

History of North Fork Settlement

Located in the extreme northern reaches of western Montana, the North Fork drainage of the Flathead river is a rugged and remote part of the state. Fed by crystalline glacial waters from lakes in the surrounding mountains, the North Fork River carves a valley between the Continental Divide Range and the Whitefish Range of the northern Rocky Mountains. The area is wet, heavily forested and still very wild. It is one of the last bastions of the grizzly bear in the lower 48 states.

Settlement came comparatively late to the North Fork drainage, following the founding of Columbia Falls and completion of the Great Northern Railway across Marias Pass in 1891. It was the prospects of coal mining at Coal Creek and logging around Sullivan Meadow, followed by oil seeps near Kintla Lake, that first sparked interest in the resources of the drainage. Federal government land survey of two North Fork townships spurred speculation and allowed for legal preemption claims beginning in 1893. The earliest settlement concentrated at Sullivan Meadow; claims were immediately filed there and at Coal Creek and Coal Banks. However, transportation difficulties and widespread depression dampened early hopes. Most of the early settlers, in fact, lived a subsistence existence hunting and trapping, and raising gardens.

The government withdrew the North Fork area from further entry in 1897 and designated it a Forest Reserve. Timber investors consolidated existing patented claims around Sullivan Meadow. Speculation in the North Fork was reinvigorated when Butte Oil Company investors built the first road into the valley in 1901, connecting Belton to Kintla Lake. However, after a few years of drilling, two competing ventures, Kintla Oil Company and Kintla Lake Oil Company, ended in failure. In 1906, restrictions on homestead entry were lifted and lands east of the North Fork were included in the new Blackfoot National Forest. Homestead entry began anew in the area, and small enclaves, most notably a cluster of homesteads at Big Prairie, emerged. Located mid-way between Belton and Big Prairie, Sullivan Meadow remained a hub of local activity, with the opening of William Adair's store there—the area's principal business—in 1904.

Events of almost two decades focused early settlement along the east side of the river, and by 1910 there were 44 homestead claims laid to lands east of the North Fork, compared to only 14 on the west. That year, Glacier National Park was created, and homestead settlement east of the North Fork River was halted. Although area homesteaders protested the creation of Glacier National Park and petitioned for exclusion of the North Fork tract from the Park, the river boundary held. Park managers viewed the private inholdings as a headache, and from that time forward, policy has been to return the private inholdings to the public domain as the opportunity arose. Meanwhile, on the west side of the river, Forest Service policies fostered local settlement. They built roads and bridges and allowed for hunting, trapping, grazing, and timber cutting. This occasion rebalanced North Fork settlement; from that time on, settlement and community shifted to the west.

Between 1910 and the beginning of World War I, about 100 homesteads were settled west of the North Fork river. A road up the west side was begun in 1912. The following year, William Adair moved his store from Sullivan Meadow to Polebridge. (The settlement was named for the 400-foot-long pole bridge constructed by area homesteaders to access Big Prairie on the east side of the river. Although the bridge lasted only a season and was replaced by the county in 1916, the name stuck.) A tent set up near Indian Creek housed the first North Fork school in 1913; in 1915, local residents built a log school building at Big Prairie. But with more children from the west than

the east side attending, "some westsiders came over one dark night and removed all the desks, etc." and moved the school across the river to Red Meadow.

The shift to the west continued; during the teens approximately 80 new homesteads were claimed west of the river. In 1918, a road along the west side between Columbia Falls and the Canadian border was finished. By 1920, there were two mercantiles located at Polebridge. Ben Hensen's store housed a post office, and a second post office was opened at Trail Creek. Meanwhile, the eastside community declined, and Glacier National Park increasingly bought out private inholdings through the 20th century. By the late 1930s, few of the original homesteaders remained. The last year-round eastside resident was taken out during the winter of 1954.

Economically, most North Forkers remained highly subsistent; hunting, trapping and gardening continued to sustain many residents. A few homesteaders ran cattle. Glacier National Park presented additional opportunities to earn money, and many supplemented their income by working seasonally in the Park, or outfitting and guiding when they could get the business. Hay was the principal crop in the area, most for sale to the Park Service, Forest Service, tourists or neighboring ranchers.

Socially, the community was centered in the hearts and homes of the people of the valley. As in many rural communities, dances and picnics were the main group entertainments. All night dances were held regularly at peoples' homes or at the Adair store. After 1920, the Vance Lodge became a regular host to such parties.¹

Source: National Register nomination form for Vance Lodge, Flathead County, Montana, December 1994.

¹This context on North Fork Settlement is condensed from *Homesteading on the North Fork in Glacier National Park*, by Patricia Bick, 1986.