

**Glenn A. Thompson and
E. Lavelle Thompson,
Idaho Forest Rangers**

by
Peter Preston



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The Thompson Family

The Thompson family is somewhat unique to the history of the Payette National Forest and the Salmon River backcountry, as the family lived on the isolated and roadless lower end of the South Fork of the Salmon, and produced two professional foresters who spent their careers as officers of the Forest Service: Glenn A. Thompson and Ernest Lavelle Thompson.

In 1898 Lewis A. Thompson, father of Glenn and Lavelle, migrated from Oregon to Payette County, Idaho, then to the North Fork of Crane Creek in Indian Valley. It was at the Indian Valley ranch that Lew Thompson raised sheep and a family of three boys and their sister Doris. Lew's first child Vern was born in 1907 but he died in 1921. Glenn was born in 1909, Lavelle in 1912, and Doris in 1915.

The mining area around Warren was an early familiarity to Lew Thompson. Lavelle believed that Lew's 1902 sheep drive over Secesh Summit into the Warren area, to feed the miners, was the earliest of record. When the former C. F. (Frank) Smith Ranch, on the lower South Fork, became available in 1928, Lew took it by trading his Indian Valley ranch deed to Louis B. Coski for the deed to the South Fork ranch (Lou Coski's brother Tom Coski was a career employee of the Payette National Forest). The ranch buildings had burned so they lived in tents until a new house could be built. By that time, Lew was a widower, left with three children to raise. Glen was then 19, Lavelle 16, and Doris 13. The South Fork ranch became known as the Thompson Ranch, until it was sold in 1944 to Wallace McDowell, a Warren miner. It was sold to Al Baldwin, then Larry Hettinger whereby it became known as the Hettinger Ranch, an end-of-the-road trailhead. The ranch is now among a complex of South Fork ranches owned by the Mackay Bar Corporation.

Glenn Thompson's Early Backcountry Venture

Prior to moving to the South Fork ranch in 1928, both Glenn and Lavelle were experienced backcountry travellers. In 1924 Glenn went on a pack trip through the backcountry with five companions, prospecting for gold. They had a string of 24 pack animals. They stopped at the Forest Supervisor's office in McCall to get a map and directions. While in McCall they purchased a case of evaporated milk for \$1.80, equal to the price of a large muskrat pelt. They started prospecting on Boulder Creek, finding a little gold but on patented land. They went on to Rapid Creek and passed the old Paddy Flat Ranger Station. Glenn noted "The old log

cabin residence, shed and barn at the Station seemed out of place for Forest Service - more like a homesteader site." They went over the ridge and down the Buckhorn Trail to the South Fork. Glenn noted "Our two night camp at Buckhorn Bar was a brand new world for me. The many large boled red [Ponderosa] pine trees, clean grassy ground cover, crystal clear water with beautiful red side trout behind each stream boulder and from 10 to 40 salmon in each pool were truly nature's Garden of Eden." Sam and Pat Reed, William "Deadshot" Reed's sons, shared supper with them. The Forest Service trail ended a short distance downstream from Buckhorn Bar.

They went on downstream, noting fish traps and smoking pits used by Indians at the mouth of Indian Creek. They camped at the junction of the South Fork and the East Fork, where 60-foot bridge stringers had been prepared with a broadax. A new trail went on down the South Fork to the Willey Ranch. They scratched in the old Tailholt diggings but did not find pay dirt.

On their way up the East Fork, Glenn notes catching a 5-lb and an 8-lb bull trout. From Yellow Pine they took the trail up Profile Creek. At the summit, "Profile Sam" Willson gave them a sample of high grade silver ore from the Red Metals Mine. On over into the Big Creek drainage, they camped at the mouth of Belvedere Creek, but found no "color" at that location. Big Creek was thick with salmon. At Edwardsburg Glenn noted, "Mrs. Edwards applied her southern lady courteous behavior to her postmistress duties." At the new Big Creek Ranger Station Glenn noted "One large building was about to be finished and another well under way [the commissary-ranger's office and the ranger dwelling]." Brad Carrey arrived with freight and mail from Warren in a Dodge truck with rear tires in ribbons.

They camped and worked for six days north of the Ranger Station. By sluicing they recovered 7 ounces of gold from the Big Creek channel by picking at bedrock below the water line. Glenn notes "It was most exciting to finger pick bright yellow nuggets the size of wheat grains from the black silt in these seams." They posted claim notices at the site, but later found, when they tried to file on the claim in Warren, that it had been filed on two weeks earlier. From Big Creek they went up Smith Creek then overland to the Hand Cabin on Beaver Creek. They dug a couple of prospect pits, and got good color, but the overburden was too great to allow hand operations. They went on to Crane Meadows where they saw their first elk.

"In Chamberlain Basin, new construction was evident everywhere," Glenn reported. "The Forest Service was building two new log buildings and a log and block fence around the meadow pasture. August Hotzel's house and storeroom were new and the log barn nearly completed... Al Stonebraker's ranch was a

model of a backcountry outfitter's operation. It doubled as a horse and cattle ranch. All streams in the area, including Chamberlain Creek, had numerous beaver dams across them. Those on Hotzel's place were causing flooding of his best hay producing land... In every direction we went the lodgepole timber was open and the ground free of logs and brush. With the exception of rock bluffs, beaver ponds, and reproduction thickets [of lodgepole pine], we could lead a pack string in any direction in the basin. The old hay press on Moose Jaw Creek was still functional. It had been built in 1902 by the Stonebraker brothers [Al Stonebraker and his brother Lillburn, known as "Tude"] to bail the rank meadow grass here for packing to Thunder Mountain gold camp. Just above this [hay] press I saw my first moose, a cow and two calves."

Their prospecting in Cold Meadows was poor. Glenn and Art Francis left the others at their Stoddard Saddle camp and spent a day on the Middle Fork. "As we could only go part way down by horse it required over 20 hours to make the round trip. Besides some good gold colors, my main memory of this day is the beautifully clear water of the river, its fish, and the large number of mountain sheep in the lower canyon. The south slopes were all green with bitterbrush and mountain mahogany. While here [in the Stoddard Saddle area] Ranger [Merle "Blackie"] Wallace conscripted us to fight fire on Stoddard Creek for two days without pay. There were about 30 other men of this fire.

"It was exciting to travel the old Indian trail blazes from Phantom Meadows back across Hungry Creek, Chamberlain Creek, Queen Creek, and down Deer Creek and up to Chamberlain Basin." From Chamberlain basin they headed west to Mosquito Springs where they met fire patrolman Ralph Fields at his tent camp. Fields rotated patrols to Chicken Peak, Mosquito Peak, and the head of Porphyry Creek. Glenn and his friends found a free gold vein in the head of Rim Creek, but the granite surrounding the vein was so hard they could not get a good sample of the ore. They headed south to the Werdenhoff Mine, then up Smith Creek past the Independence Mine.

Glenn noted, "Five miles above, on Elk Summit, we met the advance units of the Forest Service road re-building crew. First a clearing and blasting crew east of the summit, then a six-horse rock plow unit and a four-horse "V" grader outfit on the summit. On the west side there was a four-horse pull grader finishing the road up to the summit. The main road camp was located on the bench near the old smokehouse. We learned that Jim Hornberger was the main boss of this work. Below, at the South Fork, was another camp under Cude Carrey [uncle of Brad Carrey]. These men were doing mostly hand work of high quality masonry on bridge and culvert walls, rock retaining and crib walls, and surfacing work over hand-laid rock work...

"Near the mouth of Elk Creek a crew was replacing a fairly new power plant open top metal flume with a buried redwood pipe. We traveled the old road from the power diversion dam to the South Fork. A new heavily-tarred wooden truss bridge spanned the river just below the Tom Carrey ranch [which became the South fork Ranger Station the following year]... The Dustin's lived at the old Pony Smead ranch at the mouth of Pony Creek. From here to Warren we followed the old state wagon road which the Forest Service had much improved with turnouts and new log bridges and open top culverts...

After stopping in Warren, "Art [Francis] took us cross country to and up Victor Creek to Stormy Peak where we hoped to find the Beard brothers' [Pinkie and Jess] lost (secret) mine. During three days from camp in a north fork of Twenty Mile Creek, we found the old diggings, just as Pinkie had described. We recovered a half ounce of heavy gold from a horse pack load of concentrate gravel. It was just too far from water to operate. In no other place have I ever learned of glacial gravel being so high up on top of decomposed granite."

At Secesh Summit the young men parted company. Glenn and Art Francis went to Burgdorf, down Carey Creek to the Salmon River, then up to Florence. They dug for five days but found nothing. They returned to McCall for some food items then home to Indian Valley. That was quite an adventure for 15 year-old Glenn Thompson.

Lavelle Thompson's Early Backcountry Venture

Lavelle had a similar backcountry venture with retired Indian Valley stockman W. "Pres" Wilson in 1927. Pres Wilson was about 60 at that time. They left Indian Valley on July 5, and returned to Indian Valley on September 10. They saw only four or five people during the summer-long trip. The purpose of the trip was camping and fishing. The route of travel was from Long Valley to Yellow Pine, then over Profile Gap to Big Creek - Edwardsburg. At Edwardsburg they saw Mrs. Edwards and her son Napier, and bought a pound of coffee from Mrs. Edwards at her little store. They went on down Big Creek to Coxey Creek where they found good fishing: 12 to 14-inch cutthroat trout were jumping out of the water to their artificial flies. Further on down Big Creek they stopped at the Conyers' place at Cabin Creek, then stopped at "Uncle Dave" Lewis's place at Pioneer Creek. At the Lewis place they reluctantly shared an offered meal, noting that Dave's cabin was perhaps the dirtiest place they had ever been. From Dave's place they went up Cabin Creek to Black Butte and Cottonwood Butte (It was from Cottonwood Butte that Lavelle first saw Mount Maguire in the distance, on the east side of the Middle Fork; Lavelle said he wanted to reach the top of Mount Maguire, but did not do so until 1978, forty-eight years later).

They rode into Chamberlain Meadows; Al Stonebraker and August Hotzel, homesteaders, were living there at the time. From Chamberlain they went west to Fish Lake and Sheepeater Lake where there was good fishing. From the lakes they picked up the Three Blaze Trail and followed it south to Thunder Mountain, where Dan McRae's family was living and working for the summer months. From Thunder Mountain they went down Pistol Creek to the Middle Fork, then out over Sulphur Creek to Long Valley.

Early Work on the Idaho National Forest

During their maturing years at the Thompson Ranch on the South Fork, both Glenn and Lavelle had ample opportunity to become acquainted with Forest Service operations on a first-hand basis. Both young men were fire lookouts on Smith Knob, on the west ridge above the ranch. Glenn started to work for the Forest Service in 1931, working on the South Fork trail. Then in the late summer of 1931, at the outset of the great Corral Creek fire, Glenn was enlisted as scout and guide to fire planners because of his backcountry experience. In 1933 Glenn was key guard on the lower South Fork section of the Warren Ranger District, working for Ranger A. E. "Gene" Briggs. From 1934 to 1938, Glenn and Lavelle shared the job, in alternate years, of being the fire guard at the South Fork Guard Station. Lavelle gives Gene Briggs credit for encouraging his academic training in forestry by giving Lavelle the job as fire guard at the Warren Ranger Station in 1934. In 1936 Lavelle was fire lookout at Mill Creek Point.

Glenn Thompson

Glenn Thompson went to the School of Forestry at Oregon State University. He was appointed ranger of the Chamberlain District in 1939. He stayed at Chamberlain until 1942, Ranger at New Meadows for a year, then Fire Control Officer on the Idaho National Forest, Assistant Supervisor on the Deerlodge National Forest in Montana, Supervisor of the Salmon National Forest, Washington Office staff jobs, then Southeastern Area Director of State and Private Forestry. Glenn died in 1977 at age 68.

Lavelle Thompson

After obtaining his degree in forestry from the University of Idaho in 1944, Lavelle was appointed ranger on the Landmark District of the old Payette National Forest (now incorporated in the Cascade District of the Boise National Forest), then to the Idaho City District in 1946. Lavelle returned to the current Payette National Forest in 1949 as Fire Control Officer, replacing his older brother Glenn (I remember first meeting him in 1955 when he held that position). In 1957 he went to the Southwestern Regional Office as Training and Safety Officer, 1959-1964 Supervisor of Apache National Forest, and completed his 35-year career in 1969 as Assistant Regional Forester for Watershed Management at the Southwestern Regional Office. McCall and the backcountry was in his

blood and he returned each summer to renew friendships. Lavelle and Glenn both were close friends of my wife's family. Lavelle died March 21, 1996 at age 84. His obituary notes that "he was a philosopher who searched for the deepest meaning in all of life's experiences." As one who knew him, I can attest to that.

Sources of Information

The above information pertaining to the Thompson family was pieced together from correspondence and interviews with Lavelle Thompson, from 1994 to 1996, and a letter from Glenn Thompson, dated February 27, 1971, to Payette National Forest Supervisor William Sendt, all in the files of the author, Peter Preston, Box 1377, Mathews, Virginia 23109.