

*The Storekeeper and the
Kleinschmidt Hoss*

The Lincoln Back Country, 1957–1964

In the summer of 1957 a University of Montana forestry student named Arnold Elser took a job at the White Tail Ranch, Tom Edwards's outfitting operation located at the edge of the Helena National Forest northeast of Ovando, Montana. Behind the ranch's rustic log buildings rose a forested ridge flanking the North Fork of the Blackfoot River, along which ran a well-used trail leading through miles of undeveloped forestland into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Elser had left his home in Ohio three years earlier to find work in just this kind of country—either as a forest ranger (as he hoped to be one day) or as a wrangler for an outfit such as the White Tail. Edwards was willing to take a chance on the young student, especially after he offered to try out for a couple of weeks at no pay. His job was to supply and run the backcountry kitchen, but Edwards first put him to work moving a fence—an unusual task in an area where property lines had been settled decades ago. The Forest Service wanted to make use of an old right-of-way that came up from Kleinschmidt Flat and ran along the western edge of the 160-acre ranch. The following summer saw the construction of a 32-foot-wide road, graded and crowned to accommodate heavy traffic. It led into the adjacent national forest and ended at a substantial concrete bridge across the North Fork. Progress, it appeared, had arrived in the upper Blackfoot.¹

Elser recalls that one evening Edwards's business partner, Howard Copenhaver, suggested that the three of them go have a look at the new bridge. There

they discovered a four-by-eight-foot plywood sign announcing the “Lincoln Back Country Scenic Highway” and bearing the Forest Service’s logo along with a schematic map depicting how motorists soon would be able to drive through the mountains and come out at the town of Lincoln, fifteen miles to the south-east. “This would be terrible,” Copenhaver announced to his companions. Edwards agreed: he had been watching the Forest Service push new roads into the South and Middle Forks of the Flathead River, getting closer each year to the northern boundary of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Now the country south of the wilderness, a magnificent portal through which he had taken horse parties for two decades, was about to be opened to log haulers and Sunday drivers.

Tom Edwards was perhaps the most highly educated outfitter in the “Bob,” having received his MFA from the University of Illinois with further graduate studies at Stanford. He founded the White Tail Ranch in 1938, when he and his family lived in Cerro Gordo, Illinois, where he served as superintendent of schools. Having grown up on a dryland homestead outside of Choteau, Edwards longed to return to the Montana he remembered, and in 1944 he and his first wife, Eila, brought their family to Helena, where he taught art and biology at Helena High School. Summers found them at the White Tail, adding cabins and corrals when not guiding parties into the wilderness. In 1955, following Eila’s death, Tom retired from teaching and with his second wife, Helen, moved to the ranch to live full time, building it into one of the premier guest ranches in the region.

Wiry and small in stature, Edwards hardly fit the image of a rugged western outfitter. Yet his enthusiasm for the woods and meadows of the upper Blackfoot was contagious, and he built a loyal clientele ranging from upper-crust easterners to school groups and excited teenagers. He affected a corny western idiom in the annual newsletters he and Helen sent to their guests each year, filling its pages with humorous drawings of life on the trail and paeans to the beauty of the outdoors. He sometimes described himself as “just an old Kleinschmidt hoss,” referring to the broad prairie at the edge of his ranch, but most everyone knew him as Hobnail Tom, a sensitive and genial artist and student of nature who could bring the wilderness alive for his guests. Lawrence Merriam, who made a study of horse users in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, recalled that Edwards’s interest in natural history stood out among his fellow outfitters.³

Besides trying to make their operation pay, Edwards was growing concerned about changes that were rumored to be coming to the national forests ringing the Bob Marshall. The planned scenic highway up the North Fork would intrude on the long approach valleys he and his wranglers regularly used

on their trips into the wilderness. This landscape, known locally as the Back Country, contained its own delights. From the vantage point of Red Mountain, located a dozen miles north of Lincoln, the twin forks of the upper Blackfoot reached around the peak in a huge embrace to meet at a low divide above Parker and Webb Lakes. Farther north rose the limestone ramparts of the Continental Divide, atop which the alpine bulk of Scapegoat Mountain exerted a mysterious pull.

To Duncan Moir, supervisor of the Helena National Forest during the 1940s and 1950s, Scapegoat Mountain overlooked the grandest country of all. A friend of Edwards, Moir knew the Lincoln Back Country as a superb horse packing destination. He sometimes took business and civic leaders from Helena into the area to promote it as a so-called protection forest—a concept that still had some credence within the agency.³ State fish and game officials, too, wanted to maintain the area's superb hunting opportunities and, in solidarity with the outfitters, passed a resolution requesting the Forest Service to keep the area in "trail access" status. Edwards went a step further; in late 1954 he wrote to Montana representative Lee Metcalf to request that the Lincoln Back Country and adjacent lands in the North Fork drainage be added to the Bob Marshall Wilderness—particularly the lofty Scapegoat Mountain area, which served as a scenic highlight for many of his pack trips. "Our interest in the preservation of our back country far exceeds our business interests believe me," he told Metcalf. Edwards also made the request to regional forester P. D. Hanson, but no action was forthcoming.⁴

Edwards was occasionally asked to speak on recreation topics at Forest Service meetings, which gave him an opportunity to promote wilderness travel as a viable economic activity on a par with timber and livestock grazing. In his notes for a talk he gave in 1959, he pointed to the "esthetic value, intangible and difficult to describe, that you can harvest at this very moment as truly as the timber." He was careful to distinguish this resource from hunting and fishing, although many of his clients enjoyed these activities. This was, rather, "a Something hard to define but no less real—a delicate fragile something that does exist in the Back Country. It is as definite as the sacred hush of a great cathedral—and this is a recreational forest resource that millions of Americans feel the need for today." He would go on to call this quality "the hush of the land," an amalgam (it seemed) of the stillness of a forest-rimmed meadow at dusk and the whispered sounds of the wilderness. By following the measured pace of a horse, it was possible to immerse oneself in this stillness; it could be enjoyed in company, but perhaps most easily in solitude.⁵ Edwards claimed that three-fourths

of his income came from the “sale” of this esthetic value, which could be found only in the absence of motors and car traffic. “The disturbing thing to me,” he told the foresters, “is that with the grazing fee or the timber sale you can see the shekels roll in but in the sale of the recreation resource you are removed.”⁶

His words seemed not to strike a chord with the Northern Region’s staff, who were not about to halt their resource development programs to accommodate an outfitter’s need for solitude. The Forest Service saw important values in its wilderness areas, certainly, but new policies and new personnel mandated a different approach. In 1958 supervisor Moir retired and was replaced by Vern Hamre, whom one observer described as “ambitious” and a “comer.” The Northern Region was moving beyond the protection forest concept, and building up a timber program was considered the surest route to advancement.⁷ Hamre had his staff draw up a new management plan that placed thousands of square miles of forest within the cutting circles. An allowable harvest of some twenty million board feet per year was planned, which would permit the entire working circle to be cut over within seventy-five years. Ed Barry, the region’s staff officer in charge of recreation and wilderness, viewed timber roads as an asset to recreationists as well. As noted in the new timber plan, the roads contemplated for the Lincoln Back Country would give greater access for hunters and fishermen, which was “one of the essential phases of good game management.”⁸ The new road up the North Fork of the Blackfoot was a portent of major changes in the Back Country.

Arnold Elser, who gained the nickname “Smoke” from summer jobs fighting fires, worked for the White Tail Ranch for six years before acquiring an outfitting business of his own. He recalls that around 1960 Tom Edwards invited the owner of the general store at Lincoln, a young North Carolinian named Cecil Garland, to come over for Sunday dinner and discuss the changes that were coming to the mountains north of their homes. Garland supplemented his income by working for the Lincoln Ranger District as a construction foreman, supervising the building of campgrounds and other improvements. A conservative Republican who held a deep mistrust of the federal government, Garland was not shy in voicing complaints about bureaucratic inefficiencies. The new timbering plan met with his strenuous disapproval as well. What it meant for the Back Country was clearly depicted on a map he obtained, which displayed dozens of roads reaching into nearly every valley. Garland likened the map to a plate of wet spaghetti tossed against a wall. Yet from his experience cruising timber on the Lincoln District, he knew the Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, and

subalpine fir found in those remote drainages could never sustain the volume of timber harvest his bosses anticipated. In one sale area he had cruised for the agency, he found not the projected ten million board feet but something closer to three—"if," he said, "you built a road to every tree." Garland recalled that the owner of a local logging company came to him with tears in his eyes upon discovering the poor quality of timber he had just bid on. "The Forest Service is swapping the nation's timber for a system of dirt roads," Garland stated in a protest to supervisor Hamre.⁹

Garland and a retired Texas oilman named William Meyger, who owned a cabin near town, founded the Lincoln Back Country Protective Association in 1960 to fight the Forest Service development plans. The following year Garland left the agency in what was clearly a mutually agreeable decision. He assumed leadership of the association following Meyger's death in 1962 and proved to be an articulate and charismatic spokesman. That January he spoke with Vic Reineimer, Lee Metcalf's top aide in Washington, about the Lincoln Back Country and received a cordial response, but no commitment of action. A long letter to regional forester Boyd Rasmussen brought the response that with "some of the state's finest scenery, mountains, lakes and rivers" already included in wilderness areas, "there must be some limitation on how much wilderness is set aside in relation to other demands for land use."¹⁰ Garland was unwilling to accept the agency's assurances of the benefits coming from its logging and road-building program. "There was at the time," Garland recalled a few years later, "a great arrogance with[in] the U.S. Forest Service. It was as though they were all-knowing, even omnipotent. That their word was sacrosanct and the mistakes that they were about to make were not apparent to them. Clear cutting was just beginning and on every forest you could see huge patches of timber being removed as though some great force had ripped it off like patches of hide had been skinned off a living thing." In challenging the cult of expertise that was commonplace in federal resource agencies, he helped carve out a new role for the concerned local citizen as critic as well as beneficiary of forest management policy.¹¹

In March 1963 the Lincoln Back Country's transition from protection forest to working timbershed became official when Vern Hamre released an ambitious proposal for recreation and timber development in the northern half of the Lincoln Ranger District, an area comprising some seventy-five thousand acres and most of the Back Country area. The plan called for an annual timber harvest of 4.5 million board feet, to be hauled out on a new road system extending up the Landers Fork past Heart and Webb Lakes and continuing down into the North Fork of the Blackfoot River, where it would tie in with the recently developed

road coming up from Kleinschmidt Flat. A second road would branch off to follow the upper Landers Fork over the Continental Divide and into the Dearborn River drainage, creating another loop drive. Spur roads—Garland’s “wet spaghetti”—branched off these main lines, some going to campgrounds and fishing access sites to provide “family-type recreation opportunities adapted to the physical and financial abilities of most families,” the plan stated. Outfitters and backpackers would be shunted to the proposed 19,000-acre Red Mountain Scenic Area and the adjacent high country, where a new trail system would “provide a semi-wilderness experience for those wishing a one- or two-day hike or horse-back trip.”¹²

As in Bunker Creek a decade earlier, the plan failed to draw the expected accolades from hunters, anglers, and car campers. Instead there came the most serious public outcry the Northern Region had experienced to date, orchestrated by individuals with strong ties to the status quo. Tom Edwards, Cecil Garland, Clif Merritt, and many other outfitters, hunters, and hikers who had long used the Lincoln Back Country would not be satisfied with a “semi-wilderness experience” of a few days’ duration. To them, roads and clear-cuts spelled the end of a mountain region where wind, birdsong, and bugling elk formed the audible background. Garland tried to express this feeling of impending loss in letters to the nation’s chief wilderness advocates. “It seems that everywhere you look out here in our country, there are forces eating away at what few miles of true wilderness we have left,” he wrote to Howard Zahniser shortly after Hamre’s plan was released. He suggested to the Sierra Club’s David Brower that “there seems to be something more behind this drive to open this area now than the Forest Service is admitting publicly. It seems to be a sort of test. They know that if they can beat down public opposition here, they can do it most anywhere else in the West.”¹³

A few weeks after announcing the new plan, district ranger Bert Morris invited discussion at a meeting of the Lincoln Lions Club. Garland and representatives of several western Montana sportsmen’s groups showed up to voice their complaints. Hamre afterward told Boyd Rasmussen to expect “a deluge of letters” opposing the development plan.¹⁴ More than clear-cuts alone, the prospect of high-standard recreation roads leading everywhere in the Back Country seemed to arouse the greatest ire. Garland heard from a general contractor from Billings who had built the original secondary highway through Lincoln in 1939 and had recently resurfaced a long stretch of it. “I do not want to see another foot of road built in the Lincoln area if we ever expect to have any kind of decent fishing in that country,” he wrote.¹⁵

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