

A monument not m

By CHRIS BAKER

Correspondent

DARBY — When the area now known as Boulder Creek Campground was being considered for possible timber sales back in the '40s, then West Fork Ranger Sam Billings felt it was an inappropriate fate for so beautiful a site.

Billings, who wanted to save the towering ponderosa and Douglas fir along Boulder Creek, eventually became instrumental in establishing the Boulder Creek Campground. In subsequent years he took special pride in administering the site.

After Billings' death in 1986, close friends and associates took it upon themselves to see to it that Billings received recognition for saving the site from a timber sale and for the many years he dedicated to serving the U.S. Forest Service. Rev. Wayne Wardwell of Hamilton spearheaded a drive to changed Boulder Creek Campground's name changed to the Samuel T. Billings Campground, and numerous letters poured into the office of Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor Bob Morgan in support of the idea.

The name change recently was adopted by the Forest Service, and dedication ceremonies have been slated for May, at which time a new campground sign will be erected and Billings' service to the area

will be recognized officially.

"I told Sam just before he died that I'd see if I couldn't persuade the Forest Service to change the name of the campground, and I could tell Sam was very pleased," said Wardwell. "After all, it wouldn't be there if Sam hadn't done the work."

Billings' contributions to the West Fork district were many. Serving at a time when the role of the forester was changing dramatically, he can aptly be called the last of the oldtime rangers in the area.

Billings' wife Florence says that in the early '40s a ranger needed to make a lot of personal contact with people in order to gain their cooperation. Rangers didn't wield much power and, to a large extent, their jobs involved convincing ranchers and loggers of how they should be doing things.

"The concept of the Forest Service was different then than now," Florence Billings said. "Sam had to work at keeping friendly relations with everybody in order to gain their respect and cooperation."

"Today it's more cut and dried. There are more personnel available to enforce regulations. It can't be the way it used to be. Those days are gone. It's just a part of growth."

Born in Framington, Mass., on April 13, 1899, Sam Billings spent his early years in the East

before serving in France and Germany during World War I. After returning from France, Billings worked various odd jobs in Connecticut before moving to Libby, where he went to work fighting fires for the Forest Service. Liking the West and enjoying his work, Billings decided to stay.

In 1927 he passed the examination for forest ranger and was appointed to the position of district ranger for the Kootenai National Forest. On his annual leave, Billings could usually be found traveling back to Massachusetts to court his sweetheart Florence Sturgeon.

On his third yearly visit, Billings convinced Florence they should marry. She arrived in Libby on Dec. 3, 1930, and they were married four days later.

The Billings set up housekeeping at the Sylvanite Ranger Station in the wilds of the Yaak River country in the Kootenai Forest. As manager of the Emergency Relief Administration, Sam Billings employed every able-bodied man within his district between 1931 and 1936, thus alleviating much of the Depression's force in that area.

In 1939 the Billings transferred to the West Fork District of the Bitterroot National Forest, where Sam served for 15 years. The two lived in a log cabin adjacent to the station.

made by man

"In those days it was just us up there," Florence said. "We had temporary help in the summer, but we were alone during the winter. I learned to knit and did some typing for Sam."

She recalls winters of steady snows during which they had to shovel their way out of the cabin's back door, and then shovel their way back in later. Because of the poor road conditions, they rarely made trips into Darby, relying instead on a friend from Alta to bring them mail and supplies twice a week.

"The roads were horrible," Florence said. "You couldn't meet a logging truck because there was no place to turn around. And it was always you who had to back up, not them."

Being the only people at the West Fork Station meant having

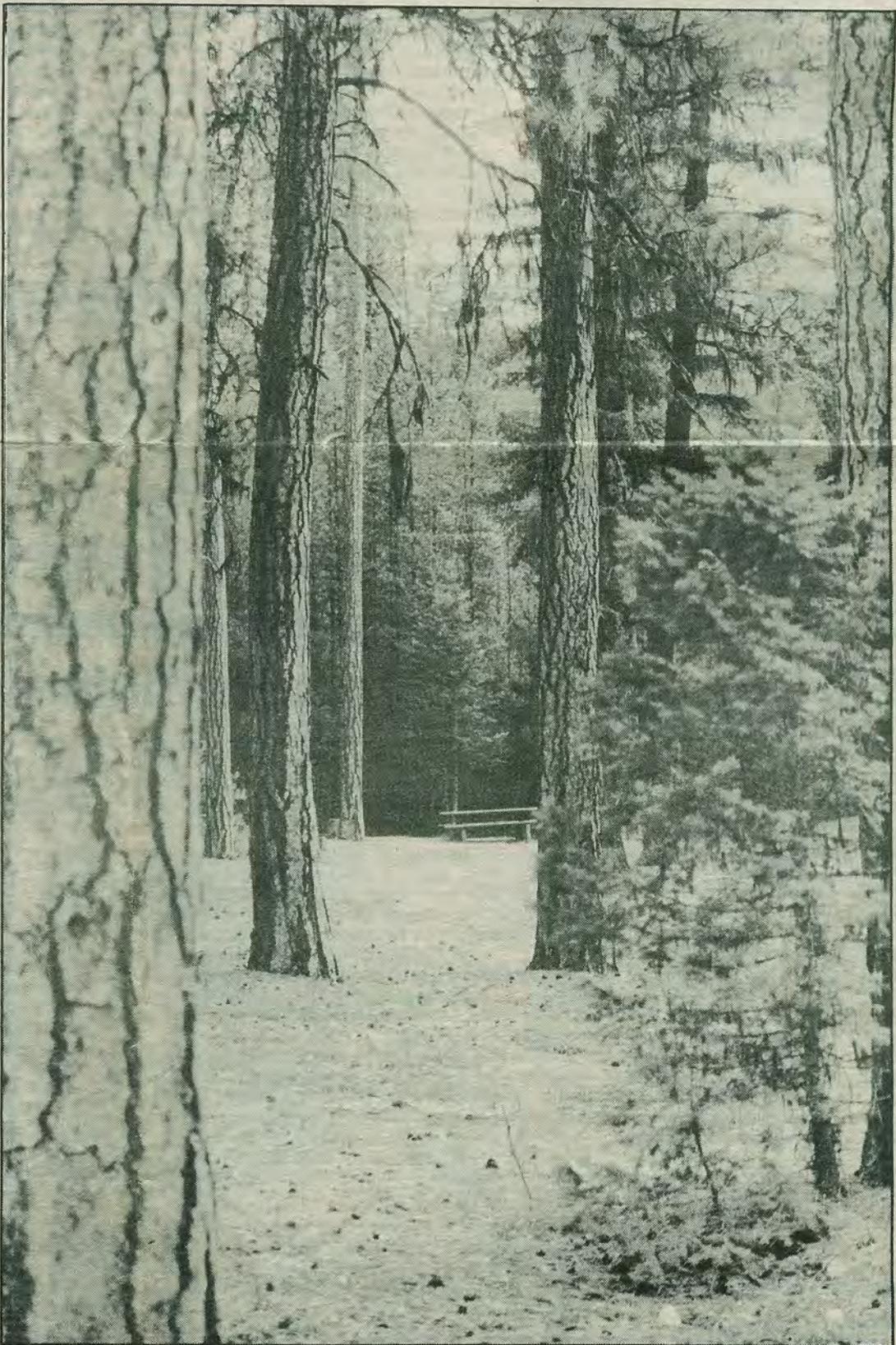
to do everything themselves, but Florence says her husband's most important accomplishment was that of becoming a good public relations man.

"People liked him," she said. "He was able to deal with them on a personal basis. They often had him over for meals or just coffee and really respected Sam."

Before he died, Billings spoke in glowing terms of the campground he had worked to save from the logger's chainsaw. In his eyes, Boulder Creek Campground had everything a good campground should have: rocks and boulders for the rock hounds, fish for the fishermen and flowers for all.

How pleased he would be to know that that same campground soon will be dedicated to the many years of service he gave to the West Fork District.





CHRIS BAKER/Bitterroot News

Ponderosa pine, which Sam Billings loved, beckon one for a further walk into the woods at the soon-to-be-named Sam Billings Campground.

Sam Billings at age 20, before he became a forest ranger.



Courtesy of Florence Billings

Florence Billings stands amid four feet of snow on the shoveled walk to the West Fork cabin in 1945.

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Courtesy of Florence Billings

Rarely traveling into Darby in the winter because the roads were too bad, the couple learned to take

care of things by themselves.



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Sam Billings at age 20, before he became a forest ranger.

