

The first USFS ranger station at Tahoe

By Don Lane

Four years after it was discovered in 1844 by explorer John Charles Fremont, the Lake Tahoe Basin saw an influx of people attracted to the 1848 discovery of gold nearby. Fortunately, there were few gold nuggets in the streams around the lake and the basin was largely left unchanged.

However, just a few years later, in 1859, another great discovery to the east of Lake Tahoe, the Comstock Silver Lode, would have a substantial impact. The Tahoe basin would never be the same.

Wood for the Comstock mines came from Tahoe basin forests, and over the next 35 years, over two-thirds of the basin's forests were logged. The timber was used for the mines, railroads, and growing cities of the West.

Voices of concern grew louder as the lands around Lake Tahoe were being changed forever. Finally, after the rich veins of ore from the mines ran dry, a movement arose to try and save what was left of the forests around the basin.

In response to petitions from the Sierra Club, Stanford University, and prominent individuals, the Lake Tahoe Forest Reserve was established by President William McKinley in 1899, six years before the establishment of the U.S. Forest Service.

The designation encompassed nearly 240 square miles of land and included 37,000 acres located in the southwest portion of the Tahoe Basin.



Rangers first had a permanent home in the Tahoe basin in 1920 in Meyers. Photo/USFS

The first Lake Valley rangers

After the establishment of the Forest Service in 1905, the Lake Tahoe Forest Reserve was managed by three men: Assistant Forest Ranger James Stout, Forest Guard Lester Walker, and Deputy Forest Ranger Raymond Tyler, who served as the first Lake Valley District ranger.

The Lake Valley rangers reported to the ranger in charge, Samuel L. Ellis, who was located in Sonora on the Stanislaus Reserve. Their headquarters was a primitive camp three-quarters of a mile below the Echo Post Office in Strawberry Valley, which was approximately 10 miles west of the Tahoe basin.

For the rangers, Lake Tahoe Forest Reserve summer duties consisted of patrolling for and extinguishing fires, surveying boundaries, posting boundary signs, building and managing trails, and managing incoming cattle and sheep.

Managing the Lake Tahoe Forest Reserve from the Strawberry Valley location proved difficult. Supplies and official communications from the Sonora office were transported via stagecoach and the long commute between Strawberry Valley and the basin was a challenge to say the least.

In addition, living accommodations within the reserve were poor. The cold winter rain and snows of late spring and fall made living in tents difficult during these seasons. The rangers frequently had colds and the horses grew unhealthy due to the icy winds.

Plans for new cabin

As the years passed and interest in the Tahoe basin grew, it became apparent that a permanent structure was needed from which the rangers could more effectively manage the Lake Tahoe Forest Reserve.

In 1911, after a half-dozen years of commuting and using temporary camps, Lake Valley Rangers' dreams were about to come true.

In July that year, Eldorado National Forest Supervisor Evan Kelly sent a letter to the current Lake Valley district ranger, J.P. McMillan, saying money was available and plans had been drawn up for the Lake Valley Ranger Station and barn. Kelly asked whether lumber could be obtained for the building.

Kelly sent out requests for bids to construct a cabin and barn in Lake Valley. They called for all materials and work to be furnished by the contractor and the station and barn to be completed for occupancy on or before Sept. 15, 1911.

In August, a bid received from Marshall Hughes came in at \$398 for construction of a 14-by-28-foot station and \$212 for an 18-by-26-foot barn. Another bid received from Al Smith for both the station and barn was for \$638.

Kelly sent a letter to the Lake Valley rangers stating that the bids were rejected because they were too high.

Construction would not begin that season. He said they'd need to wait for a mill to be built in the vicinity to provide reasonably priced lumber.

So it was that in 1912, in early summer, the first Lake Valley Ranger Station was finally built. However, the barn would take a few more months to complete.

A new era

The Lake Valley rangers continued to carry out their duties in the rapidly growing Tahoe basin. By the 1920s, the need for a year-round ranger station at Lake Tahoe became apparent.

The decision was made to move out of the rustic cabin to a new location three miles away in Meyers.

A local doctor, Frank Avery, was authorized to use the former station for \$30 a year. It was noted that when the Forest Service needed it back, the cabin would revert to the agency.

The Avery family occupied and maintained the structure as a summer residence until Jan. 31, 1959, when they relinquished the cabin to the Forest Service. The Forest Service then utilized the cabin to accommodate backcountry and trails staff and to store its equipment.

For many summers, the cabin was occupied by a Forest Service packer named James Hawksworth and the adjacent meadow was used to graze the horses and mules used during the summer months to support the Forest Service wilderness and trails program.

Hawksworth and his wife, Donna, resided at the cabin for over 30 years while serving the Forest Service.

In the early 1970s, due to concerns for the aging condition of the building, a nearby tent platform was constructed to house

Hawksworth, along with a bathroom to replace the original outhouse.

In 2004, the pack station was renamed Hawksworth Pack Station in honor of the long-term Forest Service packer.

The original Lake Valley Station has been preserved and today stands as a proud reminder of the early days of the Lake Valley Ranger District. The cabin is now used as an equipment storage site for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit's wilderness program, and has been evaluated and considered to be eligible for National Register of Historic Places status.

*Don Lane is the recreation and wilderness program manager for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. This article is republished from the winter 2017 edition of **Tahoe In Depth**.*