

# THE IDAHO RAMBLER

For Gadabouts and Stay-At-Homes

BOOK I: THE SOUTHWEST

by

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Chinese lived in Warren. The Chinese had their own store, saloon, gambling house - and the future "Poker Bride", Polly Bemis. (See page 78.)

Today Warren has only a handful of summer residents and even fewer for the snowbound winters when mail and supplies come in by ski plane.

Gas and groceries available. No Forest Service campgrounds but plenty of space. Trailhead for Mackay Bar on Salmon River. Check with the Forest Service on east end of town.

#### 6. YELLOW PINE - BIG CREEK:

*Yellow Pine, 54 miles from McCall. Big Creek, 76 miles from McCall.*

This is one of our favorite trips - breathtaking mountains, tumbling streams, idyllic campsites, yet on the fringe of civilization where you can still buy a roast beef dinner with cherry pie and get there in a Cadillac.

From McCall take the Lick Creek road and follow the signs at Yellow Pine Junction 3 miles from City center. Leave the pavement here for a good gravel road. (The road to Yellow Pine is usually open in June but don't count on driving to Big Creek until after July 4. Check locally.)

You will pass the Lake Fork Campground 5 miles from the junction, and 4 miles farther on, a small picnic site along Lake Fork Creek.

The drive along this creek takes you through forested country, past small meadows, beaver dams and usually a few deer. Climb the summit (elev. 6,910) and you drop down on a canyon where the scenery is carved of granite peaks that rival Yosemite. Across the canyon, ribbons of waterfall cascade down the hillside in silvery streamlets, and at Hum Creek a crash of water pours off the mountain generating enough energy to power the county.

A few more miles brings you to the Ponderosa Campground, a memorable site along the thundering Secesh River. *Tables, grills, firepits, toilets.*

When the early miners tramped into this country they probably found the swift-running water a nuisance but surely they, too, marveled at its clarity and its rare, quiet pools where the fish hang out. In those days, the woods were full of southerners - Confederates whose politics leaned toward secession. The Yankee miners turned this persuasion into a noun and called the rebels "the Secesh." The name stuck both for them and for the river.

Heading out for Yellow Pine you pass the Zena Creek Ranch (meals and lodging) on a road that winds along the Secesh and later the East Fork of the South Fork of the Salmon River. Here you're in a rock garden world where trees and shrubs and flowers vie for growth on slabs of gray rock that form the canyon wall. We watched kayakers here, ecstatic with this stretch of white water. "First time Idaho," they yelled. "But not the last."

At Yellow Pine you find a bit of the old west in the dusty street and frame buildings, board sidewalks or none at all. You get the local news off the bulletin board in front of the general store and cowboys have the right of way. We met an obliging one named Don, riding down the dusty main street, left leg in a cast and crutches slung across the horse's neck. He said it was a dependable kid's horse not likely to throw him. However, we still felt relieved when only one of them went into the bar that morning.

We liked Buck and Faye's too, a bar and grill where they serve giant hamburgers and where the mustached bartender sports a cowboy hat and smokes cigars. Live music on Saturday nights and you can bet the place reels with boots and skirts, whiskey and tall tales. They make their own entertainment here. Big community barbecues are featured annually on July 4 and Labor Day. When someone suggested a TV installation on one of the mountaintops, the town spoke as one voice, "No, we don't want the damn thing." They don't want phones either. They like Yellow Pine the way it is and so do we.

The town has just about come full circle in the last 90 years. It began as a stop-over for miners on their way to Thunder Mountain and today it has a small boom on because of new mining activity in the area. Today the business of recreation also is important, both summer and winter. Larry Marks, owner of

the Yellow Pine Lodge says, "I've seen 150 or 200 snowmobiles sitting on Main Street on a Saturday night."

All services available here. Meals, lodging, gas and groceries.

There are three campgrounds below Yellow Pine. The first one, Yellow Pine is 1 mile from town, Golden Gate is 2 miles beyond that and another 4 miles brings you to Ice Hole. All are attractive, wooded sites along Johnson Creek. *Tables, grills, firepits, toilets.*

### Big Creek:

*From Yellow Pine drive north 22 miles.*

Four miles from Yellow Pine a road marked "Stibnite 9, Monumental Summit 14," leads up to the old mining camps of the Thunder Mountain District. These mountains produced Idaho's last great mining excitement and the story reads like fiction.

In the summer of 1896 the four Caswell brothers (Dan, Lou, Ben and Cort) prospected up Monumental Creek. After a while they decided that their luck was down and decided to pull out as soon as they tracked a stray mule. The prodigal led them along an unnamed creek where they found fabulous outcroppings of ore. They called it the Golden Reef. An appropriate name because it turned out even better than the goose that laid the golden eggs. Every spring they took out a water bucket full of nuggets.

In the meantime other prospectors came to stake claims and in 1900 Colonel Wm. Dewey, of Nampa and Silver City, bought the Golden Reef for \$100,000 and renamed it the Dewey Mine. A picture of the check made out to the Caswell brothers was printed in the Idaho Statesman and prospectors rushed to Thunder Mountain like it was the fabled El Dorado.

They swarmed in from all directions to make a fortune in this wild and rugged Salmon River country that even today is known as the Primitive Area. They came afoot, horseback, muleback, with endless packtrains struggling up one side of Monumental Summit and down the other. A good many of them camped at the base of the summit where Mule Creek meets the crashing

waters of Monumental. Here the lively settlement of Roosevelt grew. It was a typical mining town, rowdy with gambling and saloons and high-priced flour. Food prices soared and men made good money packing flour in at \$30 a sack over the 60 miles between Warren and Thunder Mountain.

Most of the rich ore came in ledges rather than in simple placers, a kind of mining that required large sums of money for heavy machinery. Every nut and bolt had to be packed in on the backs of mules. Colonel Dewey brought in a successful ten-stamp mill and most of the \$350,000 taken from the region came from his mine.

By 1907 most of the inhabitants had drifted away and two years later, the whole town of Roosevelt disappeared. A landslide slithered down the mountainside, dammed the waters of Mule Creek and gradually drowned the town with Lake Roosevelt.

Later on, settlers traveled to the lake to "fish." This meant building a raft and poling out on the water to hook a pot, pan or other useful item. Adelia Routson Parke remembered that the large and cherished mirror on their Salmon River ranch was fished from the lake.

Zane Gray became so fascinated with the story of Roosevelt that he used the setting for a novel and called it THUNDER MOUNTAIN. Today he could add a new chapter. In 1980, the Golden Reef Mining Company of Boise began operations at the Old Thunder Mountain Mine. The Caswell brothers might be pleased to know that their story-book diggings still hold a king's treasure.

Discovery of gold at Stibnite came with the Thunder Mountain Rush of 1902 but the town took its name from an ore called antimony.

Remote and overshadowed by Roosevelt and Thunder City, Stibnite got a slow start. The Bradley Company developed open pit mines here after 1927 and took out enough gold and antimony to stay in business. However, the real boom came during World War II when the pinch was on for strategic minerals.

The U.S. Bureau of Mines sent in drillers who found much-needed mercury and tungsten. Subsequently a boom town grew

in the wilderness as Stibnite became the leading Tungsten producer in the United States and runner-up in the production of mercury. According to the State Historical Society, total yields for 1932-52 were: \$24 million in antimony, \$21 million in tungsten, \$4 million in gold, \$3 million in mercury.

Today the old town is a heap of crumbling buildings, rusting machinery and ghosts of days past. However, alongside these old scars changes are taking place. The town was recently reborn when the Superior Mining Company sent in 60 workers to build an open pit gold mine. They expect the ore deposits to last about ten years. The waste from the new mine as well as some of the old eyesores will be covered over with soil and planted to grass. Project engineer Skip Johnson says, "We'll turn it back into a meadow again."

On to Big Creek and a ribbon of road that winds around hairpin curves and a profile grade that will keep you wide awake. However, the feeling of wilderness compensates for the mountain miles. You look down to cascading white water and up to craggy peaks; revel in the forest of pines and tamaracks, the quaking aspens and small, flowered meadows that come as brief surprises.

Finally you reach the old settlement of Edwardsburg and a mile beyond that you round a corner and a break in the woods exposes Big Creek Lodge.

Almost every map of Idaho marks this little settlement yet it qualifies as neither city or town. It is a rustic lodge, long an outpost on the fringe of the Primitive Area in the Salmon River drainage.

Nearly 60 years ago the hand-hewn cabin (now enlarged) served as Headquarters for the Forest Service. Now, with newer Forest Service buildings ½ mile away, Big Creek lodge caters to the back country hiker and fisherman, hunter and miner.

Big Creek hasn't changed much since 1923 when Jake and Eric Jansen split the logs for the little Forest Service camp. A few more summer people come in now and a mountain-meadow airport reminds us that we are late in the Twentieth Century. The cook at the lodge says she can tell who is coming to dinner by the color of the airplane.

Communication with the outside is mostly by radio although the sprinkling of mountain residents can ring each other on big wooden wall phones, 1920 vintage. This may be one of the few places where you talk after cranking out two shorts and a long.

We liked this rustic lodge and Irish the cook and her roast beef and cherry pie. We liked the sylvan mountain recess and the way the long meadow stretches out between the mountains where the mist rises under an early morning sun.

Mining brings more activity to the area now with a lot of heavy equipment coming in for the old Golden Hand and Yellow Jacket Mines just outside the borders of the Primitive Area. The old ways continue, however. Dave Stucker came riding down the road with his pack string headed for Chamberlain Basin. According to one of the wranglers, John Turner, each summer they set up at least nine camps and guide 40 parties or more on hunting and fishing trips in the primitive area. The core of the business is the permanent herd of 2,000 elk that roams the back country.

However, you don't need a guide to find several interesting nearby places. Hike approximately 3 miles to Logan Lake to catch some big rainbows. Inquire at Big Creek Lodge for directions. Visit the old Sunday Mine ruins. Take the Sunday Mine road about ¼ mile south of the Lodge. Drive about 1 mile then hike 1 mile to see the old mountainside mill. Drive 3 miles north of the Lodge to the end of the road and good fishing in Big Creek.

A public campground is less than ½ mile from Big Creek Lodge. Turn off the main road just before the airport and you will find an attractive wooded area by a small creek. No hook-ups. Watch for deer along the creek and by the salt lick near the barn.

7. **RIVER OF NO RETURN WILDERNESS AREA:** At the Big Creek settlement you are at a major trailhead for hiking or packing into the River of No Return Wilderness Area. This is a new designation which includes 2.2 million acres formerly called the Salmon River Breaks and the Idaho Primitive Area. This land of rugged mountains, wild rivers and grassy meadows is the largest single wilderness in the United States outside Alaska. Deer and elk, black bear, mountain goats and over 150 other

species of animals roam this natural environment little disturbed by 20th century technology.

Idaho writer Vardis Fisher saw this awesome expanse from the air over 40 years ago. It looks virtually the same today. "In any direction for a hundred miles there is only an ocean of thousands of zeniths . . . From peak to peak, from backbone to backbone, the landscape lifts and falls until it shimmers in mist and distance . . . In the far southeast are the Sawtooth spires; in the far northwest is the tumbled blue cloudland of the Seven Devils."

This is the incomparable Salmon River drainage, isolated, rugged and relatively inaccessible. The gorges of the main Salmon and of the Middle Fork are two of the deepest in North America. Here primitive man found shelter some 8,000 years ago. They hunted the elk and wild sheep, and on the walls of their caves left traces of their culture in paintings and petroglyphs. Remnants of their descendants might be there yet except for an event known as the Sheepstealer War of 1879.

The normally peaceful Sheepstealers received the blame for some of the Indian raids of the Bannock War and U.S. troops came to pursue them through their land of canyons and sculptured peaks. The Sheepstealers had the advantage and lured the cavalry into a box canyon where the sheer walls of Big Creek almost meet overhead. Fortunately, an exchange of gunfire provided enough smoke to cover the troops for a retreat to Vinegar Hill. There, guarded by hostile Indians, isolated and waterless, they drank the vinegar from their supplies.

Winter came on and the Sheepstealers could no longer take refuge in the snowy ridges and peaks. They came down from the heights and were eventually rounded up (about 50 persons counting women and children) and given a home at Fort Hall Reservation. Idaho's last Indian war was over.

If you are hiking on Big Creek close to Soldier Bar Landing Field, look for the lonely memorial to Sargeant Eagen, the first casualty of the campaign. Years after the war, Joe Elliot, a Big Creek rancher, signed a government contract to pack in the marker. This piece of granite, weighing over 300 pounds, was loaded onto the back of a big mule named Dempsey and hauled over 40 miles of precipitous trail. Appropriately, an old timer named

Cougar Dave helped Elliot pack in the monument. He had been a scout in the Sheepstealer War and later settled on Big Creek below Soldier Bar.

Just before the turn of the century the Salmon River country began to settle up. Every shelf and mesa that could support a few acres of hay became a prospective homesite in a back country where everything came in by mule-back, including Ma and the kids. Adelia Routson Parke remembers the adventure of moving to the Caswell ranch (now the flying W) on Big Creek in 1910. They were six days on the trail from the Carl Brown place on the South Fork of the Salmon. She says, "There were frightening places on the Big Creek trail. Jacob's Ladder and Devil's Elbow were two of the most difficult, where many horses had fallen off, rolling into the dashing torrent below." Yet her father rode at the head of the procession leading a bell mare. Next followed the mother on a saddle mule with the baby lying on a pillow in front of the saddle. Two young children followed on a gentle mule, riding double. Adelia rode last in line to keep an eye on the mules that carried their precious supplies. Seven of them followed in single file, their high packs swaying as they plodded up the narrow trail.

If you want to spend some time at the Flying W today, or the Flying B or any other recreation ranch in the Salmon River country you still pack in like the Routson's did. Unless you want to fly or float. If your destination is along the main Salmon or the Middle Fork you can float down but you have to fly (or walk) out. For this is the River of No Return. You can ride downriver but rocky cataracts and whirling pools of white water won't let you go back up.

One of the Routson "neighbors" was Cougar Dave, a favorite character of the Primitive Area. Here was a man wedded to his wild peaks and streams; one who moved with the stealth of a cougar himself and whose blue eyes could be either "twinkling" or "cold as the back of a lizard" - all depending upon the company and the occasion. Self-sufficient, hospitable, reticent - all the characteristics of the typical mountain man were Dave's. Plus he was a Civil War veteran and a patriot. Adelia Routson Parke remembered "Uncle Dave" and tells this story.

An IWW radical walking through the mountains stopped in at Dave's cabin about supertime one night. Of course Dave fed the

stranger who showed his true color after supper by launching into a tirade against the government. He worked himself into such a frenzy that he reached up and tore down the flag that was draped on the cabin wall. "Suddenly the fellow found himself looking into a six-gun barrel with the eyes of blue steel behind it. Cougar Dave thundered, 'Put that flag back and get going.'" The IWW made a hasty retreat into the wilderness. Later, John Routson kidded Dave about kicking the "poor fellow" out just as night was coming on. Dave snorted. "I have only one regret -that I gave the crazy galoot his supper."

By 1935 civilization was creeping too close for Dave. Sister Alfreda Elsensohn said that he complained of the country settling up too fast. "A man don't have no privacy no more," he told his nearest neighbor who lived 5 miles away. However, Dave didn't have long to worry about close neighbors moving in on him. According to Vardis Fisher, "In July of 1936 at the age of 93, he felt a little ill - possibly for the first time in nearly a century. Alone, he hiked out of this deep, dark canyon for more than 20 miles and asked a distant friend to take him to Boise. The next day he was dead."

The hardships of the wilderness seem to spawn independence and improvisation. Although Cougar Dave may have been the patriarch of the Salmon River country, stories of other characters also linger in the canyons.

Take Mitt Haynie. He drifted in from the California placers during the Buffalo Hump boom and had been around long enough to know how to improvise. Robert G. Bailey tells a story about his first aid techniques. "When one of the miners fell and split open his finger Mitt Haynie calmly washed the wound with warm water into which had been dropped a little carbolic acid, then with an ordinary needle and some No. 10 white thread proceeded to sew up the wound." Mitt later went on a Salmon River bear hunt with Bailey.

They were hiking along and at a certain spot Haynie pointed to a narrow shelf of rock along a perpendicular wall and proceeded to tell how he inched his way around it one time with a pack on his back. "Just as I came to that spot up there and was rounding the sharp point I came face to face with a Mountain Sheep. Our faces were not a foot apart. I looked into the sheep's face and he

looked into mine. The ledge was only about 6 inches wide. With my bulky pack I was afraid to attempt to turn around and to back-track was equally dangerous for the ram. There we stood for some time facing each other and wondering what the next move would be." Bailey asked him how he got out of that fix and Haynie replied. "Well sir, I just scrouched down as low as I could, the sheep jumped over me and the last I saw of him he was hot-footing it up Sabe Creek as if Old Nick himself was after him."

If you need help in planning your own wilderness adventure, inquire at Big Creek Lodge, or Old Edwardsburg, or write for an Idaho Outfitters and Guides Booklet, P.O. Box 95, Boise, Idaho 83701.



Fisherman on Profile Creek, north of Yellow Pine.