

THREE FORKS RANGER STATION AND HOMESTEADING 1910 - 1920

The first administrative site of the Moose Creek District was at Three Forks, a flat V shaped area formed by the North Fork of Moose Creek converging with Moose Creek coming from the northeast. Three Forks is one of the very few flats found within this mountain wilderness. Two miles above the confluence in the center of the V rises Cone Peak, at the foot of the higher rising Bailey Mountain. To the left and across the North Fork of Moose Creek is Shissler Peak, and due east across Moose Creek below the confluence is Trout Peak. Below these mountains carved by many streams is nestled the small tract of land known as Three Forks which is five miles above the present day site of Moose Creek Ranger Station.

In the early 1900's Three Forks was an area of concentrated but difficult homesteading due to the small amount of level land and to the inaccessibility both for bringing in supplies and for taking out the marketable commodities such as stock or produce. The high cost in terms of time and money reduced homesteading to subsistence farming with winters often spent on traplines in order to make ends meet. The more imaginative and speculative men diverted their energies to various enterprises from moonshining to mink farming. Yet none of these early homesteaders were known for their financial success. It has often been said by early day Forest Service personnel that the Forest Service made a grave mistake to open this land to homesteading because of the impracticality of it. Proving up on such inaccessible land was extremely difficult. More successful were the enterprising dude ranches which followed the homesteaders and the subsequent outfitter camps simplified according to wilderness legislation.

It is believed the first homesteader within the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness was A.E. Hale who chose in 1910 a plot of land half-way between Three Forks and Moose Creek on the right bank. Three years later Frank Freeman staked a claim directly across Moose Creek from Hale and west of the peak which bears Freeman's name. At the same time his brother Ross Freeman claimed a portion of land on the same side of the river but further north of Frank, between Shissler Peak and the left bar of the V formed by Three Forks.

That same year, 1913, Mary Ellen Dodds filed her claim about a mile above the confluence of the forks on the east bank of North Moose. Sharing her south and east boundary also within the V was her neighbor John Van Horn who is said by Jack Parsell, early day Moose Creek Ranger, to have been one of the few who put an honest effort into working his homestead. Mary Ellen Dodd's northern boundary was shared by Lee Halkins who later with Halford proved up on their piece of land below Fitting Creek and under Cone Peak.

Next Mrs. Randall claims that in 1914 (although other sources recorded 1916) Jim Cox, the stepfather of her late husband, homesteaded directly below Van Horn, also on the west bank of Moose Creek, on the land which was later owned by the Moose Creek Ranches. To illustrate the inaccessibility of the Three Forks area, when Cox first went in, the end of the road was at Smith Creek, approximately 25 miles west of Selway Falls. The remainder of the journey into Three Forks was on horseback and pack trains. Cox used the ranch as summer grazing ground for the cattle which he drove out to

Hamilton or Kamiah in the fall. He and his brother-in-law, Jess Anderson, operated lengthy winter traplines for fox, mink, marten, weasel, and other small fur-bearing animals. Much later around 1927 Jim Cox started a fur farm. He began with a pair of fox and other small animals. Later Cox, joined by his stepson Randall, packed hunters into the ranch for several years. In 1930 Cox died, and the ranch was sold to Blum.

In 1915 Harry E. Ayers homesteaded the furthest northeast within the V above Hawkins and also on the north side of the river. That same year John Vogter staked his claim at Elbow Bend on Moose Creek, north and east of the Three Forks area. Moose Creek could be compared to a man's bent arm: the forearm flows from the north and at the elbow flows west into the Three Forks area. Inside the bend is John Vogter's stead. Those who are familiar with the area's history associate the later notorious resident Monty Jewell with this area. Other homesteaders reported him a moonshiner and flagrant antagonist of the Forest Service. But his amusing stories fall to another decade and are to be told in another chapter.

In 1916 J.W. Carothers staked a claim on the east side of Moose Creek, south of the apex of the V below Trout Peak, north of Hale's land. Carothers, according to Jack Parsell, homesteaded 160 there; but when it came time for final proof, he did not have enough land cleared up to make 160. Therefore, when it came time to make a report, Parsell remembers the Forest Service gave Carothers a reduction of area to the amount of clearing he had made, approximately fifty acres. Several years later this land was later purchased by Renshaw.

The next year, 1917, brought two more entries: James Crew, outside the upper right flank of the V on the south bank directly across the creek from Charles Bock on the north bank; and Harry E. Ayers, directly across the creek from Crew and whose land was bounded by Bock to the west.

A former U.S.F.S. employee of 1917, Ed Gilroy, claims that the first Forest Service employee stationed at Three Forks amidst these homesteaders was Louis Fitting. A cabin abandoned by Shissler and easily identified by a skull and crossbones was taken over by the Forest Service and served as its headquarters. The abandoned buildings were built by John and Fred Shissler and another brother. According to Jack Parsell, Harry Shissler, quite a notorious individual, was holing up in there escaping from the law at that time. Jack Parsell, however, claims to be the first real ranger operating out of Three Forks, beginning in 1920 when the Moose Creek District was created with headquarters in Kooskia. It was created from a conglomeration of land parcels from the Elk Summit District and other districts to the west.