

Prescott Forest History

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The Prescott Forest Reserve, predecessor to the Prescott National Forest, was established on May 10, 1898, by a proclamation issued by President William McKinley. The Reserve consisted of 16 sections of land laying southwest Prescott. Generally, its boundaries were Copper Basin on the west, Aspen Creek on the east, Bootlegger Spring to the south, and Williams Peak to the north. The establishment of the Reserve came in response to the community's need to protect its domestic watershed; the town's water plan called for dams to be constructed on Banning and Potts Creeks. In 1891, Congress had passed legislation authorizing the president to set aside from the public domain, forest reserves to protect timberlands and watersheds. The Prescott Forest Reserve was the second established in Arizona; the first was the Grand Cañon Forest Reserve, established in February, 1893.

The mountains surrounding Prescott had already been heavily mined and its timber severely cut since 1863 when gold was discovered in the Bradshaw Mountains. This, despite federal laws forbidding the cutting of timber from the public domain. Timber could only be cut legally from homesteads, mining claims, and private property. By 1898, most of the mature timber had been stripped from the mountains and hillsides, sawed into timbers and construction lumber, and transported to the mining operations. At first, even the Reserve and the hiring of a Ranger was not protection enough. Within a year after its establishment, approximately 1,000 additional trees had been cut from it. In October, 1899, the Reserve was greatly enlarged to offer additional protection for the timberlands. The Reserve then stretched from Granite Mountain to the north to Black Canyon City to the south.

In 1908, the Reserve, renamed "Prescott National Forest," absorbed the Verde National Forest. The Verde National Forest was established the previous year to protect the watershed of the Verde River. Over the years, Forest boundaries have changed as land was turned back to the public domain or traded with private owners to consolidate boundaries for easier administration.

By the time the Prescott Forest Reserve was established, almost all old-growth timber had been depleted by wildfire and severe cutting. The trees around Crown King were gone; Big Bug Mesa was mostly devoid of timber. The only mature trees remaining on the Forest were in Horse Thief Canyon, an area which proved too difficult to log. Junipers and oaks on the

lower elevations were also heavily cut, these to supply fuelwood to the mines' and smelters' insatiable boilers. Where once there had been good stands of oak and juniper, by 1900 there were fewer than one tree per acre. It was this much-depleted forest the first rangers were called upon to protect.

Illegal timber cutting continued to be a problem for the first few years, but it decreased significantly when the Reserve's boundaries were better marked and the General Land Office issued regulations and procedures for legally cutting timber from the public domain.

Until the Forest Reserves came under the administration of Gifford Pinchot, supervisors and rangers were political appointees. Their quality of leadership varied greatly. Within a relatively short period, however, a competent staff was hired, despite very low salaries. A ranger's salary was \$60.00-90.00 per month, about half of which was required to feed his horse. At the time, unskilled mine laborers in the area earned \$2.50-3.00 per day; skilled labor received \$4.00.

When Louis Barrett inspected the Reserve in 1904, he was impressed with its 5 member staff. Frank Stewart, the Reserve's Supervisor, was a good administrator, kept accurate records, and, very importantly, was respected by the community.

Of Stewart's staff, several were promoted later to Regional or Agency-wide positions. Leon F. Kneipp was thought by Barrett to be one of the most efficient rangers in the Forest Service. Kneipp later became supervisor for several national forests and eventually served in the Washington Office as Assistant Chief, Division of Lands. C. H. Hinderer, stationed on the Thumb Butte District, served as supervisor on the Guadalupe, Sacramento, and Verde Forest Reserves and National Forests before becoming supervisor on the Prescott National Forest for about eight years. Barrett's only negative criticism of Hinderer was that he was too easily bluffed by the "hard element found around these mining camps and wood cuttings."

Frank C. W. Pooler, stationed at Crown King, the Reserve's most difficult district, earned high praise from Barrett. After serving as supervisor for several Forests, including the Prescott, Pooler became Regional Forester for the Southwestern Region, 1920-1945. The remaining staff member, McCloud was an excellent ranger on patrol work and fire duty. He was able to get along with the "hard element" of his district for he was unafraid of anything or anybody. Although his education was limited, McCloud was the best ranger on the Reserve when it came to enforcing regulations.

While the problem of wide-spread timber theft was remedied fairly

quickly, problems of grazing and overgrazing continued for years. The area's cattle industry began in 1869 when James Baker drove a herd of 300 cattle from New Mexico into the upper end of the Verde River, north of Jerome. In response to heavy demands for beef by the military he was soon joined by other "soon-to-be-ranchers" who brought in thousands of head of cattle. Within 6 years, livestock raising was one of Arizona's leading industries. Completion of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1881 and the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad a year later opened up even more of the territory for ranching, especially the central and northern areas where rainfall was more abundant.

Most of Arizona was public domain, but it was 1905 before the Forest Service adopted an allotment and permit system for livestock. In the meantime, their numbers were limited only by the availability of water and vegetation. By 1891, Arizona's tax rolls listed almost 721,000 head of cattle, however, it was commonly believed there were twice that number actually on the ranges. When the severe drought of the 1890s hit the Southwest, it dealt a death blow to many ranchers. During the next several years, thousands of cattle died, ranches went into bankruptcy, and the range was devastated further by drought and overgrazing.

Even under the Forest Service's system of grazing allotments, it was difficult to reduce the number of livestock to sustainable levels. The numbers sometimes reflected politics, the economy, and wartime constraints, rather than good range management. Livestock permits on the Forest jumped dramatically during World War I and did not return to their pre-war numbers until 1926.

In 1927, Frank Grubb, Forest Supervisor, writing for the Yavapai Magazine, described grazing conditions:

There isn't a man in Arizona today who was here in the seventies or eighties who can't remember canyons and valleys which today have big, boulder strewn arroyas, dry except during times of flood, which at that time either had no water channel at all or if there was one it was a narrow willow grown stream bed, with no erosion and carrying permanent water. Past overgrazing is solely responsible for this change.

Over the years, the number of livestock on the Forest has dropped significantly. From a high in 1920 of 74,378 cattle, herds were trimmed to a low of 20,392 in 1930. Sheep and goats reached their peak of 128,054 in 1918. These numbers reflect the heavy demand for leather, wool, and meat products during World War I. The war reversed years of progress on reducing livestock numbers, but gradually they again declined. In 1993, there were 14,684 cattle and no sheep permits issued on the Forest.

In earlier years, ranchers used driveways for herding their livestock - generally sheep and goats - to and from summer and winter ranges. The Government Gap Driveway on the Forest's southern end and the Oak Creek Driveway that crossed through the middle of the Baker's Pass area, north of Jerome, were the most heavily used driveways. In 1911, a half a million sheep and goats travelled over the Forest's driveways. They were gradually reduced to 147,241 in 1933 and 5,764 in 1993.

The Prescott National Forest has changed over the century of its existence. An increased danger of wildfire has been a negative change. This has come because of increased number of people visiting or living in the wildland-urban interface and the Forest Service's diligence in suppressing all wildfires.

Suppression of all wildfires has allowed the forest to become overgrown with small, closely- growing trees and chaparral. During dry years these become tinder boxes, waiting for a spark. In the past, occasional fires burned through the area and cleaned out dead vegetation, densely-packed chaparral, and smaller trees. This resulted in larger, scattered vegetation, smaller and cooler fires, and reduced the spread of disease and harmful insects. As the population grows in the wildland-urban interface, these dangers will undoubtedly increase.

The Forest Service is now better equipped to handle wildfires and other disasters, when they do occur. In 1992, the Prescott Fire Center and Henry Y. H. Kim Aviation facility was dedicated at Prescott's Love Field. In the 1998 fire season, 2 aerial tankers, a lead plane, and 2 helicopters will be stationed at the Aviation Facility. During the 1996 fire season, 938,329 gallons of fire retardant was loaded onto aerial tankers and dropped on fires throughout the Southwest. During the same period, the Prescott Fire Center shipped \$8.3 million worth of equipment and supplies to wildfire and other disaster incidents across the country.

Today, there are approximately 140 employees on the Forest; the number climbs about 80 during summer. A wide variety of jobs and skills are needed today: foresters, biologists, archaeologists, surveyors, office support, warehouse personnel, geologists, computer specialists, and engineers.

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