



May 22, 2008

**Eye on the Environment:
Names Upon the Landscape**

By Steve Lamar

Did you ever wonder how a particular place got its name? There is often an interesting story, a bit of information, an old photo behind the names that connect us to the place where we live in such a way that it enriches our appreciation and knowledge of the area.

I have always been hooked on local history, and throughout the years have collected scraps of information, maps, stories, and photos related to the place names of Swan Valley. Several years ago, I decided to consolidate this information into an organized document for easy access. What I thought would be a couple of hour project, turned into a three and a half year adventure that has resulted in my upcoming book, *Swan Valley Place Names: A Mosaic of History, Stories, and Local Lore*.

In my quest for information, I sleuthed through archival records, talked with many long-time residents, pored over various maps and photos. I became fascinated with the history, stories, and local lore. In the end, I recorded over 500 geologic and historic features that encompass the Swan Valley. The following is a condensed sampling of some of the information that I found.

According to Bud Cheff Jr., whose father was an early-day outfitter in the Mission Mountains Wilderness, Spider Lake received its name from the multitude of spider-like bugs (water striders?) that once

inhabited the surface of the lake. That was prior to the lake being stocked with fish.

Bud said that the fish apparently eliminated most of the spider-like bugs, as few of the insects are presently found there. This took place in the late 1930's and early 1940's when the Cheff family used their pack stock to help the Montana Fish and Game carry metal milk cans full of fish and water into a number of lakes in the Mission Range.

Loon Lake has an interesting story. According to Mabel Stilwell, early-day Swan Valley resident, Loon Lake was named by homesteader Semine Saterstrum due to the regular sighting of loons on that body of water. It was said that Saterstrum purposely picked this area to homestead in 1914 because of her love for loons. Until recent years, a pair of loons had nested regularly on this body of water.

Another life-long resident, Harold Haasch, explained that Windfall Creek was aptly named because of its long history of blowdown from strong wind events. According to Pete Rovero and John Stark, early-day residents of the valley, Windfall Creek was so named because there were often more fallen trees in this drainage than any other area in Swan Valley.

Although many believe that this creek received its name in 1949 from a major windstorm that flattened many trees in this area, Windfall Creek was already on the maps as early as 1933. This area experienced a particularly severe windstorm in 1923, which might explain why Windfall Creek first appeared on the 1933 Flathead National Forest map.

Buck Creek appeared on the 1912 Flathead National Forest map. Oliver Hill, whose parents homesteaded near Buck Creek, said he remembered Indian families from the Mission Valley camping next to Buck Creek in late summer or early fall to hunt for elk and deer in this area. His parents

once told him that the stream was so-named due to the seasonal gathering of deer along the ridges north of the stream.

Van Lake was named for Orrin D. Vanderwarka, an early-day homesteader in T23N, R17W, Section 19 of the Goat Creek area. He filed a homestead claim in 1909, but did not prove up on his claim until 1923. His cabin site appeared on the 1916 General Land Office survey map. Apparently, like many of the early-day residents, Vanderwarka was a jack-of-all-trades. He served as ranger for the Swan Lake Ranger District from 1905 to 1910, and worked as a packer for the 1907 Woodward survey party. In addition, Vanderwarka earned cash by trapping grizzly bears, marten and lynx, and was rumored to sell moonshine from his still on Cedar Creek. Vanderwarka guided Pennsylvania Senator Penrose and his hunting party during extended trips into the South Fork of the Flathead River country in 1909, 1910, and 1911.

Gray Wolf Peak has an interesting story. In a Forest Service report about the exploratory trip he led into this area, Theodore Shoemaker stated that a climbing party [Montana Mountaineers] from the university [University of Montana] named Gray Wolf Peak in the summer of 1923. A further clarification on why this climbing party named the peak Gray Wolf came in a Forest Service memorandum in 1965 by Thad Lowary who reported, "There is a legend that the peak was named 'Gray Wolf' because the silhouette of a running wolf can be seen from the north side of Gray Wolf Lake." Apparently, the southeast summit is the hump of the running wolf.

And perhaps one of my favorite stories is the naming of Grizzly Lake in the Mission Mountains Wilderness. In 1956, Forest Service employees Herb Styler, Bob Van Gieson, Dick Peltier, and Thad Lowary conducted an inspection of trails and campsites in the Mission Mountains.

The group camped at a high alpine lake when they heard something splashing and making racket in the lake. Van Gieson said that they got out of their tents to see a grizzly bear swimming and playing in the water. Styler said that the bear then climbed to the top of Fissure Glacier. They watched as the bear then turned and slid to the bottom of the ice, stood up and climbed again to the top of the steep snow, then slid back down. Amazed, they enjoyed the bear's playful antics. Lowary attempted to photograph the scene. The grizzly abruptly abandoned its playful mood when Lowary approached, and bluff charged the cameraman. Later, the group decided that this lake should rightfully be named Grizzly Lake and was thus labeled so on Hal Kanzler's 1963 *Montana's Mission Mountains* map, the 1965 Flathead National Forest map, as well as the 1965 USGS topographical map.

These intriguing stories and others help bring interest, knowledge, and appreciation for this fine place that we call home.

Note: *Steve Lamar will be presenting a program on Swan Valley place names at the Loon and Fish Festival on Saturday May 24th at 10am at the Seeley Lake Community Hall.*