

Seeley Swan
PATHFINDER



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Eye on the Environment: A Brief History of Elk Creek's Section 35

By Suzanne Vernon for Swan Ecosystem Center

A bright blue sky greeted us as we walked to the old Elk Creek School cultural site west of Condon on the morning of April 16. We had set this day aside to examine the historic human impacts on Section 35 of Elk Creek. This forested 640 acres is now owned by Swan Ecosystem Center and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes who are in the process of writing the area's management plan.

Our conversations turned to one-room schools and tipi rings, as we listened to stories and imagined the people who had walked and worked this ground before us.

For decades, and perhaps centuries prior to white settlement here, Native Americans camped near the Swan River and its tributaries, according to Shane Morigeau, recent UM graduate who researched native uses for our Elk Creek Management Group.

Traditional Indian activities like hunting, fishing, plant harvesting, hide-tanning, food and medicine preparation, singing, dancing, praying, feasting, and story telling have been occurring throughout the Swan Valley since ancient times and are still practiced here today, Morigeau said.

Elk Creek was, and still is, an important bull trout spawning stream. Although it was popular for fishing during earlier times, today it is closed to all fishing.

White settlers came to this area in the early 1900s and built roads, bridges, cabins, barns, fences and even a school.

Historic places in Section 35 include what remains of the Elk Creek School and one of the old bridges across Elk Creek. About half of the homesteaders in the Elk Creek area were married and had children. It was common for neighboring families to build small one-room schools to meet the education needs of their children.

Swan Valley old-timers have said that the Elk Creek School, located between the two channels of Elk Creek, was built by local people. It was one of three schools operating in the Swan Valley in 1918. The other two were the Rumble Creek School (two miles south) and the Smith Creek School (about two miles east of the river).



Students pose in front of the Elk Creek School west of Swan River during the summer or 1918. The school burned down in about 1922 or 1923. Photo courtesy of Mark Lawrence.

Alice Brunson Lawrence, daughter of the early-day homesteader whose claim

bordered Section 35, attended Elk Creek School, and wrote the following.

“With the number of families who had moved into the western edge of the valley, it soon became evident that it would be difficult for the children to get to the Rumble Creek School. . . . During the summer of 1918, [my sister] and I attended the [Elk Creek] school under the direction of teacher Miss Jessie Larkin. She also boarded with us at our cabin and was like a big sister. In addition to us, five other students attended the 1918 summer session. . . . During the winter we hiked $\frac{3}{4}$ mile with the Sias children in snow halfway up to our knees or deeper to get to school. The boys broke trail in front of us.”

According to Harold Haasch, another descendent of a homestead family whose stories have been preserved through the Upper Swan Valley Oral History Project, the Elk Creek School only operated until about 1922 or 1923, when a chimney fire ignited the roof and burned the building to the ground. Classes were moved to a neighbor’s cabin for the remainder of that school year.



Bud Moore examines the remains of the Elk Creek School outhouse, which is the only visible evidence of the Elk Creek School which once hosted classes for children of homesteaders living west of Condon. Photo courtesy of Bill Moore.

Today, only the rotting log walls of the outhouse are still visible at the site. Local residents Bill and Jean Moore determined the exact location of the school itself only with the aid of a metal detector to search for nails.

Two of the earliest Swan Valley roads shown on a 1914 government map include the main road labeled “Lion Creek to Ovando” and a road to and across Elk Creek labeled “the road to McCrackens.” This latter road was apparently built by a married woman named Freda McCracken, who filed a homestead entry in 1916 but relinquished it in 1917.

During the 1920s and 1930s, many of the homesteaders who proved up on their homestead claims and gained title to their land moved away from the Swan Valley to find work. Some continued to use their cabins for vacations.

“After we left the homestead in 1921, we never used it as a permanent residence again but as a summer cabin,” Lawrence wrote.

Bob and Gyda [Monrad] Newman, who were also interviewed for the Oral History Project, used Gyda’s homestead cabin on Elk Creek as a summer getaway from the 1940s through about 1972, when they moved back to the Swan Valley permanently. Like others who settled in this area, the Newmans remained in awe of the pristine forests and rich habitats nurtured by the area’s major tributary.

“Elk Creek is the most beautiful creek in the world,” Bob Newman told a writer in 2003, then lamented the Swan Valley’s recent population growth. “We had Elk Creek all to ourselves for many, many years.”

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