

Firearms of the Early Forest Service by Karl Brauneis

“A ranger of any grade must be thoroughly sound and able-bodied, capable of enduring hardships and performing severe labor under trying conditions. He must be able to take care of himself and his horses in regions remote from settlement and supplies.”

U.S. Forest Service Use Book, 1908

When President Theodore Roosevelt and his Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot reorganized and consolidated forestry in 1905 under the United States Forest Service their first aim was to develop a qualified and competent corps of forest rangers. Political appointments had been the standard practice of previous administrations resulting in a less than desirable work force. That all changed with Roosevelt and Pinchot and their selection process designed around a civil service testing system to get the best new rangers.

The Rangers Test

The new rangers test consisted of a classroom written test and a field practical. Part of the field test consisted of marksmanship with both rifle and pistol. The ranger candidate had to supply his own horses, tack and firearms for work. Forest Ranger Henry L. Benham (1) was later interviewed and quoted; *“Then they tested to see what you knew about handling a gun, so you didn’t go out and shoot somebody with it the first day. And you had to put a pack on a horse, a bunch of cooking utensils, bedding, bedrolls, and a tarp to cover it with – and a rope to tie it on with. I’d learned all that before I went into the Forest Service. I didn’t have much trouble”.*



Forest Ranger “Fritz” Sethe on the old Columbia National Forest (now the Gifford Pinchot) in 1910.
Photograph Courtesy U.S. Forest Service

In the early days no two rangers looked alike. Considerable variety was the norm with a common western “cowboy” thread and bronze Forest Service badge that bound the rangers together. Most of the rangers were western men skilled in woodsmanship and livestock. Even today, field officers follow the old cowboy ideal that ***“you might not have a lot but your outfit darn sure better look good”***.

Ranger Fred Herrig

Many men were known simply by their outfit and the firearms they carried. Fred Herrig punched cows for Teddy Roosevelt on his ranch in North Dakota. He was also one of the first men Roosevelt turned to when he formed the Rough Riders (1st Volunteer Cavalry) and was there with his “cow boss” as they stormed up San Juan Hill.

Fred was later appointed Forest Ranger by Roosevelt himself and was known for his “outfit”. According to W.J. Yenne in his book Switchback (2) ***“Fred’s spurs were silver and his horse wore a silver studded bridle and martingale. He carried a 45/70 rifle in his saddle scabbard, and wore a 38 revolver, a gift from his friend, President Roosevelt”***.

Ranger Bill Bell

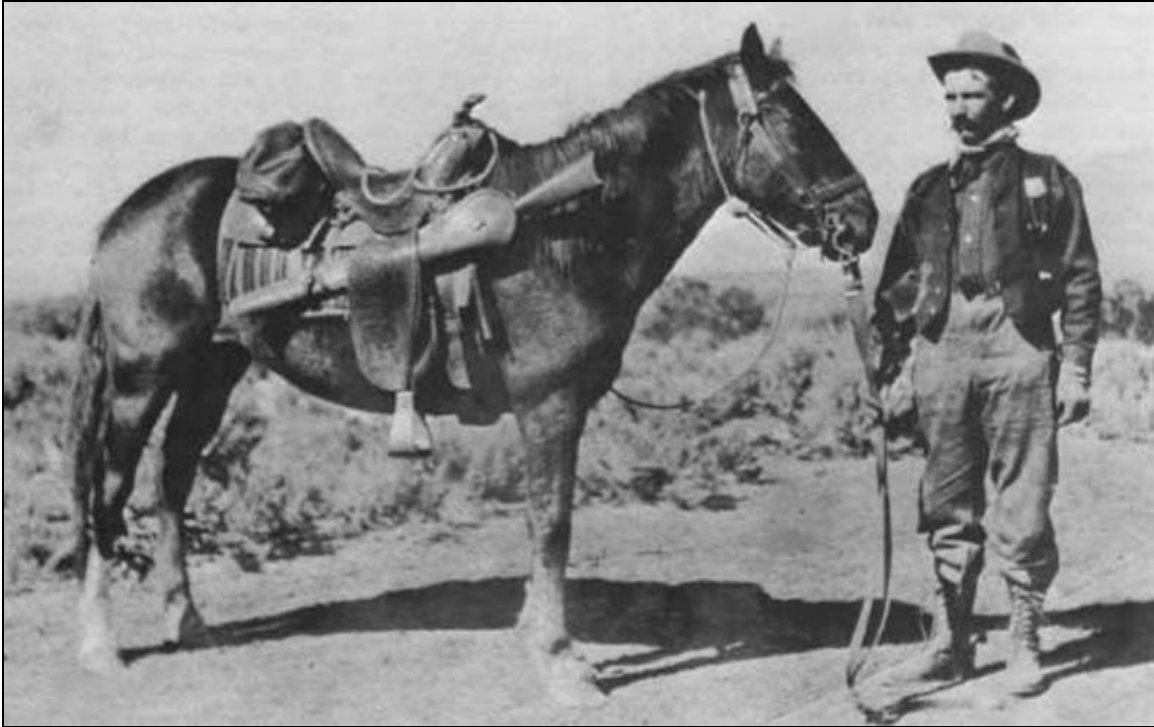
One ranger made famous in the story by Norman Maclean in USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky (3) was Bill Bell of the old Elk Summit Ranger District on the Selway National Forest in the Bitterroot Mountains. Later Sam Elliott played Bell in the Echo Bridge home entertainment movie of 2006. But it was forester Bud Moore who brought more of ranger Bell to light in his book The Lochsa Story – Land Ethics in the Bitterroot Mountains (4).

Like most rangers, Bill Bell carried a single action army Colt 45 with a 7 and ½ inch barrel. When some tough miners from Butte, Montana had had enough of the Bald Mountain Fire they gathered around Bell who was mounted on his black horse. The leader said ***“We’re taking your pack train”*** to ride out of here. **Bill hauled his long barreled, single action .45 pistol from the scabbard on his belt, thumbed back the hammer and responded, “Ye might take my pack train. But five or six of you ain’t goin’ out”**. Thus ended the miners’ idea of a free ride out of the wilderness.

Ranger Walt Perry

Walt Perry’s life as a forest ranger is well documented in Walt Perry – An Early-Day Ranger in New Mexico and Oregon by Les Joslin (5). Like Bell, ranger Perry packed a single action army Colt 45 with the long barrel. In the backcountry of the Carson Forest Walt was forced to shoot a horse he found that was hobble burned, cut bloody and raw with his hoof turned back. As the ranger later wrote ***“Then something happened which I have never been able to explain. Steeping up to within eight or ten paces of the horse, he standing still looking straight at me, I drew a bead just above his eyes where the bullet would range into his brain and fired. He never even wiggled an ear! I blinked a couple of times, then drew the same bead again and at the crack of the gun he fell***

stone dead, never so much as to move a foot, with a bullet exactly where I had aimed. But what became of that first bullet – if any? Certainly I could not miss at that short distance. If someone had drawn the lead from my first cartridge – I am still looking for the son-of-a-gun! I expect that gun to throw lead, and throw it straight, any time and every time I pulled the trigger. Quien sabe?”



**Forest Ranger Jim Sizer, Apache National Forest in Arizona about 1910
Photograph Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service**

Ranger Clyde Fickes

Some rangers opted for new innovations in firearms. Clyde Fickies was famous in the Forest Service for his work in developing a pre-fabricated lookout station (Fickes 14' X 14' L-29 design) that could be packed in by mule and horse to be assembled on site. Ranger Fickes was also instrumental in developing and managing the Remount Depot at Nine Mile west of Missoula, Montana. Through his work, the Forest Service would now have a dependable supply of mules and horses for backcountry use and re-supply.

But within the Forest Service, Clyde was known for his choice of a personal sidearm – the German Luger semi-automatic. The Luger cost Clyde \$25.00 dollars in 1908 (6). Other rangers also opted for the lighter weight 38 caliber revolvers but soon went back to the big frame 45's after encounters with bears and other big or dangerous game. Not until the development of the 357 magnum would rangers have a powerful alternative to the old single action army Colt's.

Lookout – Smokechaser Bill Reimer

Bill Yenne tells the story of his friend Bill Reimer and his encounter with a grizzly in 1930 (7). Bill was the lookout on Nasukoin Mountain on the Blackfeet National Forest during the summer of 1930. About dusk Bill discovered a fire and left the lookout with his smokechaser pack to fight it. When he reached the valley floor he soon became aware of an animal approaching him in the darkness. He shed his pack and beat a hasty retreat but tripped in the darkness. A large grizzly was instantly on him. **The bear seized one of his feet and lifted him into the air to where his shoulders barely touched the ground dislocating his hip. As this was taking place Bill unfastened his holster strap and got out his .38 caliber revolver. He fired three shots low into the bear's body, afraid to shoot higher at the risk of hitting his foot. With each bullet the bear became more fierce and shook all the harder. Finally in desperation, he decided to try for a more vital spot, hitting his foot or not. Accordingly he aimed toward the top part of the bear and fired again. This produced the desired results as the bear let go his foot and ambled off into the darkness.**

Bill was able to make it back to his lookout station and call for help before passing out. It was some weeks before he was able to walk normally and it bothered him for years. Bill would often wake up at night screaming as he relived the horrible event.



Forest Assistant W.H.B. Kent of the Huachuca Forest Reserve (now the Coronado National Forest) shows the early dress of the forest ranger. Shotgun chaps with conchos, Mexican belt loop holster and revolver, mustachio, scarf and bandana.

Photograph Courtesy U.S. Forest Service

Modern Day

As a Missoula Smokejumper in 1977 detailed to Alaska I soon became acquainted with the firearm rules for jumpers up north. The lightest accepted revolver was the 357 magnum. Still, most jumpers carried the 44 magnum or the new 41 magnum. If you were faced with a bear problem and had time to react a 375 H and H Magnum rifle was dropped to you by parachute. Today, the 12 gauge shotgun with rifled slugs is the preferred firearm of protection against bears.

We live in west central Wyoming at the base of the Wind River Mountains. The entire ecosystem north of us may have more grizzly bears now then at the turn of the previous century. Throw in black bears, wolves and mountain lions and soon any discussion will turn to an individual's preference of firearm for self defense. Recently a grizzly was killed in self defense with the standard GI issue 1911 45. Still, most opt for the revolver due to its fail safe design. However, no matter how large the handgun it will always pale in comparison to the old Winchester or Marlin saddle rifles in 30-30.

The Rifle

Rifles were carried as the preferred tool by rangers for everyday work and predator control at the time. Because the forest ranger was often the only law enforcement in the area he was often deputized by the local sheriff or game warden. Forest rangers have always had the authority to enforce state game laws on National Forest lands (Organic Act of 1897) and work in cooperation with the state game and fish departments.



**Forest Rangers west of Lander, Wyoming “On the Trail of the Lone Wolf”
Note the lever action saddle rifles – Photograph courtesy of the Jack States Collection**

The ranger's long gun of choice was the saddle rifle. Most often the Winchester or Marlin chambered in the 30-30 or like cartridge that could reach out and also be carried easily on a horse. I had an old fire warden friend, Cap Lee once tell me "*Never leave home ... never go anywhere with out your 30-30*". I find it humorous to read articles about the 30-30 that claim it is an eastern deer rifle and seldom used out west. I suppose they have never read about Tom Horn's 30-30 or looked at the old cowboy pictures from the west. The advent of the smokeless powder 30-30 in a light and easy to handle 94 Winchester truly gave the cowboy or ranger a solid reliable working mans tool.

It is important to note there are no employees within the U.S. Forest Service. By the Organic Act of 1897 all within the agency are Federal Officers and can wear the "Bronze Pine Tree Badge". In my career we considered the most basic classes to perform the job as that of law enforcement training and fire guard school. With out these two basic skills the local forest officer is ill equipped to perform the most basic protection functions of the agency.

Smokechaser Warren Yahr

Warren Yahr writes the classic tale of a bear encounter in his book Smokechaser (8). The forest packer had walked into a lookout station with re-supply only to be confronted by two black bears that had torn the place apart. The packer carried a 22 Colt Woodsman – more then a bit light for bear and emptied the gun as the bears rushed towards him. Finally the bears broke through a window to make their escape. It was believed that one of the bears died but the larger boar was alive and would soon return. The packer returned to the ranger station and reported the incident. The ranger then gave the young Yahr his Winchester 30-30 with one cartridge but assured him that a box of 30-30's was at the Lookout. So the next morning Yarr headed the 4 and ½ miles to the lookout and was able to dispatch the bear the following morning.

Rangers R.D. Jones and Clinton Hodges

Unfortunately some of the work the rangers performed turned deadly. Rangers Jones and Hodges were deputized by the sheriff to assist in trailing a cattle rustler. After tracking down the rustler they approached him along with the owner of one of the big ranch outfits. The rangers were both armed with their 30-30's. Within feet and seconds the rustler pulled his revolver ... the gun was out of the holster when the rangers fired. Jones and Hodges were later exonerated after a hearing (9).

The 1895 Winchester gave the ranger a more powerful rifle that could still be carried easily on a horse. Hank Payson, a local Lander, Wyoming district ranger, carried an 1895 Winchester in the 405 caliber. His rifle is on display at the Fremont County Pioneer Museum in Lander. To affirm Payson, many 1895 Winchesters can be seen in old photographs through out the area – a testimony to the need for more stopping power when confronting the grizzly bear. Other rifles often used with "stopping power" were the older 1876 Winchester and the 1886 Winchester in the preferred 45/70 cartridge. The Savage lever action rifle was used by local Lander Forest Ranger Charlie Bayer of the

Washakie National Forest in the 19 teens. Today some of the agencies Law Enforcement Officers carry the 45/70 in a lever action Marlin saddle rifle.

Conclusion

Early Forest Rangers used the firearms that they were most comfortable with in their prior work as woodsmen, stockmen and cowboys. First and foremost the firearm had to be reliable with sufficient stopping power and ease of handle. Although a variety of arms were used, the standard of judgment was the Colt Single Action Army 45 and the Winchester Model 1894 or Marlin 1893 in 30 WCF (30-30), 38/55 or 32 Winchester Special.

Opinion

Today, each individual Forest Supervisor authorizes the firearm use for forest officers on that forest. For a rugged backcountry wilderness forest like the Shoshone in Wyoming where pack stock, grizzly, black bear, mountain lion and wolves are the norm a firearm presence should be of common practice. Most forest officers are avid hunters and many participate in shooting sports. Their familiarity and actual use of firearms is often superior to that of the average citizen or city police officer.

When mounted on horseback a ranger should be armed with a handgun for fast use in defense or to put down injured stock. In other instances such as all terrain vehicle and pickup truck travel a rifle can be stored for use in a scabbard, rack or case. The rifle is an accepted norm of western Americana and does not invoke the image of an armed police force. To the contrary, a rifle presents the quintessential image of a western working culture and the traditions of the U.S. Forest Ranger.

“The well equipped ranger would hardly consider riding out over his district without his rifle and six-shooter. The guns were as necessary a part of his equipment as his tools for firefighting.” Tucker / Fitzpatrick - Men Who Matched the Mountains

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About the Author

Karl Brauneis served in his Forest Service career as a smokechaser, hot shot, smokejumper, forester, range conservationist and fire management officer. Throughout his career he worked in law enforcement as a collateral duty like all the early rangers.



The authors
“outfit” with an
1894 Winchester
(Mfg 1940) 30-30.
His saddle is an
old H.H. Hauser
Slick Fork All
items are
American made
wool, cotton and
canvas, wood,
steel and leather.

References

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