

***FRANK CHURCH - RIVER OF
NO RETURN WILDERNESS:
AN HISTORICAL CHRONOLOGY
AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY***

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for the***

***Heritage Program
USDA Forest Service
Intermountain Region
Payette National Forest***

March 1999

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Introduction

The Frank Church - River of No Return (FC-RONR) Wilderness, in the remote Salmon River Mountains of central Idaho, is over two million acres in size, the largest Wilderness in the United States outside of Alaska.

The FC-RONR Wilderness, and its immediate environs, has a unique history beginning in the pre-Euro-American era with transitory occupation by bands of Native Americans (Indians). Immediately following the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Euro-American and British fur trappers began exploring the northern Rocky Mountains, however, the Salmon River Mountains were generally avoided because of their difficulty of access.

It was not until the late 1800's that mineral exploration began in the Salmon River Mountains, some years after the surrounding areas began to be populated. A gold rush in 1902 at Thunder Mountain caused an almost instant population of as many as 10,000 miners and entrepreneurs, and a few enterprising "ranchers" at isolated homesteads raising cattle to feed the miners. The area's gold boom was short lived and by 1920 the Salmon River Mountains, east of the South Fork, had been depopulated to less than one hundred residents. In 1919 the "backcountry", as it came to be called, was incorporated into the old Idaho National Forest by Congressional action.

In the ensuing years, many of the isolated former homesteads became camps for big game hunters and aircraft provided transportation. The recreational value of the backcountry was recognized, prompting its designation as the Idaho Primitive Area in 1931, which was the forerunner to the FC-RONR Wilderness created in 1980.

The following pages, in two sections, provides a chronology of historic events and an annotated bibliography pertaining to the FC-RONR Wilderness. The selected bibliography includes books and like material but does not include lesser, but valuable, information sources of newspapers, personal records, oral interviews, map data, etc. This paper is intended as a reference guide for historical researchers and other interested persons.

A CHRONOLOGY OF HISTORIC EVENTS PERTAINING TO THE FRANK CHURCH - RIVER OF NO RETURN WILDERNESS AND THE SALMON RIVER MOUNTAINS

c1750- Nez Perce Indians, having acquired the horse in the early 1700's, established horse trails through the Salmon River Mountains to reach buffalo country to the east.

1805- (20-26 Aug) Capt William Clark, of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, made an reconnaissance of the east end of the Salmon River canyon, into the east side of the current Frank Church - River of No Return (FC-RONR) Wilderness, looking for a route of travel through the mountains but the Salmon River route was rejected as too difficult.

1831- Unconfirmed over winter fur trapping in Chamberlain Basin by an element of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

1862- Gold strike at Warren's Camp (Warren) provided jumping off place for mineral exploration of the Salmon River Mountains to the east of Warren.

1872- or earlier. A strategic toll bridge established crossing the South Fork of the Salmon River east of Warren facilitated access to the Salmon River backcountry.

1879- Sheepeater War routed "renegade" Indians from the Salmon River Mountains.

1883- Big Creek Mining District formed, covering upper Big Creek.

1885- Alton Mining District formed, covering Ramey Ridge area of lower Big Creek.

1891- Forest Reserve Act provided for establishment of Forest Reserves from forested lands of the Public Domain.

1897- Bitterroot Forest Reserve established in central Idaho, reaching south of the Salmon River.

1897- Caswell brothers discover significant gold deposits at Thunder Mountain, using their "ranch" at Cabin Creek, within the current FC-RONR, as their base of activity.

1902- Thunder Mountain gold rush populated the area with as many as 10,000 people. Roosevelt Post Office established to serve Thunder Mountain area (discontinued 1915)

1902-1903- Interior Department announced intention to add significant areas to the Forest Reserve system, including the Big Creek - Thunder Mountain area to be added to the Bitterroot Forest Reserve

1904- (Dec) Idaho's Senator Weldon Heyburn led successful campaign to exclude the Big Creek - Thunder Mountain area from the Forest Reserve system, citing Forest Reserves as an impediment to economic development; the excluded area became known as "Heyburn's Forest."

- 1904- Post office established at townsite of Edwardsburg on upper Big Creek
- 1905- (1 Feb) Forest Service created within the Dept of Agriculture by Transfer Act
- 1905- (3 Jun) Payette Forest Reserve created, covering the forested lands of the Payette River watershed in southwestern Idaho.
- 1905- State-funded wagon road (completed 1906) constructed from Warren, via Elk Summit, to Edwardsburg; wagon road used existing pack trail as its basis.
- 1906- Yellow Pine Post Office established, oldest surviving post office in backcountry.
- 1907- Ranger station built at Chamberlain Meadows, which was then within the Bitterroot Forest Reserve.
- 1908- (1 Jul) Idaho National Forest created from the former Payette Forest Reserve and the southern corner of the former Bitterroot Forest Reserve, south of the Salmon River, which became the Chamberlain District.
- 1909- Town of Roosevelt, the center of the Thunder Mountain gold mining area, was inundated as result of a mud slide, essentially terminating mining activity in the area.
- 1911- Forest Homestead Act affirmed homesteading within National Forests.
- 1912- Ranger's line cabin built at Mosquito Springs in western Chamberlain District.
- 1914- Clover Post Office established on lower Big Creek (discontinued 1929).
- 1917- Valley County created from portions of Idaho and Boise Counties, leaving most of the Idaho NF split between Idaho and Valley Counties.
- 1919- (8 Aug) Congressional act restored over one million acres of "Heyburn's Forest" to the Idaho and Payette NF's as the Thunder Mountain Addition, covering much of the area now the FC-RONR Wilderness.
- 1922- First aircraft reported to have landed in the backcountry at Chamberlain Basin
- 1922- As a result of the Thunder Mountain Addition, appropriations to USFS provided for capital improvements in backcountry roads; Warren-to-Edwardsburg wagon road reconstructed for automotive travel.
- 1924-Continuing USFS appropriations for the Thunder Mountain Addition provided for capital improvements in trails, telephone lines, fire lookouts, and new ranger stations at South Fork, Chamberlain, Big Creek, and Cold Meadows.
- 1925- (24 Mar) Backcountry boundary between the Idaho and old Payette NF's was redrawn as a topographic line and the Thunder Mountain District was disestablished.

1928- Airstrip established by USFS at Chamberlain Ranger Station.

1931- Idaho Primitive Area created in the wildlands of the eastern Idaho NF, as the forerunner to the current FC-RONR Wilderness.

1931- First aircraft landing in Big Creek area, at Cabin Creek ranch

1933- Cold Meadows airstrip (800 ft) established; lengthened to 3400 ft 1955-57.

1933- Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established; 1934 CCC completed road from Yellow Pine over Profile Summit to Big Creek Ranger Station.

1935- Airstrip established by USFS at Big Creek Ranger Station.

1936- Big Creek Post Office established (discontinued 1951).

1944- Idaho NF and Weiser NF consolidated and renamed Payette NF; the remnant of the old Payette NF consolidated with the Boise NF.

1950- Aerial mail delivery begins for lower Big Creek places (continues currently).

1964- Wilderness Act, established the National Wilderness Preservation System.

1965- Middle Fork of the Salmon designated a Wild and Scenic River

1969- University of Idaho established Taylor Ranch Wilderness Research Field Station at former "Cougar Dave" Lewis homestead on lower Big Creek.

1976- Payette NF acquired from private ownership the Cabin Creek Administrative Site, in the middle of the FC-RONR Wilderness, which had been the Caswell Ranch beginning in 1897, and other owners to 1976.

1980- Central Idaho Wilderness Act established River of No Return Wilderness, incorporating the Idaho Primitive Area, the Middle Fork Wild and Scenic River, and other contiguous wilderness.

1984- name changed to FC-RONR Wilderness, honoring Idaho's Senator Frank Church who was instrumental in forming the Central Idaho Wilderness Act.

1984- (Dec) USFS issues first management plan for FC-RONR Wilderness.

1993- USFS initiates process for revising the 1984 FC-RONR management plan, which was still in process in 1999.

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