

William Bernard Milbury (1872-1916)

By Greg Walter

William Bernard Milbury was the first federal forest ranger in western Curry and southwest Coos Counties when he was hired to work the Port Orford District of the newly formed Siskiyou National Forest in 1907. Given the harsh conditions and isolation of the assignment, it took a special kind of person to survive in the hostile environment. Bill Milbury was such a man.

As the ranger assigned to bring a new order to managing the public domain, Milbury was charged with settling fraudulent homestead claims and enforcing game laws. Many people were hostile to him, and he was even shot at during an ambush (the bullet passed through his hat), but he won people over with his fairness, character, and attention to duty.

Milbury was born at Bear River, Annapolis County, Nova Scotia, on September 20, 1872. In 1887, at the age of fifteen, he worked as a streetcar conductor in Boston and in 1889 went to Alaska for two years at the time of the Klondike gold rush. Following eight years in San Francisco, in 1902 he homesteaded in Eden Valley near Powers, Oregon. In 1907, he passed the ranger examination in Grants Pass and entered government service as a forester.

Early foresters had mapped the Siskiyou National Forest and had located and estimated the amount of timber, natural resources, and agricultural land. Among Milbury's most important duties was to fight forest fires with hazel hoe, shovel, ax, and crosscut saw.

No roads penetrated the interior of the National Forest and few telephone lines. For his headquarters, Milbury chose an abandoned homestead on the Middle Elk River, eleven miles southeast of Port Orford. He built his small living quarters from a Port Orford cedar tree, including a box bed he could pull up by ropes and pulleys to become part of the ceiling. He also added a woodshed, barn, harness room, and storage space, and he fenced a clearing with a split rail fence. The place was later known as the McGribble Ranger Station.

Milbury married Nellie Waters on June 21, 1910. He held his forester position until October 12, 1914, when he retired to an acreage in Myrtle Point. He was a member of the Masonic Lodge and a Noble Grand of Myrtle Point lodge, Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F). He died of heart failure on February 29, 1916, and is buried in Myrtle Point Pioneer Cemetery. Milbury Mountain, ten miles southeast of Port Orford, and Milbury Creek in Curry County were named for him.

Sources

Haefner, Henry E. "Reminiscences of an Early Forester." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 76:1 (March 1975), 39-88.

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