



CHAMBERLAIN  
BASIN'S  
HISTORIC

THREE  
BLAZE  
TRAIL

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## CHAMBERLAIN BASIN'S HISTORIC THREE-BLAZE TRAIL

by  
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Within the boundary of the Frank Church - River of No Return (FC-RONR) Wilderness in central Idaho, often called "the Frank", is an historic trail called the Three-Blaze Trail. The trail received its name from the the distinctive blazes of three squares in a column on the trees along the trail (Fuller 1887:267), as shown on the cover of this monograph, most of which are still visible (Hockaday 1968:7).

The Three-Blaze Trail had its origin during the first years of the gold rush to Thunder Mountain, which is about seventeen air miles east of Yellow Pine, in the upper reaches of the Monumental Creek drainage. The Thunder Mountain gold deposits were discovered by brothers Ben and Lou Caswell in 1896 and sold by them to William H. Dewey in late 1900 for \$100,000. Dewey's purchase of the Caswell claims sparked the rush to Thunder Mountain (Jones 1990:2).

In 1897 the principal access to the Thunder Mountain area was from the northwest, from Warren to the headwaters of Big Creek by way of Elk Summit, thence up Monumental Creek to the mining area. As the mining boom developed, the need for a more direct route to the diggings became evident. In the spring of 1900 three thousand dollars was collected by subscription from prospectors, miners, and businessmen to construct a new route (Elsensohn 1971:456-457; Parke 1955:46).

The principal contractors for locating and constructing the Three Blaze Trail were William Campbell and W. A. Stonebraker, assisted by August Hotzel and Harry Donohue. Campbell was a rancher on the Salmon River at the ferry site bearing his name; the latter three were early residents of Chamberlain Meadows: Stonebraker a packer and later a rancher, Hotzel a prospector and later a rancher, and Donohue a prospector and packer (Reddy 1995:44-45). Collectively, these four individuals had intimate knowledge of the area through which the new trail was to go.

Little biographic information exists on William Campbell: he settled on his Salmon River ranch in 1897 and soon thereafter built a ferry where the Dixie-to-Chamberlain Basin trail crossed the river (Reddy 1995:44). It appears that his ferry may have predated the 1900 trail construction contract. Tragedy struck Campbell a year after the trail's completion when he disappeared in a snowstorm near the head of Lodgepole Creek and was never found (Hockaday 1968:7).



William Allen (Al) Stonebraker (1879-1932) was one of the early settlers in Chamberlain Basin, in the company of his father. After the Three-Blaze Trail construction, he and his wife Lillian established a homestead claim in 1912 on the West Fork of Chamberlain Creek, about a mile and a half north of the current Chamberlain Guard Station. The ranch was patented in 1920 and it was there he raised horses and mules for pack animals. While packing for the U.S. Forest Service he died of an apparent heart attack at Mosquito Springs in 1932 (Carrey 1968:49; Reddy 1995:47-49). His homestead, now owned by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, continues to be known as the Stonebraker Ranch.

German-born August Hotzel (1880-1929) was an early settler on Chamberlain Creek, about a mile east of the current guard station. Hotzel established a homestead claim on the property in 1915 and received the patent in 1923 (Reddy 1995:46-47). The property, now owned by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, continues to be known as the Hotzel Ranch.

Little is known about Harry Donohue other than he was living at Chamberlain Meadows about 1895 and does not appear in records subsequent to the 1900 construction of the Three-Blaze Trail (USFS/PNF n.d.:8)

The History of the Payette National Forest includes a generalized route location of the Three-Blaze Trail (Hockaday 1968:7) A more accurate description of the route is derived from a current detailed map (USFS 1984: FC-RONR Wilderness, North Half, 1:100,000): From Campbell's Ferry northeasterly up the north shoulder of Little Trout Creek to Trout Point, climbing almost 4000 feet in elevation by many switchbacks up the steep breaks of the Salmon River; about two miles up from the river bottom the trail passes Elk Springs, also known as "Briggs' Camp", the site of a fire camp during the disastrous 1931 fire season (Briggs 1963:86-100). The Three-Blaze Trail, having climbed to the elevation of Trout Point, was located on open ridges for easier travel, as the ridges are not subject to blow-down timber and are free of winter snow for a longer period due to wind action.

From Trout Point the Three-Blaze Trail continues south along the west ridge of Richardson Creek, passing below Burnt Knob into the head of Richardson Creek; in the head of Richardson Creek, in an area called Wet Meadows, was a stop over cabin called the "Shake Cabin", probably because it may have been roofed with wooden shakes. The cabin burned several years before the site was used as a fire camp in 1931 (Briggs 1963: 91; USFS, Idaho National Forest map, 1930).



From Richardson Creek the Three-Blaze Trail continues south along Highline Ridge to the divide between Fish Lake and Flossie Lake; southeast along the north ridge of Red Top Creek to a crossing point on Chamberlain Creek at the mouth of Moose Creek where a stop over cabin called "Smokehouse" was located (see below). The trail continues up Moose Creek (south) to Moose Jaw Meadow, continuing south along the east ridge of Moose Creek to Hand Meadows, then south along Ramey Ridge to a steep descent (many switchbacks) to Big Creek at Copper Camp. Copper Camp was another stop over point, as mining activity was here beginning as early as 1888 (Jones 1990:2). At Copper Camp the Three-Blaze Trail joined the existing trail east along Big Creek to the mouth of Monumental Creek, then up Monumental Creek (south) to the Thunder Mountain gold fields (see endpiece map).

In its 1900-1902 heyday the Three-Blaze Trail carried a steady stream of people enroute to Thunder Mountain. Jim Moore, who had a ranch on the Dixie side of the Salmon River at Campbell's Ferry, reported that nearly 1800 men crossed the ferry during that period. Modes of transportation varied from backpack and mules in the summer to snowshoes and skis in the winter, with supplies dragged on animal hides (Hockaday 1968:7). The utility of the Three-Blaze Trail was short lived, with traffic virtually eliminated as gold production in the Thunder Mountain area began a sharp decline in 1905 and a mud slide on Monumental Creek in 1909 caused the inundation of the area's principal town of Roosevelt (Jones 1990:2-3).

"SMOKEHOUSE CABIN": About midway across Chamberlain Basin was a winter stop over cabin at the point where the Three-Blaze Trail crossed the Chamberlain Creek trail at the mouth of Moose Creek. This cabin was called "Smokehouse", probably because it was smokey from the interior fire. This "Smokehouse" should not be confused with another "Smokehouse", which was built on Elk Creek below Elk Summit in the late 1890's as a mail carrier's stop over cabin (Carrey 1868:58). The "Smokehouse" on the Three-Blaze Trail was still usable, but deteriorating, when used as an overnight camp and photographed (see page 4) about 1946 by Don H. (Tib) Park. Note the telephone line overhead and the telephone instrument box on the near corner of the cabin. The telephone was still in use at that time (Park 1995). Former Chamberlain District Ranger Val Simpson stated in a 1995 telephone interview that when he departed Chamberlain in 1957 the "Smokehouse" had deteriorated such that it was unusable (Simpson 1995). The ground plan of the cabin was about 12 x 18 feet. Remnants of the cabin, consisting of the bottom four to six courses of logs, were observed in an archaeological survey in 1992 (Payette NF report PY-092, August 24-25, 1992).





"SMOKEHOUSE" CABIN ON THREE-BLAZE TRAIL AT CHAMBERLAIN  
CREEK CROSSING, c1946 (PHOTO BY TIB PARK)

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