

Former Big Creek workers dedicate historic barn

BY ROGER PHILLIPS

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A reunion at Big Creek near the Frank Church Wilderness last week did much more than put a plaque on a barn. It honored the people who attended and recalled a vibrant part of Central Idaho's history.

A 74-year-old barn at Big Creek was placed on the National Register of Historic Places last Thursday at a ceremony hosted by Peter Preston of Matthews, Va., whose father-in-law, Don Park, helped construct the building.

"The idea of this dedication is to acknowledge all the people who were involved with the building at that time," Preston said.

About 100 current and former Big Creek residents, family members, relatives and friends attended the ceremony. Many had not been there in years, if not decades, Preston said.

The barn, located at the Big Creek work center on the Payette National Forest, is about 80 miles northeast of McCall. It stands nearly unchanged since 1924, when it was built by Forest Service workers. It originally served as a remote ranger district that served even more remote ranger districts in Cold Meadows and Chamberlain Basin.

"Big Creek was the social and economic center of the backcountry. It was known as Headquarters," Preston said. "Since there was a road here, this became a major supply point for other backcountry districts."

The building housed the dispatch for the other backcountry ranger stations and fire lookouts, and served as a commissary for both Forest Service crews and the early miners and ranchers in the area, and as sleeping quarters for Forest Service personnel.

Today, the building contains supplies for Forest Service personnel of a different sort. It holds saddles and hay for the horses and government mules in an attached corral, but traces of its past remain. In a dusty corner sits an old telephone switchboard that carried the voices of eight fire lookouts who reported daily to the building during fire seasons.

Ranger comes back

The first ranger at Big Creek, Dan LeVan, worked there from its creation as a ranger district in 1924 until he retired in 1950. In the 1930s, the Forest Service shut down the Cold Meadows district and split it between Big Creek and Chamberlain Basin ranger stations.

After LeVan retired, Ted



Star-News Photo by Roger Phillips

Dan LeVan Jr. and Peter Preston install a plaque last week formally listing a barn at Big Creek on the National Register of Historic Places.

Koskella and Bob Burkholder both served as district rangers for short periods. Earl Dodds, now living in McCall, took over the Chamberlain Ranger District in 1957. A year later, he took over as Big Creek ranger when the two districts consolidated. Dodds remained the

ranger there until his retirement in 1984. Shortly thereafter, Big Creek was consolidated with the Krassel Ranger district.

Dodds said during his tenure, he had 40 head of stock and one pickup truck. The ratio has
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changed considerably since then, he noted. Dodds would drive into Big Creek in late May, or whenever the road over Profile Summit was passable, and usually come back to McCall around Thanksgiving.

"It was a good life. I sure enjoyed it," Dodds said. "I was always wanting to get out of there when the snow would fly, and always wanted to get back when the grass was green."

Etching spurs interest

Preston worked at the neighboring South Fork Ranger District on the South Fork of the Salmon River from 1955-57 before becoming a career officer in the U.S. Air Force.

After retiring from the Air Force, Preston and his wife, Sally, served as volunteer rangers in Big Creek during the summer of 1996. During that summer, Preston noticed his father-in-law's name etched in concrete.

"It was during that time in the course of doing chores I saw the inscription in the foundation,"

Preston said. "It was an emotional moment to find that."

That sparked an interest in the both the building and its history.

"For my perspective it was both a family interest type thing and a general interest of recognizing the historic value of the place and the people who made it work," Preston said.

The barn was built without trusses in the roof. Instead, logs were run horizontally on top of and perpendicular to the log walls, which were cut from the area and hand peeled. The building's unique architecture, along with the fact that it was still intact and relatively unchanged since built, made it a natural candidate for the National Register of Historic Places.

Preston talked to Larry Kingsbury, forest archeologist for the Payette forest, who initiated the paperwork to have the building registered. "It's a laborious process," Preston said.

The Big Creek building joins 35 other structures on the Payette that have been entered in the register. Buildings on the register must be maintained in accordance with special regulations to maintain their historic integrity.
