

Appendix 10. History of the Elk Creek School, Nearby Roads and Trails, and Recreational Use

Elk Creek School

Several homesteads were located on former Forest Service land in Township 21, Range 17 W (sections 34, 28, and 26) and also upstream along Elk Creek in Township 20, Range 17 W (Sections 4 and 10). About half of these homesteaders were married and had children. (See Appendix 10, List of Patented Homesteads and List of Relinquished Homesteads)

In the early 1910s, it was common for families to build small one-room schools in neighborhoods with elementary-age children. The Elk Creek School, located between the two channels of Elk Creek in Section 35 was built in 1918 under the authority of the Missoula County Public Schools system.^{1 2} This school was one of only three in the Swan Valley at that time, the other two being the Rumble Creek School (2-1/2 miles south) and the Smith Creek School (about two miles east of the river).³

Alice Brunson Lawrence attended Elk Creek School, and remembered her mother's stories. "At the same time my parents filed for their homestead, other families with children also filed adjoining homesteads. The A.I. Sias⁴ family was directly south of us, and the M.I. Sias family was just south of Joe Richmond.⁵ There were also three Sias boys close to my age. Clarence and Mrs. Maloney and their children also lived on a homestead about one mile southeast of us. With the number of families who had moved into the western edge of the valley, it soon became evident that it would be difficult for the children to get to the Rumble Creek School during the winter that was 2 to 2-1/2 miles away. Mama became very active in trying to get a school built near our location, and was successful after meeting with both the local school board and county superintendent in Missoula.

The Elk Creek School, located between Big and Little Elk Creeks, was erected in 1918. During the summer of 1918, Ethel and I attended the school under the direction of teacher Miss Jessie Larkin. She also boarded with us at our cabin and was like a big sister. In addition to us, five other students attended the 1918 summer session including Clarence and Thora Maloney, Minnie Sias, two of the Sias brothers, and Carl Haasch. . . . During the winter we hiked ¾ mile with the

¹ According to Alice Brunson Lawrence, Walter Haasch may have built the Elk Creek School.

² Elk Creek School GPS coordinates: N 47 deg. 31.957 min, W 113 deg. 44.608 Min. Elk Creek School outhouse: N47 deg. 31.963 W 113 deg. 44.621 Min.

³ Browman, Audra. In 1904 the school district had been established by Missoula County but the schools were at Placid Lake and Corlett (just south of Seeley Lake). In March 1918, Minnie Crone of Swan River succeeded in petitioning for a division of the districts at the watershed divide. The northern part of the district was named Swan District #33 and the southern part became Seeley Lake School District #34.

⁴ Also spelled "Scias."

⁵ Joe Richmond shows up in several early-day records of the area. However, his name is not listed in the homestead entries for this township. Lawrence wrote "a man by the name of Mr. Wiseman . . . purchased Joe Richmond's homestead." (page 9, My Swan River Memories, 1916-1990).

Sias children in snow halfway up to our knees or deeper to get to school. The boys broke trail in front of us. We also crossed the Big Elk Creek Bridge that had been built by Joe Richmond.”⁶

Alberta Kottka, a single woman who filed a homestead entry in 1918 west of Elk Creek, also taught at the Elk Creek School from the fall of 1920 through the spring of 1921.⁷ Although the school was built in 1918, it only operated until the fall of 1923, when a chimney fire ignited the wooden roof and burned the building to the ground. Students and the teacher moved their classes to a neighbor’s cabin for the remainder of that school year, and the Elk Creek School disappeared from both the landscape and the Missoula County records. Harold Haasch remembered it this way. “One year the kids at that school had to hold their Christmas program at Red Williams' house because the school had burned down. [Red] let the kids and the teacher use his house as a school during the day, too.”⁸ In 1986, only a few logs from the school’s outhouse remained at the site.⁹

Roads and Trails

Early homesteaders used wagons and horses to navigate the roads and trails in and out of the Swan River country from the late 1800s up until about 1919. Alice Brunson Lawrence, daughter of an early-day homesteader, wrote in 2001, “We first went into Swan Valley in the summer of 1916 when Dad and Mama were considering filing for a homestead. . . Since the trails were not good enough for cars to make the trip, my parents rented a covered wagon and a team of horses from a livery stable.” Lawrence’s stories continue. “By 1919, the road from Missoula to Swan River had been extended all the way to Condon and beyond, and many of the trails to the homesteads had been improved for cars. Dad and Mama could then drive the Model T Ford all the way to the cabin although the roads were still rough and narrow and some still had stumps in the middle of them that the high-wheeled cars were able to clear.”

Two of the earliest roads shown on the 1914 map of T21N and R17W of the Swan Valley include the road labeled “Lion Creek to Ovando” east of the Swan River, and a side road labeled “the road to McCrackens.” This latter road led from the Lion Creek-to-Ovando road in the vicinity of the modern-day Swan Valley Community Hall and continued west across Swan River and the east fork of Elk Creek in Section 35, and ended in Section 34. The road was apparently built by a homesteader named Freda McCracken, who filed a homestead entry in 1916 but

⁶ The location of this bridge is unclear. That is, if the children crossed the bridge before they got to school, the bridge would have been across the westernmost channel of Elk Creek shown on the 1914 map. This channel is barely visible today. Today, remains of an early bridge can be seen just downstream from the existing Elk Creek Bridge, on the main channel of Elk Creek (GPS coordinates of abutment on east side of creek: N47 Deg. 31.996 Min. W 113 Deg. 44.492 Min.)

⁷ USDA Forest Service Homestead Entries and Inspections Reports, Flathead National Forest.

⁸ Haasch, Harold. Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project, Summer 2001.

⁹ Wiesner, Diann E. Schools of the Swan Valley, 1918-1956 by the Swan Valley School Class of 1986. June, 1986. Unpublished report.

relinquished it in 1917.¹⁰ In files located at the Mansfield Library in Missoula, historian Audra Browman wrote that McCracken “must have been a very energetic soul, for his (sic) side road is the only road branching off the Ovando-Lion Creek road that is marked on early maps. A number of trails are indicated crisscrossing the valley, but none other is called a side road.”¹¹

Other trails of interest shown on the map include a blazed trail along the east side of the river in Section 26, along with pack trails parallel to the river in portions of sections 22, 26 (west of the river channels) and sections 35 and 36 (east of the river channels). These trails would indicate possible use of the area by Indians, early trappers and prospectors, packers, guides and homesteaders active in the area at the time of the early 1900s surveys.

Alice Brunson Lawrence remembered trails to the river in Section 34 and 35, and to the post office across the river in Section 26 (located at the Drury homestead, SE1/4 Section 26, now Charles Road). “My father had blazed a trail to the High Banks area for fishing and also another trail that branched off of it and went across Swan River on a single pole footbridge with rails to the Swan Valley post office.”

Lawrence’s stories and others told by lifelong resident Gyda Newman, who was interviewed for the Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project¹², indicate that the first bridge over Elk Creek in Section 35 was built before 1918. Remains of old bridge abutments can be seen downstream from the present-day bridge location. The original pole bridge was replaced by Burlington Northern, Inc. in the early 1970s to facilitate logging. A Missoula County letter from the bridge department to the county surveyor following a bridge inspection in 1987 states that, “The bridge consists of two adjacent railroad boxcars set on 24” diameter untreated log abutments. A timber deck was laid on the existing flatcar flooring. The total structure length is 53 feet and its width is 20 feet.”

Recreation

Recreational use of Section 35, Elk Creek and the surrounding area has consisted mainly of local residents who enjoy hunting, fishing and hiking in the area. During the 1930s, many of the homesteaders moved away from the Swan Valley in order to find full-time work. Even so, many of them maintained their cabins as summer vacation properties. Bob and Gyda Newman, longtime residents of the Swan Valley, used Gyda’s family’s homestead as a summer cabin from the 1940s through about 1972, when Bob retired from his railroad job in Missoula. “Elk Creek is the most beautiful creek in the world. We had it all to ourselves for many, many years,” Bob said during a visit to the cabin in 2003.¹³ (Section 10, T20N, R17W). The Newmans, along with many other summer residents of this area, treasured the quiet and beauty they enjoyed seasonally.

¹⁰ Map of Township 21 North, Range 17 West, US Surveyor General’s Office, Helena, MT, December 14, 1914. Map in the personal possession of William R. “Bud” Moore, Condon, Montana, Coyote Forest Archives; and USFS Flathead National Forest Supervisor’s Office, Engineering, Land Records and Maps.

¹¹ Browman, Audra. History of the Swan Valley. Pp. 26. Unpublished paper.

¹² Newman, Gyda. Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project, 1999.

¹³ Newman, Bob. Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project, 2003 notes.

Alice Brunson Lawrence wrote, “After we left the homestead in 1921, we never used it as a permanent residence again but as a summer cabin.” Later, she describes those summer trips. “From the summers of 1921 to 1929, we always took our vacation at the homestead in Swan River for periods up to three weeks in late July and early August. My close friend Merlyn Jones sometimes went with us and we swam and hiked. Dad always went fishing at “High Banks” and would take two fishing baskets once a week and fill them up with bull trout and what he called “red bellies” that were probably Dolly Varden. He would bring them to the cabin and Mama and I would clean them in a wash tub.

Lawrence further describes High Banks. “Dad enjoyed fishing and had a favorite fishing spot on Swan River that he called “High Banks.” It was 1 to 1-1/2 miles northeast of our cabin, and could be reached by taking a steep trail that he had blazed down to the river,” wrote Alice Brunson Lawrence in 2001. The term “High Banks” was commonly used to describe this area as late as the 1970s, when apparently the river channels changed. Currently, this westernmost channel of the river (which was clearly marked on the 1914 GLO map) is dry and overgrown with shrubs and trees.¹⁴

Twentieth century homesteaders in the Upper Swan Valley also depended upon fish in the streams and the river channels to supplement their diets, especially during the early summer cutthroat spawning and the fall bull trout spawning seasons.¹⁵ Early residents said that the fishing was excellent in the river near the mouths of Elk Creek, Glacier Creek and Cold Creek.

In more modern times, local residents and avid anglers enjoyed a variety of subsistence gathering and outdoor recreation activities all along Elk Creek and along the river downstream from the mouth of Elk Creek toward the large “island” where the river braids channels through sections 35, 26 and 23. Favorite fishing areas, “High Bank” and “Little High Bank,” existed along a river channel just west of the island located on the eastern boundary of Section 27, and into Section 26. One of the country’s foremost fly fishermen and Seeley Lake author, Norman Maclean, often fished the Swan River downstream from the mouth of Elk Creek, on Forest Service land in Section 26.¹⁶ However, for the past thirty years Elk Creek has been closed to all fishing to protect native bull trout.

¹⁴ Harmon, Wayne A. “Butch.” Personal communication to Suzanne Vernon, 2000.

¹⁵ Huston, Ken. Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project, 1999. Haasch, Harold. Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project, 1999. Bob Newman, July 2003 Personal communication to Suzanne Vernon.

¹⁶ Moore, Bud. Personal communication to Suzanne Vernon, September 2006.