 1947 several Elk City community leaders proposed building a town airstrip. They formed the Elk Valley Community Club, a group focused on creating a runway. In the fall of 1948, they purchased some land south of the town of Elk City. After convincing local companies to donate equipment and time to help with construction, the Warrens Dredging Company began clearing for the airfield.

By the fall of 1949, several successful landings were made on the 1400' long runway. In 1971 government money was funneled to the community to improve the airstrip to its current length of 2600'. The American River Lumber Company built an airstrip in the 1950s west of Elk City, paralleling the main road. The airfield was

used in conjunction with their business and occasionally by others.

In early September 1963 Ford Tri-Motor N7861, loaded with seven smoke jumpers took off from Grangeville bound for a fire in the Trilby Lakes area. As the plane approached Elk City there was a huge explosion and violent vibration. The right outboard engine was now tilted forward. Trailing behind the crippled engine were sparks and gas leaking from a broken fuel line. Pilot Frank Borgeson shut the fuel off to the engine. The engine tilted forward slicing a big chunk of rubber from the tire. Then the engine broke away from the mounts, plunging to the earth.

The smokejumpers bailed from the plane, leaving pilot Borgeson and spotter Ted Nyquest on board. After arranging to make an emergency landing at the American River Lumber Company airstrip, the plane went in for a landing. As the right wheel hit the dirt the exposed tire tube blew, sending the plane into a 360-degree ground loop eventually coming to a stop. Fortunately, no one was injured in the emergency landing. It was later determined that several inches of one propeller blade broke off causing the engine to vibrate. Several holes were discovered in the fuselage where pieces of broken propeller had impacted.



Ford Tri-Motor N7861 after losing an engine. The plane made an emergency landing at the American River Lumber Company Airstrip at Elk City. USFS photo.

Fish Lake Ranger Station and Airfield

Fish Lake is located on the divide between the Selway and Lochsa River drainages. Lew Fitting, an early trapper in the Lochsa drainage, built a cabin across the creek from the upper end of the landing strip. Ranger Elmer Walde took over Fitting's cabin and headquartered the Fish Lake Ranger District there in 1921. In 1933 the present Fish Lake cabin was constructed on the west end of the airstrip.



Horse team used during construction of the Fish Creek Airfield in 1933 or 1934.

Construction of the Fish Lake airstrip began in 1933 and was completed the following summer. On August 11, 1934, Roy Shreck of the Spokane Air National Guard was the first to land on the new airstrip with one of his squadron's patrol planes. In 1952 the Forest Service hired Johnson Flying Service to fly a small Farmall tractor to Fish Lake in a DC-3—their hope was to better service the runway with mechanized equipment. In 1953 crews began reworking the runway. The runway was closed in 1954 to finish the work and was re-opened in 1955.

Jim Renshaw, an outfitter, and guide from the Kooskia area, operated a hunting camp at Fish Lake from 1953 through 1972. He was hired by the Forest Service to assist with runway renovations in the early 1950s.



Jim Renshaw driving the Farmall tractor used to improve the runway in the mid-1950s. USFS photo.

Cayuse Creek Ranger Station

Cayuse Creek Ranger Station was located five miles south of the Kelly Creek Ranger Station within the North Fork Clearwater River drainage. The first cabin at Cayuse Ranger Station was built by prospectors sometime in the late 19th to early 20th century. The Forest Service began using the cabin when the site was established as the Cayuse Creek Ranger Station in 1910. Twenty-two years later, the airfield was constructed by Ranger J.P. Gaffney and Louis Hartig. The 2,100 ft. long airfield was constructed with tile under the runway permitting small creeks to drain under it

and into Cayuse Creek. Magnesium flares and large reflectors, four by eight feet were kept in the cabin to make use of the field at night. The Cayuse Airfield is no longer maintained.



Making approach for first landing at Cayuse Airfield on October 7, 1932. Howard Flint photo USFS Collection.

Cindy grew up in a Forest Service family. She lived at Pierce, St Maries, Slate Creek, Moose Creek, and the Trapper Creek Job Corps. Cindy is a graduate of the University of Idaho with studies in history and archaeology. She has been involved in various preservation projects as well and served as the chairman of the Idaho County Historic Preservation Commission. Cindy recently retired as the archaeologist on the Clearwater/Nez Perce Forest.

Wilderness education grants are now up for grabs

The Selway Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation is accepting applications for the Connie Saylor Johnson Wilderness Education Grant.

The wilderness education grants provide teachers and educational organizations with money to incorporate wilderness stewardship into classroom or outdoor curriculum.

The program was established by friends and family of the late Saylor Johnson, of Nezperce, to honor her commitment to hands-on wilderness education for people of all ages.

Grants of as much as \$1,000 per year are available. Anyone seeking more information, grant applications, and a list of previous grantees may visit: selwaybitterroot.org/csjuwef-grant.



2025 USFS RETIREE REUNION

MISSOULA, MONTANA

This will be the 10th in a series of National U. S. Forest Service Retiree Reunions, generally held every three years, and the third hosted by retirees from Region 1.

A History Runs Through It

Celebrate the Dream in the Big Sky

September 22 through September 26, 2025

Retirees will have an opportunity to Celebrate the Dream in the Big Sky, recalling their years of service and enjoying the camaraderie of those who have shared past careers and experiences. These reunions are an ideal way to stay engaged with retired natural resource stewards and those who supported this critical conservation mission.

Planned activities strive to touch upon the ecological and commercial diversity of this area. We are also working closely with a wide variety of partners to make this a truly memorable event.

The reunion helps support the National Museum of Forest Service History (nonprofit), along with memberships and donations, so that together we can Celebrate *our* Dream come true, opening the National Conservation Legacy Center in Missoula, Montana.

All current information about the reunion, including the program, as it is being developed, can be viewed on our website: www.2025usfsreunion.org.

See You in Missoula!



DC3 Spray Plane, undated.

Johnson Flying Service plane above the "M" in Missoula.



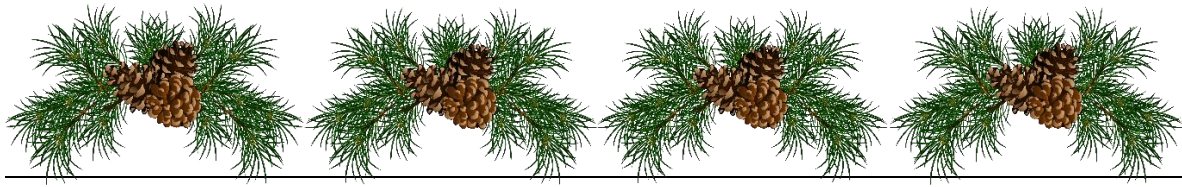
Loading retardant at Helena retardant base, 1969



Sourdough Lookout, Nez Perce National Forest, 1949. Lookout numbers were used for navigation and appeared on aeronautical maps for Idaho and Montana.



The Benchmark Airstrip is at the gateway to the Bob Marshall Wilderness



WE REMEMBER



Tom Arnesmeyer – of Townsend Montana died October 26, 2023. Tom was born December 4, 1943. Tom was a Broadwater County High School Math teacher during the school year and worked summers for the Townsend Ranger District for 43 years. He worked in fire and recreation, both on trail crews and developed recreation. Tom's wife Lynn predeceased him. He is survived by his soulmate Judy, his siblings Beverly, Al, and Bill and by children Steve, Julie, and Barbara as well as seven grandchildren.



Gordon Ash – Gordon Ash, 67, of the Creston area of Kalispell, died July 1 after a short battle with cancer. Born in Oakland, California to Rod and June (Fischer) Ash, both strong advocates of conservation. In 1969 Gordon, his parents June and Rod and siblings David, Ellen, and James became summer residents in a one room cabin on Condon Loop Road. There began his love affair with Montana and the wild lands he would call his lifelong home.

He moved to Missoula in 1973 to attend the University of Montana and began his career in Forestry and Recreation. Gordon graduated from the University of Montana in 1979 and worked briefly with outfitters, before spending 25 years with the Flathead National Forest at the Spotted Bear Ranger Station. There he was the wilderness ranger at Big Prairie in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. He met his wife and partner, Susan Kemper, at Big Prairie.

In 2006, Gordon and Susan moved to Twin Bridges where Gordon worked for both Dillon and Madison Districts on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. Gordon retired in 2019, and in 2020, he and Susan returned to the Flathead Valley with their dogs, horses, and mule.

Gordon never forgot a friend, and they never forgot him. All were greeted with a sincere bear hug, friendly banter, and a welcome to join him in whatever he was doing. Gordon had a rich life, well led through his love of friends, Grizzly football, camping, fishing, travel, his many beloved animals, and the backcountry. He was a lifelong steward of the land and land ethics. He is survived by Susan (wife of 30 years), his siblings, numerous nieces and nephews, and his four-legged family of dogs: Ramblin' and Ziggy, horses: Summer, Merlin, and Jocco, and mule: Thumper.

In lieu of flowers, please make a donation to MT Public Radio, the Bob Marshall Foundation, Swan Valley Connections, or your own favorite charity.

For more of Gordon's stories, check out the following links:

2016 interview with Bob Marshall Foundation: <https://archive.storycorps.org/interviews/stories-from-the-bob-gordon-ash/>

May 2003 interview with:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1a47Pz8XUtaAz0nIQ3pvtJ7oorazJViav/view?usp=sharing>

<http://Gordon%20Ash%20Archival%20Listing>

Dick (Richard Charles) Deden 86 of Missoula passed away June 24, 2023. He was born in Red Wing Minnesota in 1937 to Clarence and Celia Deden Dick married his high school sweetheart, Nancy Bird, in 1959. When Dick graduated from the University of Minnesota, they headed to Montana with two daughters in tow for a temporary seasonal job with the Forest Service in Dillon. He soon picked up a permanent position and had a 33-year career throughout Montana and Idaho on the Beaverhead, Kootenai, Flathead and Kaniksu Forests finishing up at the RO in Missoula as the Assistant Director for Timber.

Dick and Nancy raised five children and as they became involved in sports Dick and Nancy spent time traveling to basketball games all over Montana. After retirement Dick started a furniture restoration business, he would repair and refinish furniture and Nancy would do the painting. Hunting and fishing were also Dick's passions and often a necessity to feed a family of seven.

Dick was an active member of the Atonement Lutheran Church for over 50 years. He was preceded in death by his wife, Nancy, and a grandson. He is survived by his five daughters, thirteen grandchildren and soon to be five great grandchildren. The family would suggest donations to your local elementary school to adopt a child's past due lunch account.



Winona (Nonie) Gleason age 62 passed away April 21, 2023, in Albuquerque New Mexico. She was born March 30, 1961, to Mildred and Albert Perkins in Lander Wyoming. Nonie was a budget analyst and was with the Forest Service for 37 years.

Nonie is survived by her daughter Jolyn Gleason, two grandchildren and her fur baby, Snookie.



Robert (Bob) Hensler age 86 of Libby Montana was born in West Bend, Wisconsin on June 28, 1936. He passed away April 6, 2023. He graduated from West Bend High School and attended the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point and graduated from the University of Michigan with a Forestry degree. While in college he married his high school sweetheart, Patricia Klein. He went on to get his master's degree in wildlife biology from the University of Michigan. Bob started his professional career with the Montana Department of Fish and Game then went on to the Forest Service in many

places in Montana and North Dakota. He retired from the Forest Service in 1992 after a career of 36 years. At this time, his wife was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and passed away after 34 years of marriage. After

retirement he married Paula Darko from Libby Montana where they spent his retirement years in their house along the Kootenai River.

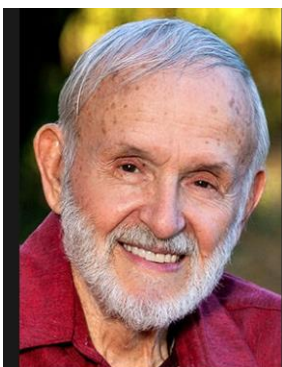
Bob was into fitness and rode his bike 3900 miles to his 50th high school reunion in Wisconsin. He was an avid hunter and spent many hours training his dogs for upland birds. He golfed, participated in Montana Senior Olympics, ran road races, coached youth baseball, and was involved with Habitat for Humanity.

Bob is survived by his wife, Paula and his five children, two grandchildren, two great grandchildren, and two brothers.



Cheryl Hossack— was born January 26, 1945, in Ahsahka, Idaho to Cecil and Ermine Stamper. She passed away May 22, 2023, in Orofino Idaho. She grew up in Ahsahka and Orofino Idaho. After working a variety of part time jobs, she started her 28-year career with the Clearwater National Forest’s Supervisors Office. Cheryl started out as a switchboard operator and worked her way up through every position in the resource accounting section. In 1978 she married Charles White and gained two stepdaughters. After Charles’s passing, she married John Hossack in 2006 and added two sons and another daughter to her family.

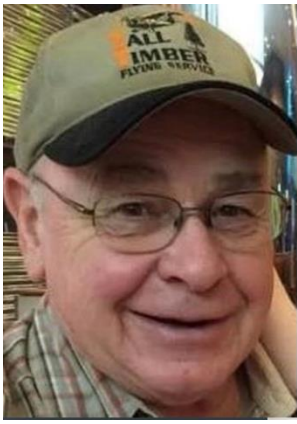
Cheryl and John spent their time in Idaho and Eureka, Montana where they enjoyed traveling and wildlife photography. Cheryl was preceded in death by her parents and both of her husbands.



Harvey C. Kom of Lewiston Idaho passed away on March 22, 2023, at Serenity Place assisted Living. He was born December 21, 1929, the eldest of ten children born to Emelia and Clarence Kom and grew up in North Dakota. Harvey enlisted in the Navy when he graduated from high school and after 4 years, served 2 years with the Army National Guard in North Dakota. Just before enlisting he met Bernice Larson, and they were married after his discharge from the Navy.

Harvey attended forestry school at Bottineau, North Dakota and the newlyweds took a lookout job in Coram, Montana. They loved the west and worked their way west where he took a job with the Northern Pacific RR as a forester and where he eventually enrolled at the U of Montana in their forestry school. Eventually Harvey took a job with the Forest Service at Hungry Horse, Montana then went on to a job at the smokejumper base visitor center. A subsequent move was to Kooskia, Idaho then on to Orofino, taking a reforestation job at the Kelly Creek Ranger Station. The family spent many summers at Kelly Forks in the remote part of the Clearwater Forest.

After retirement in 1986, Harvey helped his wife with her day care business and enjoyed traveling the world. They volunteered at the Historic Lochsa Ranger Station, enjoyed gardening and his orchard. Harvey was active in his church and enjoyed singing in the choir and community choir until he was 87. He was artistic and enjoyed drawing and painting. Harvey is survived by his wife, Bernice, three children, a granddaughter, three brothers and a sister.



Charles Richard (Dick) Komberec passed away on October 28, 2023, in Missoula, Montana. Dick was not a Forest Service retiree, however, by virtue of the fact that he was a Johnson Flying Service pilot he was essentially extended FS family.

Dick was born in Thompson Falls, Montana on March 18, 1947. When he was young, Dick's family moved in search of work countless times, landing them in Drummond, MT. It was there he read the book "Tall Timber Pilots," that forever changed his life. He knew what he was born to do. He had to become a Johnson Flying Service mountain pilot. At 15 years old, he started his first business, earning enough money to pay for flying lessons and to purchase his first airplane at 16.

Dick's first flying job was for Bob Lueck of Missoula Sky Flight in 1965. He was offered a pilot position at Johnson's not long after his 20th birthday. As a Johnson pilot, there wasn't anything Dick couldn't fly. He would go on to pilot countless rare aircraft, fly backcountry missions, spray in TBM Avengers, drop Smokejumpers out of DC-3's and become an Air Tanker Pilot in the TBM and A-26 WWII era Firebombers. When Johnson Flying Service was sold, Dick would go on to the next major chapter of his life, flying for Western Airlines.

In 1994, along with a couple of local friends he founded, invested in, and became a lifetime member of the Board of Directors of the Museum of Mountain Flying in Missoula. He co-authored the book, "Tall Trees, Tough Pilots," with his long-time friend, Kathy Ogren

Dick was preceded in death by his parents and his youngest brother. He is survived by his wife, Barbara Jo (Enman) Komberec, a son, a stepson, two grandchildren, and two brothers.

A Celebration of Life is planned Sunday, March 17, 2024, at the Museum of Mountain Flying in Missoula (5843 Museum Way at the Airport). The family has established a scholarship in Dick's honor. Contributions to the scholarship fund can be made in Dick's memory. Donations should be sent to the Museum of Mountain Flying, P.O. Box 16601, Missoula, MT 59808. Please note on the donation memo line that your donation should be directed to the Charles R. Komberec "High Flight" Scholarship Fund.



David Edward Maser of Helena Montana passed away June 4, 2023, at the age of 72. Dave was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania to Frank and Margery Maser January 18, 1951. As a young man Dave competed in several sports and it was swimming that led him to Syracuse University where he earned a forestry degree. The forestry degree led him to the Peace Corps in Guatemala where he met Marta. Dave and Marta were married in 1975 and remained devoted to each other for 48 years.

Dave went to work for the Forest Service as a forester, retiring from the Helena Forest to pursue his passion with the Disaster and Emergency Services, the career from which he retired. Dave enjoyed the outdoors, shooting sports, hunting and archery and hiking. He had a strong faith and commitment to his church and church family.

Dave is survived by his wife, Marta, sons Frank and Gregory, three brothers, three grandchildren and extended family in New York and Texas.

Henry (Hank) Newhouse of Pemaquid, Maine passed away April 10, 2023. He was born in Klamath Falls Oregon to Harriet and Henry Newhouse on September 8, 1941. Upon graduating from high school, Hank enlisted in the Navy and served for four years. Following his discharge Hank settled in San Francisco where he met and married Lynn Boatman. They had three children and later divorced in Alaska in the early 1980s.

While raising his family he spent time working various jobs and attending college and earned a degree in Fisheries Biology from Humboldt State University and for his master's thesis researched anadromous fisheries of Northern California. He started his career on the Modoc National Forest, then went to the Kootenai and the Nez Perce Forests. He spent the last years in the Forest Service as the Regional Fisheries Biologist in Alaska. He retired to Alaska after 25 years with the Forest Service. While in Alaska Hank became an avid sailor and boar aficionado.

While in Alaska, in 1986, Hank married Elsan Zimmerly with whom he spent time living on sailboats and various places in Alaska, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. They eventually settled in Maine to be close to Elsan's family. Hank is survived by his wife, three children, a sister and a brother, two stepdaughters, eight grandchildren and twelve great grandchildren.



Mark Joseph Pengelly of Frenchtown Montana passed away of Natural causes July 12, 2023. He was born March 18, 1958, in Missoula to William and Mary Pengelly. From a young age he was a lover of nature and spent many hours exploring the hills of Mount Sentinel. Mark spent most of his adult life in the backcountry. He was an avid horseman, hunter, and guide. He was employed by ranchers in British Columbia, Idaho, and Montana. He spent his career as the lead packer at the Nine Mile Remount Depot. After a career of 25 years with the USFS he retired in 2018.

Mark and his former wife raised five daughters together and was known to his friends and neighbors as a generous person, sharing his knowledge and carpentry tricks. Mark is survived by his daughter and three stepdaughters, four sisters and his faithful dog, Tag. He was preceded in death by his parents, his older brother, and a daughter.



Katherine Quillian Solberg of Hamilton Montana passed away October 27, 2022, at the family home. She was born to William and Margaret Quillian in Delaware Ohio on June 7, 1947. She was raised in Lynchburg, Virginia and graduated from Mary Baldwin College with a degree in political science in 1969. Her professional career started at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare then from 1977 to 1999 with the Forest Service and as a consultant/contractor until 2015.

In June of 1983 she married Terry Solberg, and they lived as a dual career Forest Service family. Her job took her to assignments as Personnel Officer with the Lewis and Clark and Flathead

Forests, Classification Specialist in the Washington Office. These positions were followed by others in the Pacific Northwest Region in Portland Oregon, the Deschutes National Forest, and the Regional Office in Missoula until her retirement.

Kathy loved music, RV rallies, family gatherings, hunting, and snowmobiling. She is survived by her husband, Terry, three sons, a daughter, seven grandchildren, eight great grandchildren, a sister, and a brother.



Ray Tesoro of Lolo Montana passed away April 5, 2023, from a tragic accident after a great day of skiing with his friends. He was born in Williston North Dakota on May 24, 1956, to Jamie and Viola Tesoro. Ray graduated from Williston High School and attended the University of Oregon and graduated from Montana State University in 1980 with a degree in Earth Science and started with the Forest Service as a district geologist in Watford City ND. He met his wife-to-be, Sherie while working there. His career then took him to Butte and Missoula. Ray and Sherie bought a little log house in Lolo where he lived at the time of his passing.

Ray retired in 2016 and enjoyed spending his time skiing, golfing, mountain biking, fishing, and hiking. He is survived by his wife Sherie and children Max and Maria.



Steven D. (Steve) Zachry age 66 of Stevensville Montana passed away at home on September 27, 2023. He was born September 4, 1957, in Roswell, New Mexico to Dave and Mary Jo Zachry. Steve grew up in Unity, Oregon where he lived on a farm and enjoyed sports as a youth. His love of the outdoors led him to a Forest Service career, first as seasonal wildland firefighter. He fought fires in many states and several foreign countries. Steve worked on the Umatilla, Lewis and Clark, and Lolo National Forests before retiring from the regional office in Missoula as their safety officer.

Steve was an avid hunter who enjoyed working with his bird dogs and working at the local hunt tests and field trials. Between his Forest Service and dog training friends he knew many like-minded people with whom he shared his enthusiasm for the sport and outdoor activities. Steve was also an avid gardener and cook. He was always willing to work at gun dog events as well as dispense gardening advice and tips. Steve leaves behind his wife Sara, stepdaughter Kacy Marr, a sister and a brother and their families. Memorial donations may be made to the Red Cross or your local food bank.

Obituaries have been edited to save space. Complete ones can be found by googling the names.

Northern Rocky Mountain Retiree Association

P.O. Box 3215
Missoula, Montana 59806

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Plane and pack string at Big Prairie. from the Flathead National Forest Archives.