



John Muir Correspondence (PDFs)

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Letter from Cha[rle]s H. Sawyer to John Muir, 1902 Jan 4.

Charles H. Sawyer

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Los Gatos Jan. 4th 1902

My Dear Mr. Muir;

Though I know some of the Forest Reserves fairly well, particularly the Olympic and Bitter Root Reserves, the only opportunity I have had of observing the methods by which they are guarded, was during a trip I made in the company of the Rangers of the Bitter Root Reserve, a year ago last summer. I was very much disappointed, I had hoped that it would be guarded and preserved, the beautiful wilderness that it is.

I met three Rangers that trip, two of them I traveled with for a month, and one I met in town, in charge of the office, the Supervisor being away. This particular Ranger whom we will call Ranger #1, owed his appointment to his Father a clerk in one of the Departments in Washington, he was absolutely unfit for the life, hated it, and said that he should resign if he ever had to patrol the Reserve again. He had spent the winter before on the Reserve, where he and a companion, Ranger #2 built a "cabin", afterwards known as Rangers' cabin #1. They used small logs piling them up as a rail fence is built, open everywhere, two blankets for the roof, a blanket for a door, it was a standing joke for the whole country side, the meanest trapper in the mountains had a better one, in spring he made one trip on the Reserve and then went to live in town, he was actually afraid, he could not be persuaded to venture out after night-fall for fear of cougars.

Ranger #2 owed his appointment to his father, a man who had at one time held an important office in Idaho. He took the job until he could get something better, he told me himself that there was nothing to do but hunt or prospect, and during the month I traveled with him he did not leave camp or his blankets except upon two occasions, both times he went hunting for an hour or two, and all that he did to earn his pay was to ride from camp to camp.

Ranger #3 was a splendid mountain man, and he did all that was ever done, he could at least handle an axe, and would use it when necessary to open a trail, the others would go around any distance or go back. He was easily influenced by his companion, Ranger #2 but I will say that he was the only one that I saw that did anything to earn one dollar of the pay the Government gave them. Before he obtained his appointment, which was given him through the influence of Ranger #2's father, he had been trapping and prospecting, he had also run several rafts of timber from the Reserve to the farming country below, selling them for telegraph poles etc. until the Supervisor warned him that

his neighbors had complained and that he had better stop.

I hired horses from these men and we were out a month, they did not care where they went if the trail was good, for they simply wanted to pass the time. We covered part of their district during that time, and discovered three fires a few days after leaving, they were all in sight at the same time from a high ridge which the trail crossed, two of them were large, but they paid no attention to them because they were not near a trail, we camped near the third one two days later, simply because it was on the beaten trail. After two days in camp, Ranger #3, at my request, took a shovel and visited the fire which was on a spur of the main ridge. The forest was open, Pinus Contorta, and the fire was smouldering in the mould but slowly creeping to the ridge where it could run for miles in the rank growth of grass just in a condition to burn. That fire could have been extinguished even by one man, it was simply a question of time, a day's hard work at most. Ranger #3 worked at it for an hour and said that it would probably rain in the night and put the fire out, it did rain that night, but several days later I saw the smoke again rising in heavy columns, we were many miles away by that time.

We camped a few days later within a mile of the boundry of their district, a large fire was burning in the canon above us, but when the Rangers discovered that it was the other side of the river and not in their district they would not even go up to see it, I crossed the river twice on foot and found enough evidence to convince me that it had been set by a band of Indians, but the Rangers did not make an effort to investigate. On the way out we discovered many of the fire notices cut and torn down, they knew who had done the mischief but said he was a good fellow and did not mean any harm, there is a penalty for distroying the notices. We got back in time for them to hand in a carefully padded report so that their pay would arrive promptly on time. I omitted to mention the fact however, that they had carefully tacked up notices at every camping place, for their friend to destroy. Both these Rangers have since left the service whether of their own free will or not I do not know. The way they guarded the Reserve was worse than useless for it held the whole system up to ridicule, these men are the only ones I have actually observed, I have had a great deal told me that of course I cannot vouch for.

Yours very truly,

Harold H. Sawyer

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