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THE ENDURING TRADITION OF THE FIREHOLE RANCH

By Will Genge

It is no small feat to become a member of the National Register of Historic Places. Candidates must jump through legal hoops, write an extensive narrative detailing significant historic moments, prove the existence of original structures in their original state, and tell a story of the place that people would want to read. Upon wading through all of the paperwork, it's easy to tell that the story of the Firehole Ranch qualifies for such a title with ease.

After trying his hand at mining near Virginia City for two months, Watkins headed to the Madison River where he would setup his permanent home near present-day Ennis. Though mining was his original plan, Watkins "immediately foresaw that the future of the Madison Valley lay in its agricultural possibilities," and by late 1864 Watkins had acquired 160 acres of rich land at the fork of St. Joseph and Jordan Creeks northeast of Ennis.



All photo courtesy of The Firehole Ranch

Firehole Ranch, West Yellowstone, MT

As with much of Montana's early pioneer history, this story begins with gold. The early 1860s brought the discovery of gold in Bannack and Alder Gulch, and gold begat people. One person who came west was George S. Watkins. He would become one of the original homesteaders in the Madison Valley.

Watkins was born in Kentucky in 1837 and attended college in both Missouri and New York State. Following his education he worked in lumber and trading in Missouri prior to the Civil War. The gold discovery in Alder Gulch in 1863 prompted Watkins to rethink his plans and he headed westward by wagon in 1864.

Ranching and his later work in freighting between Virginia City and Corrine, Utah proved quite successful for Watkins, and by the 1890s he had purchased thousands of acres of land, 1700 head of cattle, and became known as the "cattle king of Madison County."

Upon discovering the land that would later become the Watkins Creek Ranch (the name of which was later changed to Firehole Ranch), Watkins blazed the original wagon trail through what was known as the Upper Madison Canyon that separated the lush grazing area upon which Hebgen Lake now floats and his ranch further down the valley. Today, the road he built has

turned into U.S. Highway 287. He said the land was “a wonderful pastureland with grass as thick as the hair on a dog’s back.”

As he moved more cattle up to this ranch, the need for permanent structures arose. George Watkins’ son, J. Spencer Watkins, recalls that at the original ranch “we had two large cabins, a bar, a lot of corrals, and a smokehouse used for jerking elk and deer meat.” The ranch was also approximately 30 miles from the nearest residence during these early days.

The advent of Yellowstone National Park also helped George Watkins’ fortunes as he was able to sell much of his herd to the park. By the summer of 1887 his pastures in the Madison Basin were home to more than 1000 cattle and 400 calves, and many of these were destined to be slaughtered and sold to Yellowstone to feed soldiers and visitors.

Watkins’ pasture was forever altered by the Madison Power and Light Company’s construction of the Hebgen Lake Dam. In 1904 he turned over his land to the company and sold the rest of his cattle. Following the construction of the dam starting in 1909, the land on which Watkins ran cattle and first settled remained quiet. Much of it now lies underwater, but part

of what remains was turned into a dude ranch by the middle of the twentieth century.

The concept of dude ranching arose from a general feeling of nostalgia during the first part of the twentieth century



The Smith Family sitting in the Lodge

during which time the American West was tamed. Those who were too young to participate in gold rushes and homesteading

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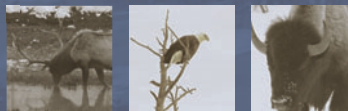


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began to feel that with the west's assimilation into the rest of the United States, something had been lost. Their feelings were perpetuated by stories and movies of the olden days as well as the leisure time and financial means to have a desire for what had turned into romantic stories of the cowboy culture. Promotion by the train companies for Yellowstone and the ease of reaching western frontier destinations also encouraged people to experience the west.

In 1944 Clarence "Clix" and Leila Wright acquired the Watkins Creek Ranch from William F. Martzel and started the dude ranching operation which remains to this day. One of the main advantages the Wrights had with establishing a dude ranch on this land was its proximity to Yellowstone National Park. Side trips into the park became an important part of their business with many guests looking to discover America's first national park for themselves.

According to Julie Smith Mannino, granddaughter of Lelia and Clix, "Clix Wright first came to the Hebgen Lake area in the 1930s," and he later would bring his family up from their home in Utah to enjoy summer vacations.

The Wrights began building on the site with a family cabin and then proceeded to build four identical cabins for guests. In June 1946 Snedaker and MacDonald Architects of Salt Lake City finished drawings for the main ranch lodge.

Over the years of the Wright ownership, they continued to grow the ranch. Though it was not exactly a working ranch as the owners only grazed cattle, the ranch was served by both its remoteness and its proximity to Yellowstone.

Even back in the middle of the last century, Yellowstone was the catalyst for growth far beyond its borders. With the introduction of train travel to West Yellowstone by the Union Pacific in 1908, hordes of people began coming to the park. By



Aftermath of 1959 earthquake, Hebgen Lake

the 1940s and '50s train travel was losing its luster with the success of the automobile, and advertisements for trains began to extend beyond the park.

As late as the 1960s the ranch and its partnership with the railroads existed, and cross promotion was key. Brochures for the Watkins Creek Ranch often noted that guests could book their travels through the Northern Pacific Railroad and would be met by the ranch staff at stations for direct transport to the ranch.

Life on the ranch was promoted as both varied and relaxing. A 1948 brochure, for example, advertised:

"Life on an operating ranch offers many varied and interesting things to do each day, and no two days are like. One can do everything with the pleasant satisfaction of knowing there is nothing one must do, and plain and fancy loafing is rather popular. Those who desire more activity can ride after cattle, enjoy horseback trips into the woods, fish to their heart's content in all types of water ... enjoy boat rides on the lake, swim, shoot skeet, water ski, play badminton, or horseshoes, or just sit on a corral fence and swap stories."



The ranch enjoyed great success through the 1940s and '50s, becoming known as one of the premier dude ranching in the west. By the early '50s the Wrights sold their portion of the ranch to their daughter and son-in-law, Anne and K. Smith.

Then on the night of August 17, 1959 the ranch lived through the greatest earthquake ever recorded in the mountain west, a 7.5 magnitude shock that sent a mountain into Hebgen Lake and rattled the core of the ranch.

According to present day owner Lynda Caine, that night on the ranch some of the guests had just finished a poker game in the main building and were standing outside when the quake rumbled through. It was lucky they had finished because the grand fireplace at the center of the building, beside which they were sitting, came crashing down.

The Smiths were forced to cancel reservations and undergo significant renovations as many of the masonry fixtures were damaged and the road accessing the ranch was partially destroyed. They persevered and continued in operation until the fall of 1967 when they sold to a group of investors called the Watkins Creek Ranch Company.

The company didn't have much success and by the early 1970s the ranch had ceased operations. Donald Albrecht purchased the ranch in 1982 as a sort-of sister ranch to his holding in Jackson, Wyoming, the Crescent H Ranch. He held the property for 10 years, first starting as a guest ranch and then moving towards subdividing and selling lots. Fortunately for the ranch, his plans only got as far as a subdivision approval before bankruptcy forced him to sell to his lawyers, Skip Bridingham, Dale Kinsella, and Marshall Gaylor.

This group changed the name to the Firehole Ranch in hopes of attracting more fly fishing customers. By 1999 they sold the ranch to Lynda Caine who had grown up down the street and used to clean cabins at the ranch.

Appreciating the history of the ranch and the continued appeal of a guest ranch, Caine has worked to restore the original luster of the early days. In the process of shoring up the lodge, Caine discovered that there were seven different roofs resting atop the building because improvements throughout the years simply kept adding new roof structures atop the originals.

She also found that the bottom wooden beams were rotting and required some work. As she described it, the floor would bend and bow with each step you took, and you could literally reach your hand through the foundation. Contractors wanted to simply peel through the floor to gain access for their work, but Caine refused to damage the building's original floor and instructed them to dig from outside underneath the logs to reach below the building.

Improvements have also been made to other buildings such as the guest houses which now contain new bathrooms and some additional space. But most still retain the original duplex design that characterized the early days of the guest ranch. Caine likes these cabins with shared porch areas the best as they bring guests together outside during the evenings.

To this day visitors all dine together in the main lodge, arranged by Caine herself, turning the Firehole Ranch

into an intimate destination in which you get to know those enjoying the ranch with you. And with a maximum of twenty guests at any given time, there is a distinct calm that wafts through the property. Meals are prepared by veteran French chefs Bruno and Kris Georgeton, who create a magnificent new menu each night.

Caine says that she has resisted calls to expand the ranch for two reasons. First, she wouldn't want to change the atmosphere that such an intimate setting generates, and second, she wants to preserve the historic settling of the small but cozy lodge.

She takes great pride in the experience of the ranch. There are no TVs in the guest rooms and cell phone service is sporadic. Views are nearly unobstructed, and the dirt road



Main Lodge at the Firehole Ranch

winds through working farms before reaching the ranch. She recognizes that many vacations turn out to be more stressful than a typical day, so she encourages guests to disconnect and relax beneath the big sky.




Lodge Dining Room

In tandem with this philosophy, Derek Strahn worked with the Firehole Ranch to win membership in the National Register of Historic Places in 2006. His extensive research into the history of the Firehole Ranch and guest ranching in general demonstrates the importance such places have in the hearts of the guests who enjoy them as well as how they shaped the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem during its formative years .

Today, fishing has become the Firehole Ranch's specialty, in part due to its long history. The ranch owns permits that are impossible to get today and has the ability to take guests on guided trips along the Gallatin River, Madison River, and Henry's Fork of the Snake River, as well as through all of the waterways of Yellowstone National Park.

To complement the fishing guests can go for horseback rides, mountain bike rides, hikes, or they can simply enjoy "plain and fancy loafing" as the Wrights suggested.

The Firehole Ranch exemplifies the history and myths of Montana from the pioneers who first carved up the land, to those who came for a glimpse of the tamed land, through today's efforts to preserve as much as possible. 

The Firehole Ranch is located 18 miles northwest of West Yellowstone, Montana. The ranch is open from the first week of June through mid-September. To learn more visit the web site, www.fireholeranch.com or call (406) 646-7294.



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