

The Bechler River Ranger Station: A History of Preservation

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November 2004

"All the way up the Bechler Canyon there are falls and cascades, not only in the Bechler River itself but every stream entering the Bechler throws its water over terraced cliffs above, and one is never out of the sound of roaring waters as he climbs higher and higher toward the Pitchstone Plateau."—Superintendent Horace Albright, 1920.¹

The Bechler Region's wonders were only beginning to become known when Albright wrote his description of Bechler Canyon, after having explored much of the southern portion of the park he had just arrived to superintend. He—and the newly-created National Park Service that he represented—were facing several proposals by farmers from the surrounding states to impound the waters of Yellowstone Park. Idaho farmers were, in fact, proposing to flood Bechler Meadows with a reservoir—and their proposal had already passed the U.S. Senate. Albright, knowing he needed a first-hand look at the areas threatened with inundation, took a fall horseback trip through the areas (more than one dam was proposed). After visiting the Bechler region, he specifically deplored the potential Falls River Reservoir:

In the Falls River country, as I have already stated, the irrigation projects would ruin a very scenic region. The loss of timber would be enormous, and the mud flats that would remain when the water was drawn off in the summer would be stench to Heaven. A vast amount of splendid moose range would be destroyed, and access to the remarkable canyons of Mountain Ash Creek, Falls River, Bechler River, and Boundary Creek would be cut off, because the reservoirs would back water up to the cliffs of the Pitchstone and Madison Plateaus.²

Throughout the remainder of 1920, Albright and his boss, Steven Mather, vigorously opposed the potential dams and defended their park's integrity and NPS credibility. They deplored the fact that a dam in a national park would open the preserves to economic exploitation; they found better dam sites downstream and outside the parks; they reminded Americans of what empty reservoirs looked like; they extolled the beauties of the threatened areas; and they criticized irrigators for attempting to appropriate the nation's property for their private ends. By mid-1921, the dam proposals had all failed, and while the impoundment threat would resurface, it never achieved the strength that it had had in 1920. Ultimately, the region was never flooded—nor was any reservoir built in Yellowstone.³

Such protective efforts characterize much of Yellowstone's history, and much of the Bechler Ranger Station's history. Over time, the main perceived threats to the Bechler Region have changed from inundation and poaching to excessive tourist visitation, but Army Scouts and Rangers have always striven to protect the region's wonders for present and future generations,

¹ Albright to The Director, Oct. 16, 1920, File "Irrigation—Fall River Reservoir Site, May 22, 1920 to Oct. 30, 1920, Part 3," Box 218, General Records/Central Files, 1907-39, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

² *Ibid.*, and Michael J. Yochim, "Beauty and the Beet: The Dam Battles of Yellowstone National Park," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 53 (Spring 2003): 14-27.

³ Yochim, *Ibid.*

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and have usually been successful in that endeavor. Throughout, patrol cabins and the Bechler River Ranger Station have greatly facilitated such preservation efforts.

Given the park's vast size (then 3,348 square miles), the U.S. Army, administrator of Yellowstone before 1918, recognized that buildings to accommodate rangers or scouts on patrols distant from headquarters or their base stations throughout the park were necessary. Virtually as soon as the Army arrived in the park (in 1886), Captain Frazier Boutelle suggested that a series of patrol cabins be built in the park's backcountry. Park boundaries were areas particularly in need of them, because Army scouts needed to patrol there to guard against poachers and woodcutters. The proposed cabins would be approximately a day's travel apart, and would be equipped with the basic supplies and equipment needed to shelter two or more men at night.⁴

Boutelle directed that the cabins be geographically distributed throughout the park, and by 1900 his successors had built nineteen such cabins. Evidently, three of those were in the Bechler region: the "Boundary Creek" Cabin, located near Dunanda Falls; the "Bartlett" Cabin, located near Rocky Ford, and the "Proposition Creek" Cabin, located near the Falls River a mile or two west of Terraced Falls. The Bartlett Cabin was apparently built in 1897, and the other two in 1898.⁵ In 1903, the Army probably replaced the Bartlett Cabin with a new one called the Bechler River Cabin that was perhaps closer to the mouth of Bechler Canyon (not to be confused with the Bechler River Soldier Station, still several years away from construction). Alternatively, the Army began referring to the Bartlett Cabin as the Bechler River Cabin, but as the next paragraph makes clear, the Bartlett Cabin was in poor shape and may have been flooded in 1902. Although there is no suggestion in the historic record for which alternative—cabin replacement, or simple renaming—occurred, it appears that the cabin was replaced.⁶

Given that poaching occurred as often in winter as at other seasons (or more so, because animal fur grew longer to protect against winter cold), Army Scouts used these cabins for patrols year-round. The cabins were most helpful in winter, which is how they acquired the generic name of "snowshoe cabins," since Scouts on snowshoes (the typical name of the era for what we today call "skis") generally used them. The reports of many scouts on their patrols through Bechler reveal high amounts of snow, but one report stands out for its record of moisture in the liquid form. Scout Peter Holte and an unnamed companion took a spring patrol to the Bechler region. Arriving at the Proposition Creek Cabin on May 12, 1902, they found the building entirely stripped of rations. They spent one night there, continuing on to the Bartlett Cabin. Holte's description of their adventure onward from Proposition Creek speaks for itself:

May 13th Left for Bartlett Cabin. it was warm last night and snow did not crust and shoeing is very heavy. We fell[ed] trees across the small streams and crossed. We had decided to undress and wade the Bechler. But finding this impossible we fell dead

⁴ Aubrey Haines, *The Yellowstone Story: A History of Our First National Park*, rev. ed. (Yellowstone National Park: The Yellowstone Association for Natural Science, History & Education, Inc. in cooperation with the University Press of Colorado, 1996), II:26; and Lon Johnson and Christine Whitacre, "Snowshoe Cabins, Yellowstone National Park," 2000, manuscript in Yellowstone National Park Library Vertical Files, File "History—YNP—Structures."

⁵ Kenneth L. & Lenore L. Diem, *A Community of Scalawags, Renegades, Discharged Soldiers and Predestined Stinkers? A History of Northern Jackson Hole and Yellowstone's Influence, 1872-1920* (Moose, Wyo., Grand Teton Natural History Association, 1998), 73-75.

⁶ *Superintendent's Annual Reports for 1897 through 1907*, Yellowstone National Park Archives (hereafter YNPA)—see specifically the maps included with many of these reports; Document entitled "Schedule for Rationing Snowshoe Cabins, 1903," File "Items Reported," Item 99B, YNPA; cabin supply lists dated 1900, and 1903-1909, File "Chart list of Snowshoe Cabin Supplies Original—1909," Item 99B, YNPA; and Loose maps dated 1904 and 1908-09, Item 99B, all of which both document the three cabin locations and exhibit no simultaneous use of "Bartlett" and "Bechler River" Snowshoe Cabin place names. See also Diem and Diem, pp. 73-75.

trees and made a raft tied our snowshoes and packs on securely and paddled across, landing safely some distance below. the country for at least two miles is flooded. we waded where possible but within about five or six hundred yards of the cabin we were compelled to make a detour of more then two miles. The cabin is nearly surrounded by this Lake, only one narrow ridge leading to it from the west and this ridge is only a few inches above the water[.] We are cut off from warm formation which we intended to visit tomorrow[.] This cabin is in very bad condition the roof having fallen in in two places, and it leaks all over like a sieve[.] it is not safe to use another winter as the roof is to[o] weak to hold up the weight of snow. It contains nothing but the cupboard, stove, axe and eight cans of Emergency rations.

May 14th Rained very heavy all night, raising the water between two and three feet and covered the ridge by which we reached the cabin, leaving us on an Island[.] We found some nails in the cabin and with these we constructed a raft using the logs from an old corral near the cabin.

May 15th Rained all night and is still raining today[.] the water is now within ten feet of the cabin an[d] is rising fast[--]the lake surrounding the cabin is at least three miles across. taking some Emergency rations with us we placed our packs and snowshoes on the raft and with long poles shoved across the lake untill we reached cascade river where the current carried us swiftly into the Bechler river. we only knew when we reached these rivers by the swift current as the the [sic] entire country is one vast lake. Beaver splashed all around us[,] six Elk swam across cascade in front of our raft[;] they seemed poor and weak. We landed close to the ford on the Bechler river securely fastened the raft and started for mountain ash [creek.] we were continually wading above our knees in snowwater[.] we carefully examined mountain ash creek there are many Beaver colonies on this stream but no sign of them having been molested...."⁷

Perhaps not surprisingly, Holte suffered from rheumatism later in that trip, having to spend an extra day at the Snake River Soldier Station to recover from his impressive adventure before proceeding back to headquarters at Mammoth Hot Springs. Clearly, the Bartlett Cabin was in deplorable, endangered condition and was probably replaced with the Bechler River Cabin, although the history on that point is obscure.

Despite such heroism, incidents of poaching continued. For example, in 1898 scouts found eight or more men camped near the Bechler River, along with a barrel containing 200 pounds of salted trout and 140 freshly caught trout. It was likely that the men were going to transport their catch out to Idaho, where they would be able to sell the fish to Gilman Sawtell, a Henry's Lake area rancher who bought fish for 10 cents per pound and shipped them to Butte or Salt Lake City, selling them for 25 cents per pound. In another example, Scout J. Wilson arrested another poacher, George Broadbent, west of the Bechler area in 1907.⁸

Due in part to this kind of continuing problem, Acting Superintendent George Goode called in 1900 for a soldier station in the Bechler area, stating "a knowledge of the park, extending through a number of years, and a most sincere interest in its preservation and welfare, prompt me to make the following recommendations for your consideration: ... That new stations be built (1) near southwest corner of park, on Bechler River." Soldier stations were staffed year-round, and consequently offered improved protection for park resources over occasional patrols and unstaffed cabins. Several years were to pass before the new station became reality, however;

⁷ Peter Holte (Scout) to Major John Pitcher, May 21, 1902, Document #4851, Item 20, Letter Box 10, YNPA.

⁸ Diem and Diem, pp. 70, 75, 85.

even nine years later Major H.C. Benson, one of Goode's successors, was still requesting a soldier station for the area.⁹

The persistent requests paid off in 1910, when the Army was finally able to build a soldier station in the Bechler area. That year, day laborers and troops built an eight-room frame quarters with a stable nearby for approximately \$3,650. Capable of housing up to twelve men, the station measured 31 x 52 feet and the barn, 31 x 34 feet. Construction was directed by the Army Construction Quartermaster and was completed in early December 1910. Soldiers moved in by December 14, 1910. Most likely, Holte's experience with the Bartlett Cabin led the Army to look for a drier site; the Bechler River Soldier Station site met that description, being 25 to 30 feet above nearby Wyoming Creek.¹⁰

To facilitate effective communication, the Army connected the station to the park's telephone system with a line strung from the Snake River Station at the South Entrance in 1911. That same year the Army further improved the isolated station's patrolling effectiveness with new trails. First, Army scouts built a trail connecting the Soldier Station to the Snake River Station to the east (most likely, the telephone line followed the same trail). That trail turned north at the Bechler River Soldier Station, proceeding up Robinson Creek to the west boundary and continuing north until it turned east toward Summit Lake and thence to the Lower Geyser Basin.¹¹

With the soldier station complete, the Army began to staff it, which included stationing scouts there throughout the winter. The station's distance from headquarters meant that its scouts had to be self-disciplined. Most scouts had no difficulty with this task—if nothing else, the immense amounts of snow the region received (most accounts measured between 34" and 91" of snow at the station in mid-winter) kept the men busy.¹² However, a non-commissioned officer stationed there during the winter of 1912-1913 neglected his duties and falsified some reports. Having been advised anonymously of the affairs, Major E. S. Wright dispatched Scout Raymond Little to investigate. Traveling in secret by train to Ashton and thence by ski to the Station, Little and Lieutenant Kobbe found “

many irregularities in the conduct of the Soldier Station..., including apparent false reports of park patrols. These were so apparent that Lieut. Kobbe decided to bring the Non-commissioned officer in charge of the station back to the post with him, to be dealt with in accordance with military laws and regulations. ...A rigid inspection was

⁹ *Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1900*, p. 8; and Benson to Lieut. Wildurr Willing, April 12, 1909, File “52—Buildings & Building Sites, War Dept. Chapel, Hospital, Outpost Stations, etc.,” Letter Box 64, Item 104B, YNPA.

¹⁰ Diem and Diem, p. 78; “Map showing locations of new soldier stations built summer of 1910...,” File “52—Buildings & Building Sites, War Dept. Chapel, Hospital, Outpost Stations, etc.,” Letter Box 64, Item 104B, YNPA; Map dated 1910, Loose within box, Item 99B, YNPA; and in a listing of buildings in the park in File “51 Buildings, Interior Dept., Mscls.,” Box 23, Item 45, YNPA, under the heading “Soldier Stations” appears “Bechler Station (frame), Built 1910 by Q.M.D. Dry location is from Bechler River Soldier Station Horse Barn Historic Structure Survey Form, file “Bechler Ranger Station,” Yellowstone Center for Resources National Register Files (hereafter YCR NR Files), National Park Service, Mammoth Hot Springs, Wyoming.

¹¹ Telephone line information is from Chester A. Lindsley, “The Chronology of Yellowstone National Park, 1806 to 1939,” p. 205; and trail information is from Major E.J. Wright to Secretary of the Interior, March 17, 1913, File 349, Letter Box 33, YNPA, and Map entitled “Trails Built Summer 1911. Scout McBride in Charge (Snake River to Upper Basin via Bechler),” file “348: Roads and Trails: New Trails in Park,” Letter Box 33, YNPA.

¹² “Game Report for Feb. 1925, Bechler Station,” File “1924-1925—Tower Falls, Lake, Hell Roaring, and Bechler Stations’ Ranger Reports,” Box W-73, YNPA; and “Average Snowdepths for Yellowstone Park, January, February, March,” File “Fire Lookout Plans & Specific, 1949-1966,” Box Y-258, YNPA.

made of the station and surroundings, and no evidence was found of any violation of park rules and regulations."¹³

Since the Army era, the Bechler River Ranger Station has seen continuous summer use, but is no longer staffed in winter. Further, poaching intensity has decreased, thanks to the presence of the ranger station. Since World War II, visitation to the area has steadily increased, particularly to nearby Cave Falls, which is an easy one-hour drive from Ashton, Idaho. Because the ranger station is a mile off the Cave Falls Road, the National Park Service considered moving the facilities out to that road, where rangers could more effectively monitor visitor traffic. Amid concerns that a satisfactory sewage system would be difficult to construct and operate in the envisioned location, plans for moving the station were never drawn, and the station remained in its original location.¹⁴

Developmental changes in the Bechler area since its original construction include a root cellar, added to the station in 1919 by rangers (or 1936 by the Civilian Conservation Corps—the historic record is uncertain); improvements to the Bechler River Ranger Station side road done by the CCC in 1934; subdivision of the house into a three-room and a two-room apartment before 1941; moving a small office building to the site from Lake in 1946 (the current office); construction of a firewood storage building in 1954; and construction of a fire cache and winter garage facility in 1970. All of these buildings remain in place today. Periodic maintenance of the buildings took place, but distance from park headquarters and general lack of funds meant that the Bechler River Ranger Station buildings sometimes languished for years before necessary upgrades took place. Even then, retrofitting historic buildings with modern utilities was sometimes done in a historically insensitive manner.¹⁵

Today, the Bechler River Ranger Station's primary purpose is serving the hundreds or thousands of annual visitors to the area. National magazines like *Backpacker* and *Outside* along with some guide books have popularized the area's waterfalls, hot pools, and trails, transforming the region into one of Yellowstone's most popular backcountry areas. Its relatively easy vehicle access makes a visit to the area possible for anyone willing to drive their vehicle over a good-quality gravel road. A typical August day will find several horse trailers parked at the station, as well as numerous automobiles, and the region's trails have morphed from narrow single-tracks into two- or three-foot-wide comfortable trails. The large numbers of backcountry travelers keep rangers busy with trail and campsite maintenance, food storage checking, and the issuing of backcountry permits. Those rangers continue to be based at the Bechler River Ranger Station.¹⁶

¹³ Scout Raymond G. Little to Acting Superintendent, Feb. 18, 1913, File "95 Employees: Monthly Reports, Scouts & Acting Supt. Transmitting 1913," Letter box 53, Item 97, YNPA. See also Wright to Secretary of the Interior, telegram, Feb. 9, 1913, Lewis C. Laylin to Wright, telegram, Feb. 10, 1913, Wright to Sec. of the Interior, Feb. 11, 1913, Wright to Little, Feb. 11, 1913, Little to Acting Superintendent, Feb. 18, 1913, Wright to Secretary of the Interior, Feb. 18, 1913, and Laylin to Wright, Feb. 25, 1913, all in File "113, Expenditures from Revenues Yell. N.P., for the Fiscal Year, 1913—July 1, 1912 to June 30, 1913," Box 54, Item 98, YNPA.

¹⁴ 1941 Master Plan, YNPA.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; and Historic Structure Survey Forms for the Bechler River Ranger Station Office, Storage Shed, Fire Cache and Shop, and Station and Quarters, all in file "Bechler Ranger Station," YCR NR Files, Mammoth, Wyoming. Root cellar information from *Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1919*, p. 39, and the 1941 Master Plan (YNPA).

¹⁶ See, for example, Michael Lanza, "Unknown Yellowstone," *Backpacker*, Dec. 2002, 34-41, 105; Alston Chase and Debra Shore, "Our National Parks: Yellowstone National Park," *Outside Magazine*, June 1992, accessed on the web at <http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/0692/926fnpys.html> on Nov. 29, 2004; and Paul Rubinstein, Lee Whittlesey, and Mike Stevens, *The Guide to Yellowstone Waterfalls and Their Discovery* (Englewood, Col.: Westcliffe Publishers, 2000).

Whether it is poaching patrol (which does continue today) or guiding visitor use in such a way that resources are protected, the Bechler River Ranger Station has been instrumental in preserving the lush Bechler landscape. Rangers continue the protective purposes that this Ranger Station, and its predecessors, have served since the first cabins were built in the area.