

KOOSKIA



ON THE EDGE OF WILDERNESS IN THE MIDDLE OF FREEDOM

BY DENNIS PENCE

This is what much of America used to be. I sat in a rickety old lawn chair on an even ricketier deck, admiring the view. It was mid-June and the temp was seventy-five degrees. A few puffball clouds floated across the sky, the forest-cloaked mountains rose sharply a few miles away. The only sounds I could hear were the birds chirping and the wind softly blowing. The scene was idyllic. It doesn't get much better.

LEFT: Forest-clad mountains make
Kooskia a gateway to wilderness.

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ABOVE: The Kooskia Library provides a wealth of information for the history buff.

In 2009, my wife Teri and I purchased an old mobile home with a rickety deck on five acres only a few miles above Kooskia. The intention was to build a home and live in the mobile in the meantime. We had decided to “retire” a few years early and move to a simpler lifestyle. Our criteria were to be on the edge of the wilderness, though not too far out, no freeways, fairly good weather, and a small rural town with that ever-elusive commodity, freedom.

Kooskia, with its population of six hundred including the surrounding area, fit the bill. Winters are fairly warm by Idaho standards, growing season is 147 days on average, and the town is billed as the “Gateway to the Wilderness.” A bonus: the closest freeway is 145 miles away.

The area where we bought our property was known affectionately as Bachelor Knob. There were several older men, all homeowners who were not married. Each one of those bachelors stopped by and introduced himself and offered to help us should we need it. One, a gentleman with a gray beard, holding a beer, said, “I just had to meet the first woman on Bachelor Knob.” We all had a good laugh on that one.

Teri and I bought our property a year before we moved here permanently, so at first it served as a vacation place. We already knew our neighbors better here than the last place next to a large city where we had lived for eighteen years. And we didn’t even live here yet. We felt like we were moving home.

Being a history buff, I couldn't wait to explore my new home. Kooskia is rich in history. Its name alone fascinated me. Pronounced Koos-kee with a silent "a," the name is a shortened version of Kooskooskee, a Nez Perce term. I knew the origin but was unsure what the name meant. Depending on whose history I read, I narrowed it down to three meanings. One source says the definition is "clear water." Which makes sense. The river that flows past the town is named the Clearwater for its crystal-clear water. Another meaning is "where two rivers meet." Which also makes sense. Kooskia is at the confluence of two rivers: the South Fork Clearwater meets the Middle Fork to form the main stem Clearwater River. Yet a third meaning is "many waters." I'm still unsure which is the correct definition.

The first explorers not of native origin to the area were with the Lewis and Clark Expedition, though they passed some miles to the north and didn't enter the valley itself. US Highway 12 that serves this part of Idaho generally follows the trail of the expedition and originally was christened the Lewis and Clark Highway, which later was changed to the Northwest Passage Scenic Byway.

My main source for historical information is the Kooskia Community Library. Small though the library may be, it is a wealth of information for the history buff. Dena Puderbaugh, the librarian, picked up right away on the fact that I like local history and soon I was receiving notifications from the library that the book I requested was being held for me—except I hadn't placed any items on hold. Dena, knowing what I liked to read, took it

upon herself to reserve books for me, as well as for many of her other patrons. Only in a town like Kooskia would the librarian be so accommodating.

I recently sat down with Dena and asked her, "Do you like living here in Kooskia?"

"I love it," she said. "I'm an Idaho native from Salmon. I've lived here twenty-two years. It is home."

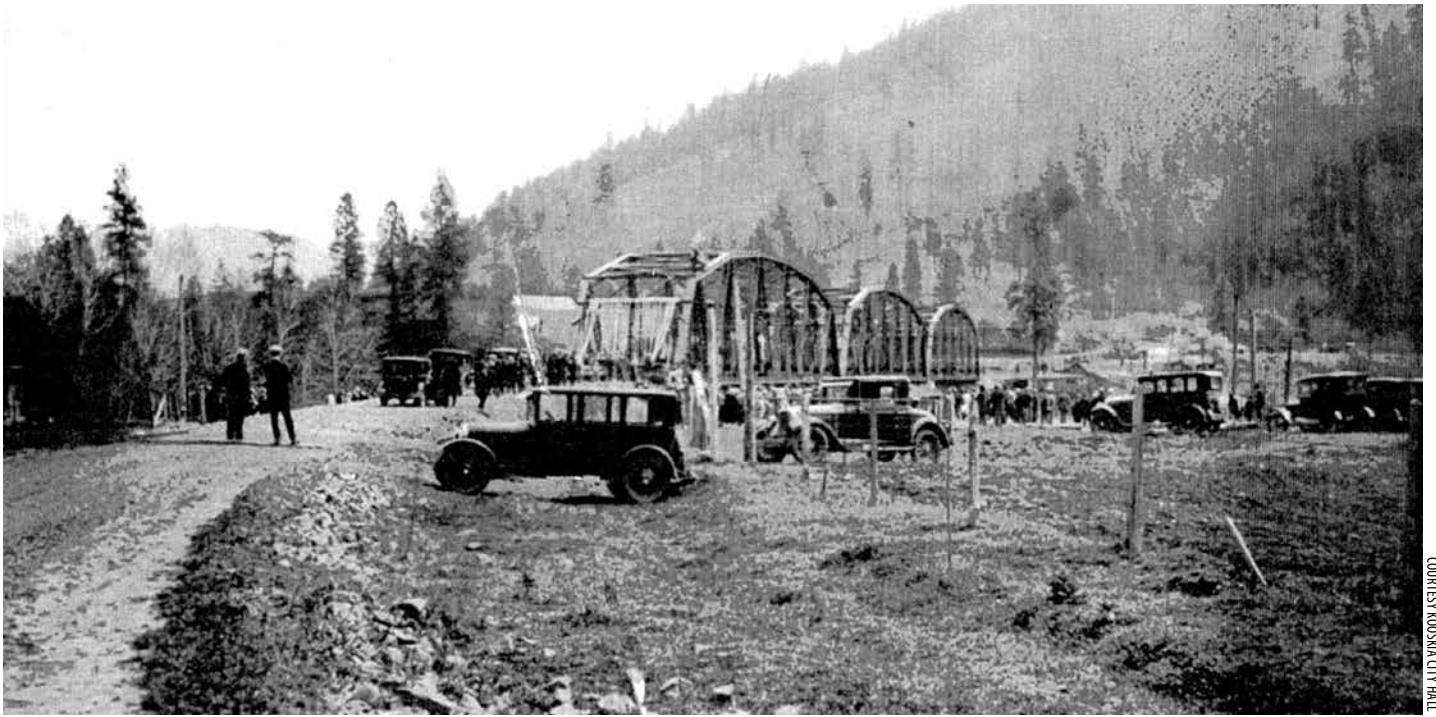
"What about being here do you love?"

"Because of the library, I see everybody. The people I meet are willing to go out of their way to help others. And I like the area because of the close-by recreation. You don't have to spend a fortune to have fun. I like to walk, so one day I drove up the river to Snowshoe Falls trailhead. I walked up the trail and spent most of the day exploring. All it

BELOW: The old Clearwater Ferry across the river's middle fork at Kooskia.



COURTESY KOOSKIA CITY HALL



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ABOVE: Dedication of a new bridge at Kooskia in 1927.

cost me was the gas to drive there. When I got back to the car that evening, I was happy—other than the dozen ticks that accompanied me back,” she laughed. “It was tick season.”

In my many years of haunting libraries, Dena truly is the best librarian. If there were a librarian of the year award, my vote for Dena would go along with the many other votes she’d get from this area.

In my quest to learn more about local history, I went to the Kooskia National Fish Hatchery two miles east of town on Clear Creek. While the hatchery is an important facility to the Nez Perce Tribe and US Fish and Wildlife Service for rearing Chinook salmon, that wasn’t the purpose of my visit. The real reason concerned a major battle between the Nez Perce and US Army fought at this location in 1877. This site, right in my backyard, was one of the many battles of the Nez Perce War.

It was as if I were transported back into history. I tried to imagine what it was like on that July 1 morning. Chief Looking Glass, a peace advocate, was trying to stay out of the

war. He moved his band, as ordered, to this location on Clear Creek, along with the band’s horses and cattle. Seeing the soldiers coming down the steep slopes to the west of the creek, the chief raised the white flag. He wanted it known that he was not part of this war.

A trigger-happy civilian fired a shot and wounded an older man. The battle was on. Mayhem ensued. Frightened women and children fled. Some jumped into the swollen Middle Fork Clearwater River and were lost. Others fled into the mountains. The army proceeded to burn their lodges and goods, and captured more than seven hundred horses.

Learning about all this, melancholy enveloped me. These people were trying to live in peace and remain neutral, yet were attacked and literally lost everything. Some gave their lives.

To see this pleasant site today, it is hard to imagine the fear and horror prevalent on that long-ago morning. Lush green grass now grows throughout the area. Trees line Clear Creek as it makes its journey to the Middle Fork, a short distance away. An old mill pond from days gone by often holds wild geese and

ducks. Deer and turkeys are plentiful. Even the hatchery buildings, with their rearing ponds and the paved road, almost seem to be a part of the landscape.

I brought myself back to the present. Time to move on to my next stop in history: another battlefield from the 1877 war. This time I drove south of Kooskia a short distance on Highway 13 up the South Fork Clearwater River. At Stites, I crossed the river to the west side. A short time later I was where the Nez Perce camped at Cottonwood Creek during their flight from the US Army.

An old house, long vacant and speaking of better days, sat in a large open-fenced area. Several whitetail deer fed along Cottonwood Creek, and a small flock of turkeys made their way along the fence line. It was obviously private property. Not wanting to trespass, I walked on the shoulder of the road. Again, as at Clear Creek, I tried to get a feel for the site, but this time it eluded me. Perhaps because the actual battle took place on the east side of the South Fork and a thousand feet higher, on top of the ridge.

The South Fork flowed a few yards away, rimmed on both sides by cottonwood trees. Across the river, Highway 13 to Grangeville paralleled every bend.

On July 11, 1877, the Nez Perce were camped on the flat where I stood. Again, I tried to visualize the scene of lodges strung across this flat along the South Fork, horses and cattle grazing. Children playing, women tending fires. And suddenly, cannon and Gatling gun fire coming from the ridge opposite into the camp. Warriors running for horses, terror following.

I could visualize it, but the peace of the scene in the present belied the fear the Nez Perce people must have experienced.

Perhaps the ghosts of the past are better off left in the past.

For a change of pace, I focused on the history of Kooskia itself. I already knew much of the basic history, such as that the original name of Kooskia was Stuart. Settled in 1895, the town was named after James Stuart, a Nez Perce who was educated and successful. A surveyor, he also owned a furniture store in town and traveled to Washington, D.C. a number of times to represent the interests of the Nez Perce Tribe. Today a high hill dominating Kooskia behind the town is still called Mount Stuart by the locals.

The Northern Pacific Railway Company extended its line to Stuart in 1899. The railroad station was called Kooskia, because the line already had a station called Stuart. A few years later, the town's name was changed to Kooskia, to the consternation of some residents.

Of particular interest to me was the flour mill, built in 1903. Not so much the mill itself fascinated me, but the tramway that transported the grain from the town of Winona at the edge of the Camas Prairie to

BELOW: Clearwater River a half-mile downstream from Kooskia.



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the mill. Wheat and other grains were transported one-and-a-quarter miles and seventeen hundred feet lower to a warehouse by two endless cables holding thirty buckets. Goods and supplies were loaded into the buckets for the return trip back up to the prairie. The tramway was so important to Kooskia in the first years of the 20th Century that some maps listed the town as Tramway instead of Kooskia.

Of course, I had to see the site. But nothing is left of the mill itself. A few homes dot the mountainside that the tramway ascended. The route the tramway took is steep—a good example of the engineering feats of those days, often accomplished by hand in the absence of machinery, can be described by nothing short of “awesome.”

My friend Butch Weeks has lived in Kooskia almost all his seventy-three years. “I left for two-and-a-half years to attend college,” he laughed. “I don’t like city life, so I returned to Kooskia. I’m a hick from the sticks and belong here.”

We talked about him growing up in Kooskia. “When I was a kid, the pylons for the tramway were still standing. That was in the 1950s. Us kids would go up there exploring. We’d leave in the morning and go exploring or fishing. Our mom wouldn’t see us until lunch. Then after lunch we’d be gone again until supper. It was a good place to grow up.”

“I’m assuming logging was the main industry then?” I asked.

“It was. There were as many as four mills operating back then. One at the mouth of Clear Creek, where my dad worked for a while. Then one at the new bridge, one across the river over at the foot of the tramway, and one out where the current mill is now. Plus the pole yard. The lumber went out by rail then.”

“So the railroad was still going well?” I was thinking of how there’s still a rail line now but it is used only for rail car storage. And not even much for that. The rails are rusty with disuse and weeds grow between the ties.

“In the fifties, we still had passenger train service,” Butch informed me. “Must have been the mid-fifties when the last passenger train left.”

I remembered reading somewhere it was 1955, though a freight train per day continued to use the line for quite some time after that.

“A lot of logging trucks back then,” he said. “But the heyday is over. There’s still some logging, but not like then.”

We talked of people he knew, and he told some colorful stories that can’t be repeated here. Kooskia indeed had some colorful people in those days. And still does.

“Guiding and outfitting was big back then,” Butch went on. “Much bigger than now. Elk populations were much bigger. We were known for our good hunting. Hollywood stars would fly into the airport here,” he said referring to the short grass strip on the south end of town. “Their guide would pick them up for a week or two of hunting. I remember one of the actors from the old TV show, *The Virginian*, coming here to hunt.”

Butch is one of those people who make the Kooskia area a good place to live. His sense of humor is second to none, and he always has a good hunting story to tell. This last winter, when more snow than normal fell on Bachelor Knob, Butch made the trip up to us every time a few inches piled up, and he plowed all our driveways. And asked nothing in return. He is the perfect example of the spirit of the people here.

I have to mention the recreational opportunities here, because Kooskia is indeed



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a gateway to the wilderness. Hunting, fishing, and camping tend to dominate, but a host of other activities draw people to the backcountry. Hiking trails crisscross the wilderness, and rafters and boaters challenge the rapids of the rivers. The land gives its bounty to us to add to our winter larders: not only wild game and fish, but also berries, mushrooms, and wild fruit. Many of us depend on the ample firewood supply in the backcountry to keep us warm in the winter.

Charlie Phillips is one of the bachelors I

first met on Bachelor Knob. Twenty years ago, Charlie had his fill of big city California, picked up stakes, and moved lock stock and barrel to Idaho. He never looked back.

A couple times a week, Charlie and I, and occasionally a couple others, have one of our famous “round table” discussions. Or perhaps infamous, depending on your point of view. The round table is his kitchen table. If it’s morning, the beverage of choice is coffee. If afternoon, a cold beer replaces the coffee. Usually from a craft brewery. At the round

ABOVE: Sasquatch still frequents the area, at least in murals.



ABOVE: Downtown Kooskia.

table, we solve America's problems—of course, from an independent, rural Idaho point of view with a liberty-leaning slant. All in good humor.

At eighty years young, Charlie has been around the horn. Since I am a relative newcomer to the Kooskia area, having lived here only ten years, Charlie was the logical choice for a long-term transplant's viewpoint for this article. At one of our round table discussions, he summed it up well. In his humorous, low-key manner, he said, "If I tell you we did it this way in California, it's not that I think we should do it this way here. It's so we don't do it here like we did it in California."

Well said, Charlie.

I see Kooskia as one of the last best places in America. It has rugged backcountry with steep mountains, fast-running rivers and vast

forests, but it is so much more than that. It's also the people—fiercely independent and self-sufficient, yet if you need help, the whole neighborhood will be there.

The fires of 2015 were the prime example. More than sixty homes and many other buildings were lost in the wildfire. At one of the local churches, six freight truck trailers were full of donated goods for those who lost their homes. There were so many donations, the church ran out of room to store everything.

More than two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson envisioned a country populated by rugged individualists, mostly rural, dedicated to preserving liberty. The people of Kooskia and the surrounding area are of this Jeffersonian type.

Kooskia is not perfect. No place is. But it's the best place I have lived. It is home. ■