MEN WHO MATCHED THE MOUNTAINS

The Forest Service in the Southwest

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1972
United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Southwestern Region

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402

CHAPTER IV
New Rangers

After the Bureau of Forestry was transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture in 1905 and renamed the Forest Service, applicants for Ranger jobs (who had to be between 21 and 40 years of age) were required to take an examination. The first examinations under the new regime were held on May 10 and 11, 1906, throughout the West.

One of those pioneer Rangers, Henry L. Benham, who started work in 1907, was interviewed at his home in Williams, Arizona, and was asked about those early examinations.

"Well," he said, "we had a little written test to find out what we knew about surveying, if anything, and mining. It wasn't too big a test. What they wanted to know mostly was whether a man was able to ride the range and see that the cowmen and the sheepmen stayed on their own allotments.

"I had been riding for Will C. Barnes until he sold out and moved away from New Mexico. Mr. Barnes went into the Forest Service and he wrote me and asked me why I didn't apply for a job. . . .

"They gave you a paper about the duties of a Forest Ranger, and it was a pretty good description. You had to ride and be able to take care of yourself in the open in all kinds of weather. After they gave me the written test I had to saddle a horse and ride out a certain distance in a walk, then trot over to another station, then lope back to the starting point. After punching cows for six years, I didn't have any trouble qualifying.

"Then they tested to see what you knew about handling a gun, so you didn't go out and shoot somebody with it the first day. And you had to put a pack on a horse, a bunch of cooking utensils, bedding, bedrolls, and a tarp to cover it with—and a rope to tie it on with.

"I'd learned all that before I went into the Forest Service. I didn't have much trouble. Some of the boys had an awful time, winding their ropes under the horse and around his belly.

"I took the examination in Denver, and in this class they were mostly right out of college. I remember one boy didn't get

through the written examination before he walked out. In the olden days they wanted cowpunchers or men who were used to being out-of-doors and knew they could get along in the open."

C. V. Shearer, of Las Vegas, New Mexico, another pioneer in the Forest Service, recalled the examination he took in 1911.

"It was a two-day affair," he said, "that is, there was a written examination and there was a field day. The written examination was not a multiple choice. You had to write things out—various questions. There were some about sawmills: how many men does it take to run a 10,000 foot mill? What are the positions of these men? What do they do? What kind of timber grows where? And, one question was, 'How would you fight a ground fire?' 'How would you fight a surface fire?' And 'How would you fight a top fire?'

"I remember one fellow taking the examination; he was just eating tobacco by the plug. He had a big spitoon by him. And he was busy writing and spitting and writing and spitting. Everything was quiet in there, not a word said. When he comes to this one about fighting forest fires, well he couldn't hold it any longer. He broke out, "How'd you fight a top fire? There's only one way; I'd run like hell and pray for rain!' "

Shearer's introduction to his new job as a Forest Ranger would have been enough to turn a young man to soda jerking or clerking or some other less-demanding job. But Shearer remained with the Forest Service for several years, then took a position as farm manager of the Los Alamos School for Boys. He later joined the Soil Conservation Service and remained with that agency until his retirement.

His appointment as an Assistant Forest Ranger on the San Antonio District of the Carson National Forest came through in November, 1911. Shearer started from his home in Las Vegas with a team and a buggy, accompanied by his mother and sister, food, bedding, two hound dogs, a cat, and a bowl of gold fish. The entourage got beyond Mora the first night, then to Black Lake the next. Between Black Lake and Taos they had to traverse a snow-covered road that was straight down the steep side of a mountain. Snow had been scooped out "higher than our heads" and it was extremely icy.

"Those two horses had to hold back," Shearer remembered. "The brakes I had on my buggy wouldn't hold anything. The wheels would just slide on the ice. We had come to this place so suddenly I wasn't able to stop and let my folks out. These horses set back in the breeching, and that buggy going down the hill—the old buggy tongue was turning into a bow. I sure thought it