

FIRST DRAFT

Nation's first forest ranger faced fires, guns in Colorado

It was late summer, 1901. William Kreutzer had been a ranger on the Battlement Mesa Forest Reserve — now Grand Mesa National Forest — for barely three months when he was ordered off the mesa by two armed cowboys.

Families in the Cedaredge-Surface Creek area had no love for outsiders or government officials that summer. William Womack, a local cattleman, had been killed by a state game warden in July during a dispute over fishing restrictions at Alexander Lake and nearby lakes.

Kreutzer was at work that August when he recognized two horsemen from Cedaredge approaching him.

"They rode directly up to where he was working and told him ... to leave the Mesa" within 30 minutes, wrote Kreutzer's friend and biographer, Len Shoemaker.

"Since Bill Womack had been killed by a Government agent, the people of that town had decided to keep all wardens and rangers off that area."

Kreutzer was not one to be intimidated, but his revolver was 50 feet away, so he had to improvise.

One man's gun was hanging loosely in its holster, Kreutzer noticed. So, he approached the men smiling, with his hand outstretched.

Then, "he snatched the gun from its holster, firing into the air as he did so," Shoemaker wrote.

Caught off-guard, the two men surrendered. Kreutzer disarmed them and ordered both to head home, adding that anyone who threatened him again would face a grand jury.

They didn't bother Kreutzer again.

It was one of many times in his career that Kreutzer defused a potentially explosive situation.

Born near Sedalia, Colorado, in 1877, Kreutzer was an experienced horseman and cattleman, skills that would serve him well during a forest career that spanned 41 years.

But first he had to become a forest ranger — Ranger No. 1, as Shoemaker called him.

Other men were hired as forest rangers in 1898, the same year as Kreutzer. However, Gifford Pinchot, who developed the National Forest Service under President Theodore Roosevelt, wrote: "Bill Kreutzer was the first United States Forest Ranger ever appointed."

There was no Forest Service in 1898, however, only the Forest Reserve program under the General Land Office.

Kreutzer had learned that Congress had finally appropriated money to administer forest reserves set aside by presidential decrees earlier in the decade.

He discovered that a forest ranger was to be hired to patrol the Plum Creek Timber Reserve southwest of Denver, which later became part of the Pike National Forest.

It was Kreutzer's home turf, and he was soon accepted for the job, even though he had no political backer at a time when federal jobs were usually acquired through political patronage.

His letter of appointment outlined his broad duties: "To protect the public forests from fire or any other means of injury to the timber growing in said reserves."

There were fires burning on the Plum Creek reserve even as Kreutzer received his appointment in Denver.

So, he hurried home to fight them, using his own horses and tools. He soon realized he needed help on larger fires, so he recruited neighbors for the



Grand Mesa Hotel at Alexander Lake as it looked a few years before the killing of William Womack in 1901. DELTA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



William Kreutzer as he appeared later in his career, when this photo appeared on the cover of the book, "Saga of a Forest Ranger."

task.

Kreutzer described to volunteers how they would fight the blazes: "They would stop the spread of the flames with a direct attack; then, when the danger to their homes had been eliminated, they would circle it with a control line, hold it within that line, and let it burn itself out," Shoemaker wrote.

Kreutzer and his team controlled multiple fires that way, but dry conditions that year led to many more.

"Although he worked almost day and night, Bill couldn't get to them fast enough ... he hurried from place to place, controlling the most dangerous or damaging blazes."

He and several volunteers were nearly trapped in one blaze, but Kreutzer found a way out. He began to learn how to read fires, where they could be safely fought and where they couldn't.

He also learned that some fires had been intentionally set by locals who didn't like government rangers patrolling lands they considered their own.

As Pinchot put it: "When Bill began his work for Uncle Sam, the West was, nearly everywhere, and not least in Colorado, firmly set against practically every form of government control."

Fires weren't the only problem. Everyone from ranchers to railroaders, miners to mill workers considered the forest their personal timber supply.

Not surprisingly, Kreutzer had confrontations with timber users.

In one instance, he confronted brothers who were illegally

ESTABLISHMENT AND MODIFICATION OF NATIONAL FOREST BOUNDARIES						
A CHRONOLOGIC RECORD						
1891 - 1999						
Forest Reserve	State	Type of Document	Date Approved	Citation	Effect	
Yellowstone Park	WY	Proc. 17	MAR 30, 1891	26 Stat. 1565	Established reserve.	
Timber Land Reserve	WY	Proc. 6	SEP 19, 1891	27 Stat. 983	Supplement to Proc. 17 of MAR 30, 1891.	
Yellowstone Park	WY	Proc. 6	SEP 19, 1891	27 Stat. 983	Supplement to Proc. 17 of MAR 30, 1891.	
Timber Land Reserve	CO	Proc. 8	OCT 16, 1891	27 Stat. 993	Established reserve.	
White River Plateau	CO	Proc. 8	OCT 16, 1891	27 Stat. 993	Established reserve.	
Timber Land Reserve						
Pecos River	NM	Proc. 12	JAN 11, 1892	27 Stat. 998	Established reserve.	
Fikes Peak Timber Land Reserve	CO	Proc. 15	FEB 11, 1892	27 Stat. 1006	Established reserve.	
Fikes Peak Timber Land Reserve	CO	Proc. 21	MAR 18, 1892	27 Stat. 1014	Boundary redefined.	
Bull Run	OR	Proc. 28	JUN 17, 1892	27 Stat. 1027	Established reserve.	
Plum Creek Timber Land Reserve	CO	Proc. 29	JUN 23, 1892	27 Stat. 1029	Established reserve.	
South Platte	CO	Proc. 37	DEC 9, 1892	27 Stat. 1048	Established reserve.	
Sea Gabriel	CA	Proc. 38	DEC 20, 1892	27 Stat. 1049	Established reserve.	
Alagnak Forest and Fish Culture	AK	Proc. 39	DEC 24, 1892	27 Stat. 1052	Established reserve.	
Battlement Mesa	CO	Proc. 48	DEC 24, 1892	27 Stat. 1053	Established reserve.	

US FOREST SERVICE

This list of the first forest reserves established shows the Battlement Mesa Forest Reserve was the ninth created, and the fifth in Colorado. In the first two years of the reserve program, Colorado had more reserves than any other state.

cutting railroad ties and had vowed to kill any ranger who tried to stop them.

He tricked them into giving up their rifles with a shooting competition, then talked with them for hours, eventually persuading them to seek permits for their work.

Soon afterward, Kreutzer was assigned to the Battlement Mesa Forest Reserve, where his first confrontation wasn't over timber or fishing, but grazing. The Forest Reserves had recently established a system

of grazing permits. Kreutzer was sent first to the north side of Grand Mesa, with his headquarters in the town of Mesa.

He soon discovered that the western part of the mesa was heavily overgrazed, while to the east, on Buzzard Creek and Muddy Creek, there was abundant

grass. But ranchers didn't want to move their cattle. Kreutzer set out to change their minds, contacting well-known ranchers in Plateau Creek.

"Someone with authority called a meeting at the Snipes Schoolhouse to discuss the matter, but no one was interested; the range was too far away," Shoemaker wrote. "They intimidated, casually ... they were not taking orders from the Government, especially, from a tenderfoot ranger like Kreutzer."

But Kreutzer was no tenderfoot. He proved it to the Plateau Valley crowd by easily riding a notorious bronc, which every-

one believed would toss him in the dirt in seconds.

With his cowboy credentials established, Kreutzer talked with the ranchers, urging them to move their cattle to better grasslands.

One prominent rancher said: "Kreutzer, I'm range boss in this neck of the woods, and when it comes to grazin' matters, I've got the say. Get those permits fixed up and we'll start the roundup and drive to Buzzard, pronto."

"That fall, all the stock were sleek and fat, and the range showed some improvement," Shoemaker wrote.

Later that summer, Kreutzer moved to the south side of Grand Mesa, where he stood up to the Cedaredge cowboys.

He remained on the Battlement Mesa Reserve until 1905, handling disputes between sheep and cattlemen, fights over wildlife poaching and water reservoirs. He survived several days lost in a blizzard atop the mesa. And he fended off the efforts of his boss, a political appointee, to get him fired.

In August, 1905, Kreutzer was assigned to the new Gunnison reserve. Two years later, he became supervisor of the Gunnison National Forest, where a 13,000-foot peak was named for him.

In 1921, he became supervisor of what's now the Roosevelt National Forest, headquartered in Fort Collins.

William Kreutzer died in Fort Collins in 1956.

Sources: "Saga of a Forest Ranger: A Biography of William R. Kreutzer, Forest Ranger No. 1," by Len Shoemaker; Gifford Pinchot letter, Aug. 17, 1944, included in Shoemaker's book; historic newspapers at newspapers.com.

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US FOREST SERVICE

The Indian Canyon Ranger Station near Duchesne, Utah, may be sold or destroyed. The Ashley National Forest is proposing to get rid of its two oldest structures, both dating back nearly to the birth of the U.S. Forest Service more than a century ago. The agency lacks the resources to properly maintain all of its historic properties.

Forest Service wants to sell, raze its old ranger stations

By BRIAN MAFFLY
The Salt Lake Tribune

SALT LAKE CITY — Lacking the resources to properly maintain all of its historic properties, the Ashley National Forest is proposing to get rid of its two oldest structures, both dating back nearly to the birth of the U.S. Forest Service more than a century ago.

The deteriorating, rodent-infested Indian Canyon Ranger Station, along with its outbuildings, are to be razed, under the proposal posted earlier this month and open for public comment through Oct. 23.

And the Stockmore Ranger Station, nestled on the Duchesne River confluence with its West Fork near Hanna, would be sold to the highest bidder without restriction.

The Forest Service hasn't had a use for these facilities in years and their locations aren't well suited for the Ashley's popular cabin rental program, according to Duchesne District Ranger Kristy Groves.

Located just outside the forest boundary on State Route 35 where the road to the Grandview trail head meets the highway, the Stockmore station "helps portray the significance of early Forest Service admin-

istrative sites and how they helped the fledgling Forest Service manage broad swaths of public lands," according to the proposal.

Named for a fake town established at this location as part of suspected land fraud, it served as the headquarters for Ashley's Hanna and Granddaddy districts.

"In the past we reached out to organizations to see if they wanted to use it as a scout camp. The conditions of the buildings are in disrepair," Groves said. "It's a hazard for employees to enter because of hantavirus (transmitted through rodents). It is an odd place for a rental cabin because it's surrounded by private homes."

Both ranger stations, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1999, were built a few years after President Theodore Roosevelt established the Ashley National Forest in 1908, according to Cory Jensen, an architectural historian with the Utah State Historic Preservation Office.

The Stockmore station is in better shape and officials hope a new owner will preserve its main structure and the bunkhouse.

The Daily Sentinel (ISSN 1445-8962)
Printed editions published Wednesday thru Sunday, electronic editions published every morning at 734 S. Seventh Street, Grand Junction, CO 81501. Periodical Postage paid at Grand Junction, CO. Carrier home delivery prices: 13 weeks - \$65.00, 26 weeks - \$130.00, 52 weeks - \$260.00. Weekend delivery packages: Wednesday thru Sunday - \$244.40, Friday thru Sunday - \$197.60, Saturday & Sunday - \$163.80, Sunday only - \$163.80. Weekend "print only" delivery includes the following date in 2020: 11/26/2020. If you are an e-edition subscriber for 11/26/2020, you will not receive a printed paper. Single Copy: \$1.00 daily and \$2.00 Sunday. Mail (USPS): \$30.00 per week, \$1,560 per year. *POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Daily Sentinel, 734 S. Seventh Street, Grand Junction, CO 81501.*

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