

## Clarence Stilwell



To say that Clarence Stilwell's life has revolved around trees would be an understatement. He has studied trees, managed trees, harvested trees, taught college courses about trees, protected trees, fallen in love with ponderosa pine trees, taught his grandchildren about trees, and even chose the location of his retirement home--all because of the trees.

Clarence was born in 1910, an omen, he said, of things to come. "That was the year of the Big Fire," he said, explaining that he grew up hearing heart-breaking stories about the 1910 fire, and later worked around many men who had seen that fire first-hand. "I've always been a fire man," he said.

Stilwell is a professional forester. He spent nearly three decades of his life working to develop fire and timber management plans for the Forest Service in Montana and Northern Idaho.

"Trees can tell you a lot. . .," he said, simply. "They know more than I do."

He talks about trees as if they were people. He grew up at the foot of the Cascades, he said, and it was there that he "got acquainted" with the large, old ponderosa pines. "They've always been kind of a soft spot with me," he grinned.

In 1934, Stilwell graduated from the University of Idaho at Moscow with a degree in forestry. He immediately went to work for the Forest Service, working at first on fire and trail crews, later moving up to

management positions. When World War II started, he enlisted in the Army Corps of Engineers, where he served as a transit surveyor. At the end of World War II, he returned to his Forest Service job, and by 1946, was assigned to the Condon Ranger District, Flathead National Forest.

During the years that he worked at Condon, the Forest Service preserved some of the 500-year old ponderosa pines that grew on the Gordon Ranch.

"The highway was just being surveyed when I came as a ranger here. At that time, we (Forest Service) reserved those big trees bordering the Gordon Ranch. Koessler's mill was going then, and the Forest Service traded trees on Owl Creek to the mill, in exchange for Koessler not cutting the big pines that would border the new highway," he explained.



"We figured that if the highway went through there and they weren't preserved, people would never know what the valley looked like with the big pine," he said, adding that, "We just did it because we felt

there was a need to preserve the history of the valley and the way it looked."

When Stilwell first saw the Swan Valley in the mid-1940s the road from Swan Lake to Condon was impassable during certain times of the year. "I couldn't get through, from the Swan side, the road was so bad," he said, commenting on his first trip here.

His first trip to the Swan was memorable, he said. "Being a fire horse, it was quite dramatic, really," he laughed. Driving north from Seeley Lake, he had just passed the Gordon Ranch when he spotted smoke at the foot of the Mission Mountains.

"I looked over to the west, and there was the damndest smoke over there. Heavy smoke. I thought, 'Uh-oh. I'm the new ranger and here I've got a fire already.' It was over at Lundberg's," he said. The Lundberg family had been clearing land in a meadow next to a spring so they could build a lake, he said. "I drove in there and nobody was around. So I kind of stopped the spread of the fire. It wasn't very big. It was throwing a lot of smoke," he explained.

Charlie Lundberg, owner of the ranch, soon returned to the property, and Stilwell started to give him heck for leaving the fire. "I can't remember what time of year it was, but it burned pretty good," he said. And so it was the Clarence met the Lundberg family. Through an odd twist of fate, Charlie Lundberg would soon become Stilwell's new father-in-law. Clarence married Mabel Lundberg in 1947.



In the 1940s, the forests of the Swan Valley consisted of bigger trees, compared

to today. "(It was) lots of mature stuff," he explained. "Most of the trees in the valley at that time were the big ponderosas. They (were) scattered through, just like they are now, really."

One tree species in the valley surprised him, however. Western white pine, or Idaho white pine, as Clarence calls it.

"That's the only one that seemed like it was out of place. There's some down on the lower end of the valley, down there on the far drainages at the north end of the valley, on up on the west side. There are areas in there that look a little bit like North Idaho. Quite a bit of pine down there."

Clarence is an expert at tree identification. "I teach all my grandchildren about trees. How to identify them. How to tell a Douglas fir from a white fir. Some of them never forget," he said. "The red fir, or Douglas fir, is the only fir with a sharp red, pointed bud. If you have any trouble between Douglas fir and white fir or any other firs, the sharp, pointed red bud is the key to the Douglas fir," he explained. The Douglas fir, he said, is now prominent in the Swan Valley.

The Condon Ranger District encompassed most of the Upper Swan Valley and the Big Prairie region of the South Fork of the Flathead during the 1940s. Commercial logging was limited to private land in the valley bottom, except for occasional Forest Service salvage sales, usually involving ponderosa pine.

"There were no real commercial type sales. They (Forest Service) were just kind of keeping ahead of the insects and things like that," he explained.

Stilwell remembered Al and Vic Wise at Salmon Prairie who favored the big pines, and sawed them into boards at their sawmill. "They were lumber men and they liked that big ponderosa pine. They could slab big boards off of that stuff. They were always looking for a bug-killed tree or some excuse to cut one of those big pines. If they didn't find them, well, I'd find them, and sell them to them. It was a salvage proposition, to try to keep ahead of the pine beetles," he said.

Disposal of mill slash was a problem at all of the small, local mills. "I had to watch them real close on that to be sure when they were sawing that they'd throw the slash . . . around the sawmill site where it wouldn't set it afire and burn it up easy," he said.

Stilwell recalled one lightning-caused fire in Windfall Creek that was difficult to snuff out. "We had a fire in there that threatened a little bit. It was kind of a battle for awhile," he said. Stilwell credited local packers for helping put the fire out. "I was amazed. [We] had the Wilhelm boys. [And] Dunlap. He was a salvation to me because he'd take his horses and mules and take stuff into places where other people wouldn't go because they were afraid of the fire. He'd go anywhere," he said.

Stilwell returned to the Windfall Creek fire after it was supposedly out, thanks to a report of smoke from packers who traveled through the area. "I took off in the evening and went up there. It was quite a hike clear up the stream. By golly, there was still a little bit of fire in there and I put it out. Something kind of funny happened that night. It was a full moon, came up. I tell you that moon just right on the horizon. I thought it was that doggone fire. I thought, 'Boy that thing is taking off.' But after I [was] up over the ridge a little way, I could see it was the moon, it wasn't the fire!" he laughed. "That's the only real scare I had with fires [in the Swan]. Wasn't really anything but my imagination, that there was any danger there."

Scoop Scolville, one of the most colorful characters to ever work for the Forest Service, was working at Condon when Stilwell was ranger here. Scoop knew all about fires, and a whole lot more. The first time Clarence met him, Scoop was working near the barn at the old ranger station. "I could hear somebody bellerin' and hollerin'. So I moved up to the barn, and here was Scoop Scoville, up there gathering the mules up and he was really bellerin'. Scoop was a burly guy and that's the way he did things. He was a powerhouse, I tell you."

Scoop was in charge of the Forest Service mules, and had been working as

ranger before Clarence arrived. In those days, most of the work on the district focused on fire protection, fire prevention, and fire management, Clarence explained-- and the maintenance of miles and miles of trails.

"This country, about the only way you could get around was on trails," he explained.

Pack strings of mules shuttled supplies to places like Hemlock Peak, Holland Ridge, and Big Prairie. "That's what we had them [mules] for, mostly. It was the only way we had to get stuff over the hill!" Stilwell laughed.

Most of the operations in the South Fork of the Flathead were based out of the Holland Guard Station at Holland Lake. "We used it as a headquarters for packing mules from this side over to the Bob Marshall," he explained, adding that the old Holland Guard Station cabin was located at the Holland Lake swimming beach and the Owl Creek Packer Camp wasn't developed until later.

At that time, the main trail into the South Fork of the Flathead was on the north side of the lake. A local outfitter, George Moore, had built a trail along the south shore of the lake and Holland Creek, but it wasn't improved until after World War II. However, both trails received considerable use. The South Fork of the Flathead primitive area (now the Bob Marshall Wilderness) was used by hunters, guides, fishermen and outfitters. "It had a pretty good reputation as an area to hunt and fish," he said.

Stilwell didn't have much time to hunt or fish when he worked here, but he enjoyed hiking in the Mission Mountains when his job required it. The area was still wild and remote, and Indians from the Mission Valley still camped there regularly. "I went across there one time, just prior to the hunting season. An old Indian was camped back in there. I stopped and talked to him. He never said much. I just told him, 'You know hunting season doesn't start [yet].' I just kind of cautioned him about being careful not to start too early," he said, smiling.

For Clarence, the Swan Valley community of the 1940s offered few surprises. "I kind of liked the area. People were about as I would expect them to be in a rural community like this. More or less isolated. Kind of a backwoods area," he said. Most of the people either worked for the Forest Service, or operated small sawmills on their own land, he explained.

However, during the years following World War II, major changes arrived in the Swan Valley. Clarence, like many others, believes the new highway had the most impact. "That highway made a lot of difference. Killed more deer. Made it possible to get access to these stands of timber, especially in the Missions," he said. "It makes me kind of sad what has happened to the trees in the Missions."

In 1948, Clarence and his family moved to northern Idaho. He and Mabel raised five children there, returning seasonally to the Swan Valley where they maintained a cabin.

By the mid-1950s, the Stilwell family had acquired two Swan Valley homesteads: the Charlie Anderson place on Pine Ridge Road, and the old Saterstrum homestead at Loon Lake. Following Clarence's retirement from his position as head of timber management for the Forest Service in Sandpoint, Idaho, he and Mabel began building a new log home along the banks of the Swan River at Pine Ridge Road. In 1973 they retired there. However, they never developed the Loon Lake property.



"We bought the Loon Lake homestead to preserve it, not to develop it," Clarence explained. Semine Saterstrum, a single woman, filed a homestead entry on 160 acres surrounding Loon Lake in 1914. Clarence explains it this way: "She must have been a loon lover. She worked in town for various rich people in the winter, and came up here in the summer. (She was) very industrious, and would hike everywhere," he said.

Miss Saterstrum died in the 1950s, and the Stilwells acquired the property from her estate. "We bought Loon Lake to kind of preserve it, like she used to know it," Clarence said. "The loon is a wild bird that has to be secluded, and he needs protection."

With that sort of nurturing spirit in mind, the Stilwells eagerly settled into the Swan Valley community, enjoying nearly thirty years of retirement at their riverside home.

"We moved here because of the environment. I love the big trees, the wildlife, and the mountains," he said. Both he and Mabel enjoyed the critters that shared the forest surrounding their home, especially the deer, chipmunks and squirrels. "This is a nice retirement area," Clarence said.

*Clarence and Mabel Stilwell moved to Sandpoint, Idaho in 2001, to live closer to their children. In January of 2003, Clarence died of natural causes. He was 92 years old.*

*Clarence and Mabel were active in many community groups, including the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society and the Lutheran Church. Information for this article came from interviews conducted in 1992 and again in 1999. Tapes and transcripts are on file at the Swan Ecosystem Center.*

## Mabel Lundberg Stilwell



Mabel Lundberg Stilwell's life has reflected the things that she loves: children and mountains. She dreamed of becoming a teacher, and she was able to live those dreams, educating children at schools throughout western Montana. At the same time, she enjoyed raising her five children. In addition, she was able to acquire two homestead properties in the Swan Valley, where she found refuge every summer. She later retired here, and credits the education she received in the one-room schoolhouses of the Swan Valley and the discipline she learned from her Scandinavian parents for giving her the inspiration she needed to pursue her dreams.

Even while managing a large family and pursuing her teaching career, Mabel's roots were always firmly planted in the Swan Valley. "I was born here. I wanted to die here. This is my home," she said.

Mabel grew up on a homestead in the Kraft Creek area of the Swan Valley. Her parents, Charlie and Olivia Lundberg, filed a homestead entry just east of Stoner Lake in 1914. Charlie and Olivia came to the Swan Valley with Charlie's mother, Bertha Roll, and stepfather, Fred Roll, who

also filed a homestead entry on adjoining land in Section 24.

"I think they wanted to have something of their own," Mabel explained, adding that the Homestead Act enabled the families to work their way toward land ownership.

Mabel's Swedish father and Norwegian mother brought traditions with them from their homelands, including practical skills that made life easier in the mountains. Her father, for example, snowshoed everywhere in the winter months. "They needed them because the snow got pretty deep," she said. And her mother enjoyed cooking traditional foods, using basic ingredients. One meal that the family enjoyed in particular, was fish-head soup. One family member commented, "We ate it, but we didn't want to know what she put in it!"

However, like many other Swan Valley homesteaders, Charlie Lundberg often worked away from the Swan Valley. Between 1914 and the mid-1920s, he worked on the railroad or at the Butte copper mines each winter. Every summer he would move his family back to the Swan Valley, where he could work for the Forest Service, building and maintaining trails.

Mabel was born at the family's homestead cabin in August of 1917. She believes that she was the first white child ever born in the Swan Valley, and she often shares her story with visitors. "It took three days and two nights to go out of the valley at that time, so childbirth was not something that you went to town for," she said. The night Mabel was born, Charlie Lundberg saddled his horse and rode to the Gordon Ranch, where he knew he could find a doctor.

"They [ranch owners Renick and Witherspoon] had doctors come and stay there," she explained. Mabel's father had no trouble retrieving a doctor who agreed to make a house call. "He came over just to see how I was, and my mother," she said, adding that she was born with a little bit of a black eye. "Doc said, 'It's kind of a tough country when the babies are born with black eyes!'" she laughed.



When her parents were naming her, the doctor said, "Call her Swan," and her dad answered that that was a boy's name. "So they called me Swanreed. Mabel Swanreed Lundberg," she said.

"That's where I got my start," she explained. And it was a good start, she added.

By the mid-1920s, the Lundberg and Roll families decided they could live on their homesteads year 'round, even though Charlie still had to work away from home occasionally. Fred and Charlie also both took up trapping, which supplemented their incomes.

The families had constructed several buildings and also cleared land and planted hay and grain. Fred Roll had even built a schoolhouse on the boundary between his land and Lundbergs, to accommodate the school-aged children who lived in the neighborhood. The schoolhouse was built from logs cut on the Roll homestead. "It was very small," Mabel laughed. "It was just a room," she said, explaining that a barrel stove kept it warm.

Marguerite Wilhelm was the first teacher at the Roll School, in 1921 and 1922. Students in 1921 included Charlie Roll, Herman and Otto Knoof; Mabel

Peterson, Clara Lundberg and Dobb Wilhelm.

Mabel first attended classes at the Roll School in the mid-1920s. Some of the other students included Mabel's siblings, Clara and Warner; Dobb, Ting, Bill and Eunice Wilhelm; The Topp children: Edgar, Marie and Janet (they lived in the Deegan cabin); and Alan Ladd, who was related to the Hollopeter family. Some of the teachers at the Roll School lived with Mabel's family, including Mary Holden, Florence D'Autremont, and Ruth Dettweiler, she said.

Mabel's favorite subjects included reading, and history. She memorized poetry, and particularly enjoyed the teachers like D'Autremont who shared an interest in literature. "She was a good teacher. A fun teacher," she said.

The teachers were responsible for ordering books from Missoula. Pencils, pens and paper were in short supply, so most of the instruction and lessons were done on the chalkboard that lined one wall of the school room.

Surrounded by neighbors that included other railroad workers, Mabel grew up in a community where everyone seemed like family. Her grandparents lived next door, along with two uncles and an aunt. Her immediate neighbors, Jimmy Lynch and a black man by the name of Johnson, were also railroad employees, along with several homesteaders who lived closer to the river, including Deegans and Sheehans.

The black man, Johnson, was the only one in the neighborhood who filed a homestead entry but didn't prove up on his land. "He didn't like the weather and everything. So he went back down South," Mabel explained.

The schoolhouse, and a larger log cabin on the Roll homestead, were often the center of community parties and dances. "My grandparents had a building that really could take care of people. They always liked to have fun. Lots of dances," she explained, adding that all of her siblings, her grandparents, and her uncles, enjoyed music. "They were the first family to have a Victrola, too," she said. However, she

explained that people would usually dance to homemade music. Fred Roll, Charlie Roll and Warner Lundberg all played either violins or an accordian. "It was nice. . . for people to get together," she said.

School picnics also provided an excuse for people to gather. "We always liked to have picnics," she said.

On the Fourth of July, people living near Holland Lake would host a picnic at the lodge. "It was fun, just to see everyone," she said.

Young people in the valley could always find ways to get together on their own, especially to go swimming in the summertime. One of the saddest things that Mabel remembered was when a cousin drowned in the river. "His name was Arnold Brunson. He was staying with his grandma [Bertha Roll]," she remembered. Brunson was swimming in a popular spot where Holland Creek joins the river. He got caught in a current that swept him under the roots of a big pine tree, under the riverbank.

"I remember everyone just so sad. Didn't think that would happen. But you never know. I was always aware of Mother saying, 'No, you don't go to that hole, because the water takes you under,'" Mabel remembered.

The Lundbergs lived on the homestead in Section 24 until the late 1920s when Charlie decided to sell out. The land there required a lot of work, he said, for the amount of hay and grain that it produced. The Lundbergs didn't move very far away though. Charlie convinced the Northern Pacific Railroad to sell him land that bordered the Swan River about two miles east of his homestead, on Section 31, just north of the modern day Pine Ridge Road. Section 31 offered more meadows, a spring creek, and the river. Haying was more productive, and a large population of beaver could be trapped, providing cash income. Charlie bought the property and started building a new house there in 1929.

In order to survive in the Swan Valley, the Lundbergs lived on wild game, supplemented with huckleberries that they picked in the foothills of the Mission Mountains, along with potatoes and other

root crops that they harvested from large gardens.

"You had to make use of everything you had. We ate deer meat and fish. Things that we could get from the country," she said. The land, and the water, supported them. Mabel's father fished near the inlet at Holland Lake, and netted large numbers of native trout and mountain whitefish. "They'd go up there and just gather them up," Mabel remarked. "They put up whatever they could," she added, explaining that her mother canned most of the fish and the meat. True to her Scandinavian heritage, Olivia also stored salted meat and fish in a crock that was kept cold in the creek.

Like other families living in the Swan Valley during the 1920s, the Lundbergs and Rolls also raised a few milk cows. Every morning they'd milk the cows, then separate the cream from the milk. Cream was kept cold in cans, then taken to a mail drop where the mail delivery drivers would pick up the cans and haul them to a creamery in Missoula. (The mail drop was located about three miles from the homestead.) Each month families in the Swan would receive their "cream checks" which helped provide ready cash to pay for necessities.

Children helped with chores such as fetching the mail. "We had to wait for the mail," Mabel explained. Sometimes, in cold weather, a neighbor would also be waiting at the mail drop, with a warming fire already built. Mabel remembered one neighbor in particular who would cook squirrels over the fire, while he waited. "We'd eat deer meat, but not squirrels!" she laughed.

Sometimes the children walked to the mail drop, but other times they retrieved the mail with the family's horse and buggy.

Managing a ranch in this remote, mountainous country required organization. Like many of the other Scandinavian people who settled here, Olivia Lundberg had a strict, daily routine.

Long before daylight, the matriarch of the house was up, cooking a breakfast of hotcakes and eggs, or oatmeal. Then she headed out to the barn to do the milking. Then came the separating. The cream and

milk then went into the ice box, cooled with ice cut from Holland Lake or a nearby pond.

Life was a continual shift from one chore to the next. Every Monday was wash day. Laundry was washed by hand, and hung on a line to dry, even in winter. Later, the stiff, frozen overalls, shirts and dresses were brought inside to finish drying by the stove. Mabel's mother ironed every article of clothing, using irons heated on the wood stove.

Cooking was time-consuming. Every two days Olivia would bake bread in the wood cookstove. For special occasions, she'd make Swedish bread -- Svenskakakka. Big, sweet, round loaves. Family members practically fought to see who would get the first warm slice out of the oven.

Olivia loved to sew. She made quilts. She mended all the family's clothes. She knit socks, and sewed them up with darning needles when they'd wear out. "They made do with anything they had," Mabel said. The cupboards in the cabin lacked doors. Instead, Olivia covered them with curtains.

Olivia was enterprising. She would sell her oven fresh bread, fresh milk, eggs, cream and butter, handmade quilts, pickled fish, and even freshly butchered chickens and turkeys to the dude ranches and lodges at Lindbergh Lake and Holland Lake.

"That's what she had for spending money," Mabel said.

Even though the Lundbergs raised a variety of livestock, predators weren't a problem. The family also raised stock dogs to protect the domestic animals. The dogs kept the bears and lions away, Mabel recalled.

One pest couldn't be eliminated however: mosquitoes. "They swarmed," she said simply, adding that Olivia always said it was like turning daylight into dark during mosquito season. Mabel remembered that her mother tried burning juniper branches to create smoke "smudges" to keep the bugs from coming inside the cabin. "She took juniper and broke it up, and made a smudge in a can," she explained. She even tried burning the juniper inside, once, but only

once. The smoke stung her eyes so badly she didn't try it again.

Birds proved useful in the war against mosquitoes. Charlie Lundberg set out bird houses to attract tree swallows, blue birds and purple martin. Olivia liked birds, too. Especially hummingbirds. She planted hollyhocks and dahlias to attract the tiny creatures.

The Lundberg's ranch was nearly self-sufficient. "We didn't buy too much. It was always something that we made, or had made. We got along okay," Mabel said.

Buildings included the main house and barn, all built with logs cut on the property. From the house, a walkway was built to a large storage building which included the woodshed, ice house, and saw shop. A sharpening stone was powered by pedals similar to a bicycle. Scythe and mower blades were kept sharp for haying, and harvesting grain.

A pig house and pen, and mower shed, were attached to the barn. Other outbuildings included a large root cellar, a guest cabin, garage, feed (grain) house, outhouse and chicken coop, and an outdoor cookery or "cook shack" where Charlie cooked the pig mash and Olivia made her own soap and dipped her own candles.

After the family moved to Section 31, Indians from the Mission Valley continued camping seasonally near the spring creek. "I think they just wanted to visit this country. It was just right over the mountain. They liked it," she said.

In 1929 a large forest fire burned through the area, destroying the haystacks and meadows on both the original homestead (Section 24) and the new property that Charlie had purchased from the railroad. The fire also destroyed several cabins, barns and also burned the Roll School. However, the Roll School had been closed the previous summer. Local residents had decided to build a new school near the 33 Bar Ranch (called the Pine Ridge School) where there were more students. Mabel and others were attending classes at the newly constructed Pine Ridge School at the time of the 1929 fire. The students were all moved

to the Gordon Ranch while firefighters fought the blaze, which burned from near Stoner Lake east to the swamps at Barber Creek.

Mabel said she would never forget the forest fire. "It was scary," she said. "They [Forest Service] had a lot of people to get it conquered."

Mabel attended 7th and 8th grades at Pine Ridge School, then left the Swan Valley to attend high school in Missoula. Later, she earned her teaching certificate at the teacher's college in Dillon.

In the early 1940s, she married a local boy, Jens Monrad, whose parents had also been Swan Valley homesteaders. Jens and Mabel had two daughters, Olive and Jenice. Sadly, tragedy struck the family when Jens was killed in an accident while working on the Alaska Highway.



Mabel kept teaching, supporting her two daughters. In the mid-1940s, Mabel met Forest Service District Ranger Clarence Stilwell, who was working at the Condon Ranger Station. She had asked the Forest Service for permission to install a grounded telephone line at her Swan Valley property, but the government couldn't budge on its

regulations. Stilwell, obligated to enforce Forest Service rules, had to deny Mabel's request for a telephone. However, the two of them got along well, and were married in 1947. Clarence adopted Olive and Jenice as his own, and he and Mabel had three more children: Joe, Susan and Karla. The family moved to Sandpoint, Idaho where Clarence worked until he retired. However, they often found refuge in the Swan Valley, during summer vacations and weekend retreats.

In 1973, following their retirement, Clarence and Mabel moved back to the Swan Valley, to the log home they had built above the banks of the Swan River. Here, they enjoyed nearly thirty years of being active in the Swan Valley community. They have been involved with the Lutheran church, the schools, Montana Audubon, the Grounded Eagle Foundation, and the local history club. Mabel never had any regrets about growing up in the Swan Valley, or returning here to retire.

"It's a nice place. Nice people," she said. "I can't think of anything better than to be from this country."

*In 2001, Mabel and Clarence Stilwell moved to Sandpoint, Idaho, to be closer to their children. In 2002, they celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary. Mabel was 85 years old. In January of 2003, Clarence died of natural causes. He was 92.*

*The Stilwell family owns two Swan Valley homesteads: the Charlie Anderson place at Pine Ridge Road, and the old Saterstrum homestead at Loon Lake. Mabel's brother, Warner, still lives in the Swan Valley, on the family ranch just north of the Pine Ridge Road.*