

Big Creek Commissary

10VY532/PY-797

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service

Payette National Forest, Heritage Program

June 2002

The Big Creek Commissary, located on the Krassel District of Payette National Forest, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was constructed in 1924 and 1925 and represents one of the few remaining "log cabin" era buildings on the Payette National Forest. Located at the Big Creek Ranger Station complex, the commissary is accessible via Forest Service road #371 or by air to the Big Creek airfield.

The vicinity of Big Creek was first used in the early 1920s as a ranger headquarters. Fred Williams tells of his experience. "The next season, 1922, headquarters was established in a set of old mining cabins on Smith Creek (two miles north of the present site). The Station headquarters had been moved from Ramey Ridge – said cabin had been used as a barn, no floor or windows – it was quite a classy place. That fall we moved to Edwardsburg (1/2 mile south of the present site) ... In 1923 we established headquarters at what is now Big Creek headquarters – the Ranger Station was a 7' x 9' tent, the warehouse and office consisted of two 14' x 20' tents and the cook shack was made of whatever old canvas we could find." The development of the Big Creek Ranger Station complex occurred over the next few years.



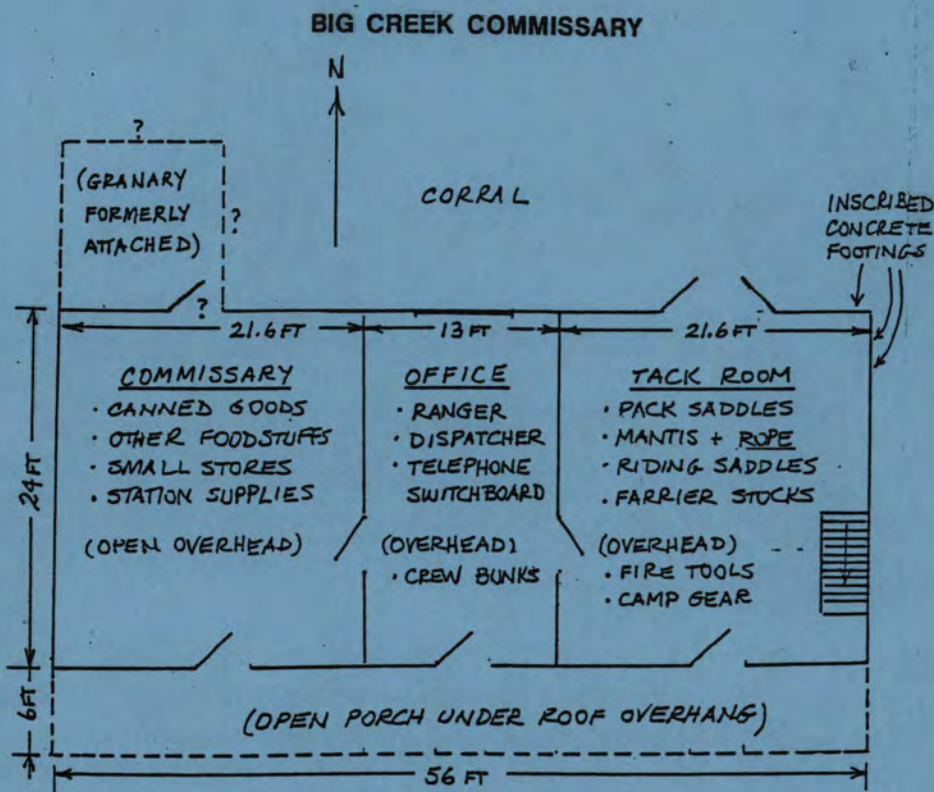
Big Creek Commissary during its construction circa 1925.

The Commissary was first used as an administrative building in 1926. This multi-functional building was unique to the administration of the Forest in this area. The 56' x 24' building was divided by log interior walls into three sections with the interior rooms open to the rafters. On the ground level, the west room was the commissary, which contained canned and dried foods, and other domestic supplies. The middle section was the office where the Ranger had the use of a telephone switchboard for dispatching duties. As a District Office, this main telephone switchboard operated the backcountry telephone lines. The system was phased out in the late 1940s and early 50s with the advent of the two-way radio. Above this room, a loft was sleeping quarters for Forest Service personnel. The eastern end of the building was used for storage of livestock tack.

The architecture of the building is ingenious. The log walls have been left in their natural round profile. The ends have been hewn and square notched. The joints where the interior room dividers meet the outside wall have also been square notched creating a neat seam. The overall effect is very uniform in materials and craftsmanship.

What is unusual about the Big Creek Commissary is the size of the log building, and the internal supporting log diaphragm system used to strengthen and stiffen the roof. Three structural walls, each constructed of 16 horizontal logs spanning from north to south, support the log purlins. There are no trusses supporting the roof of this massive log building. The rustic design was used out of necessity, based upon the availability of materials, skilled craftsmen, and the isolation of the setting from towns with sawmills. Logs were the only available building material, the builders knew the construction techniques and they were acceptable to the agency directed to manage the forest resources.

There are no other log buildings of this scale on the Payette National Forest or on other forests south of the Salmon River. Only two other sites on the Payette National Forest have structures of this era; a log cabin at Cold Meadows Guard Station, circa 1925, and a cabin at Hays Ranger Station built in 1913. During the days of the Civilian Conservation Corp, from 1933 to 1941, there was a boom in log building construction in the forests. The last log structure built on the Payette National Forest was at the Krassel Work Center in the early 1970's. These structures have an estimated life span of twenty years, but preventive maintenance has preserved these buildings and allowed continuous use by the Forest Service.



BIG CREEK COMMISSARY (NOW CALLED BARN, PNF # 1303)
FLOOR PLAN AND FUNCTIONS, CIRCA 1939

SKETCH BY PETER PRESTON, 12 JAN 1997