

THE EARLY DAYS OF THE WENAHA FOREST RESERVE¹

(District No. 6)

By

J. M. Schmitz, Ex-Forest Supervisor²

On August 8, 1905 I arrived in Walla Walla to act as Ranger in charge and soon thereafter as Supervisor of the Wenaha National Forest, having been transferred from my position as Ranger on the Rainier National Forest. I found a few supplies, a typewriter and a letter press awaiting me. As there was no office, I did all the work in my room.

Stockmen began to call to see what it was all about. Most of them had the idea that their stock would be excluded from the Forest. I assured them that such would not be the case. I also learned that the Forest was practically surrounded by small stockmen and that a large part was being heavily overgrazed. The main reason for the overgrazing of the interior was that each spring long before the range was fit to graze there would be a race to get the sheep over the divide and located on the best camps. I then realized the hard work it would take to get things organized and on a good working basis.

On my first trip around the heads of the Walla Walla and Wenaha Rivers and Mill Creek I found that the map of the interior was all wrong. I had a good small compass, and taking my bearings from Walla Walla, I found that Table Rock was about two miles north of the State line instead of on it as shown on the map. Then from Table Rock I could locate other buttes approximately before returning to Walla Walla to correct the map.

In September I had three guards appointed, only one of which, Mose Kinnier, turned out to be good help. On September 23, H.D. Foster, Forest Assistant, arrived, but I had to use him as a Clerk. We took a trip to the Touchet and Tucanon to look over the lay of the land and to get data on settlement claims. As to grazing inquiries I told everybody that a meeting would be called in the fall. Two new guards, T.P. Mackenzie and O.T. Green were appointed – both good men.

From November 14 to 28, Harold Foster and I took a trip along the eastern part of the Forest to see settlers and to work on the map. We found the map all wrong but did not have time to correct it in the field. The Rangers were called in to help get out the best map possible for use at the stock meeting.

The stock meeting was called for December 18-25 at the Walla Walla court house. A great number came, although only about 300 of them had stock on the Wenaha Forest. Superintendent D. B. Sheller was there. He was a good organizer and kept the crowd in a fine humor.

We finally arranged a committee of three cattlemen and three sheepmen to divide the sheep and cattle ranges. Each group tried to claim about all the range. Finally after an all day confab, an agreement was reached.

Then came the tug of war for the individual sheep allotments. All admitted that a reduction of

sheep was necessary, and as the one-band men couldn't be reduced, it fell on the two- and three-band men. This was accomplished without much trouble. The division into individual allotments took some time.

The Oregon man claimed all the Oregon range for Oregon sheep. Both Mr. Sheller and I told the committee to disregard the state line and allot the range according to prior use. The Washington sheep men were in the majority and so could outvote the Oregonians, leaving out some of the Oregon prior users for personal reasons.

The last day of the meeting was mainly used for making out applications for grazing permits. After they were all stacked up, I asked Superintendent Sheller what to do with them. He said if it were up to him, he would send them to Washington, D.C., and let them do as they pleased with them. However, by the regulations I would have to approve or disapprove them anyway, which I did. I do not remember the number of stock applied for or approved nor the permits issued. Approving applications and sending out notices took about two weeks work for Mr. Foster and me.

The committee's rejection of Oregon sheep applications was going to cause trouble, and a move was being made to exclude Washington sheep from Oregon. As I did not want to leave room for a just complaint, I called a meeting at Pendleton, for which I got a good old-fashioned call-down from the Washington office, saying I had no right to call a second meeting and that if the committee had made a mistake, let them shoulder the responsibility. However, the meeting was a success and all were fairly well satisfied. Apparently all the Oregon legislature could do was to pass an inspection law saying all Washington sheep had to be inspected at the state line, but the actual inspections died out after a few years.

The foregoing will give some idea of the amount of work it took to get an overgrazed forest organized. The field work was yet to come. The cattle were given a general allotment in each locality, the permits ranging from one head up to a few over a hundred head. The sheep men were given individual allotments with a description and map. All this was no small task. The clerical work fell on H. D. Foster who was capable and very willing.

The early field men were O.T. Green, Mose Kinnier, T.P. Mackenzie, W.H. Kendall, Roy Smith, Albert Baker, Ed Blankenship, Arlie Birdsill, to be increased a few years later by Andrew Graden, Elmer Thomas, Reid Davis, R.A. Bottcher, George Stevenson, Roy Moss, Francis Drachbar, and Frank Marks – all good men.

As grazing protection was of the utmost importance, they had to know stock and range. They had to be woodsmen, and able to take care of themselves and their horses under all conditions. They must see that each sheep man got located on his allotment. The fact that there were very few infringements on each others allotments or of sheep on cattle range, shows the good work of the rangers and the fine cooperation of the stockmen, especially of the sheepmen. But some of the herders were not too careful as to the boundaries of their allotments.

All disputes were quietly and satisfactorily settled in the field by getting the parties interested on the disputed area. Although it cost me several rides to the heads of Walla Walla River and Mill

Creek, I did not want to give the impression that the Forest was being run in a highhanded manner, but was willing to overlook little mistakes and to treat the stockmen in a friendly and neighborly way. By doing so we received their cooperation in fire protection which was of great value.

In 1907 the Meacham Creek area was added to the Forest, which created some grazing difficulties, resulting in my recommending that O.T. Green, although a good field man, be transferred to another Forest, which he was.

The Wenaha Forest was mainly a grazing forest with not much saw timber, so the timber sales were not very heavy. But it was the wood lot for farmers for miles around the north, south, and west sides, and would now come under free use. The work involved was so great and there was so much more important work, we had to use every possible short cut. We would advertise certain dates when all who wanted free use of timber permits could get them at Cloverland, Peola, and La Grande, but the west side permits could be handled from the supervisor's office in Walla Walla whenever required. Each permit was for a certain designated dead wood area. No record was kept of the amount of wood taken. Some may have taken more than the permit called for, but on the whole I believe they took less. At one time we had the record free use business of all the forests.

Once in 1905 two parties from Dayton wrote saying they had some wood cut, and what were they to do about it? I made a sale to them at a small stumpage price, which I reported to the Portland office. I was severely criticised for making the sale, the office saying it was a clear case of trespass and it should have been reported as such. But if we had made trespass cases of all the wood taken without permit from the Forest in 1905, there would have been hundreds of them which would have caused a tremendous amount of work. However, what I was anxious to avoid was the creating of hard feelings against the Forest. On a Forest where practically every foot was in use, we needed the cooperation of those users, and if we antagonized them for every little wrong done, they could cause a lot of trouble.

The first season, 1906, went much smoother than I expected. With only rough and loggy trails the rangers got about surprisingly well, looking after the grazing and keeping down fires. They fought the fires with what help they could get from some of the stockmen or herders. It was lucky for the rangers and also for myself that I had done a large part of the mapping, helped with all of it, and had seen practically all of the Forest, so that when a sheep man came to the office asking for more range, I didn't have to refer it to the ranger but could point out where he could use a rough or loggy part of his allotment and have range enough. All left satisfied. A few times I went with them to the allotment to show them range the herders hadn't wanted to use.

The first inspection, 1906, by E.T. Allen was very favorable, stating that the rangers were of the cowboy-woodsman type. Well, they were necessary. We took over the Forest in the rough and it required that class of man to handle it successfully. A college education wasn't necessary, although education could be a big help.

Each ranger had more work laid out for him than could possibly be done. He was supposed to inspect each sheep camp every week to see how it was grazed. Sheep camps were moved

every week, and if a ranger had from ten to fifteen bands of sheep in his district, and as it would take a day for each camp, it just couldn't be done because of the other important work. Most rangers had a guard to help during the fire season, and when a fire was discovered it had to be fought with what help there was at hand. There was no telephone, and to go out for help would have taken five or six days. By then the fire would have burned itself out or be beyond control.

The Grand Ronde fire in 1910 was the only one that amounted to much. That was discovered in time, but the ranger thought it wouldn't do much damage. I happened to get there just as it was getting a good start. I sent for men and got a good crew on short notice from the Eden country and Elgin. All did their best, especially Eden people as their homes would be in danger if we couldn't control it. Our main work was done from three to eleven o'clock in the morning when the trenching and backfiring was done. The rest of the day about half of the crew had to patrol the fire line. We gained some each day, and finally ran it down the bluff into the Grand Ronde River 2000 feet below. The area burned was about 1000 acres but the damage was not great as the timber was of little value.

I couldn't have asked for a better crew. There were no eight hour day men and no sitdown strikes. Some of the Eden settlers nearly stampeded on me, wanting to drop back about five miles and start backfiring from there. I couldn't blame them much as their homes were in danger, but I told them my plan and promised that if it failed we would fall back and try again. Fire losses were kept down because most of the Forest was heavily grazed and because of the good work of the rangers.

Our improvement funds were very limited. We hired quite a lot of trail work done, but as for the houses, fences, and telephone lines, we considered ourselves fortunate to get enough funds to buy the materials, and the rangers did the work before or after the fire or grazing seasons, and did it cheerfully, except for one man who thought I was asking too much work of a ranger.

I can't speak too highly of the wives of the rangers, living as they did in cabins or small houses in isolated places but with never a complaint. They always met you with a pleasant smile, made you as comfortable as possible even if you did come in rather dirty after two weeks in the hills. I'm sure we all appreciated it.

The two District Foresters under whom I worked, E.T. Allen and George Cecil, were very good men and helpful in every way. Nor can I speak too highly of Mr. Pinchot, the Forester. He certainly was the right man in the right place, and did much to get the National Forests running on a business basis. He did mildly criticise me at one time, saying that I should use more diplomacy in my correspondence, but I had to tell him that it was my way of writing and as people had come to depend upon what I said, it all worked out very well in the long run.

The foregoing will give some idea of the early forest officers' work. The present forest rangers no doubt have plenty of hard work though it may be of a little different nature, but they have the roads, telephones, and lookouts and others to assist in case of fires, I hope they won't forget the rangers who took off the rough parts.

What became of the pioneer rangers:

O. T. Green – transferred	R. A. Bottcher – transferred
T. P. Mackenzie – transferred	Andrew Graden – resigned
W. H. Kendall – retired	Roy Moss – resigned
Albert Baker – retired	Francis Drachbar – resigned
Ed Blankenship – transferred	Elmer Thomas – resigned
Roy Smith – transferred	Reid Davis – resigned
George Stevenson – transferred	Frank Marks – resigned

Forest guards that had charge of a district during the fire and grazing season:

Mose Kinnier	Arlie Birdsill	Add Griggs
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The rangers that stayed on the Forest only a year or two and numerous summer fire guards I will not mention, except for Earl Storm who had the appearance of making a good ranger. He went into grazing work and was transferred to another Forest.

Drachbar as a ranger was hopeless. He had a good education, but was very unclean and would not take care of his horses. Moss thought I demanded too much work of the rangers. He wrote me a few years later that where he was then the rangers did no work but just rode the range. Marks was barely possible.

Clerks:

H. D. Foster – really a forest assistant, but I had to use him as a clerk. Very good.

Shirly Buck – clerk for a short time. Good. Transferred to the Portland office.

Jacobs – clerk for a few months. He left without notice and I was glad of it.

Martin Unser – long time clerk. Very good.

I resigned July 1, 1918.

J. M. Schmitz

Editor's Note: The above record was furnished by Gerald Tucker from his personal files. He states the history was believed written by Mr. Schmitz's daughter as told to her by her father about 1943.

A biographical record of Mr. Schmitz appeared on page 44 of Timber Lines in 1960.

¹ The Wenaha National Forest was located at the northern tip of the Blue Mountains in northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, extending from north of La Grande, Oregon to south of Pomeroy, Washington. It was created in May of 1905 using lands withdrawn from homestead entry in 1902 and 1903. The Forest was known as the Wenaha Forest Reserve between 1905 and 1907. The Supervisor's Office was located in Walla Walla, Washington. Originally, the 790,000-acre Forest had 8 Ranger Districts – 4 in Oregon (La Grande, Weston, Tollgate, and Troy), and 4 in Washington (Walla Walla, Tucannon, Peola, and Cloverland). The Wenaha National Forest was eventually combined with the Umatilla

National Forest to the south in November of 1920. The current Umatilla National Forest Ranger Districts of Pomeroy and Walla Walla were originally contained in the Wenaha National Forest.

² This account appeared in the June 1962 issue of *Timber-Lines*, a periodical featuring reminiscences from Forest Service retirees; it was scanned from the original *Timber-Lines* article. This same story is included in a recent book entitled *We Had An Objective in Mind: the U.S. Forest Service in the Pacific Northwest, 1905 to 2005; a Centennial Anthology*. According to the book, "Schmitz started work on the Mt. Rainier Reserve in 1902. he was appointed Ranger in 1905, then transferred that same year to the Wenaha Reserve as Ranger in Charge, and then named Forest Supervisor stationed at Walla Walla."