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My Summer in the Black Hills

by Leslie M. Bender

I was only one of many I.S.U. forestry students who were temporarily employed on the Black Hills National Forest during the summer of 1983. My position was that of head forestry technician, in what was to be my first experience with the Forest Service. So the first week in June I chased the mice and rats out of bungalow #3 at Pactola Work Center, approximately ten miles west of Rapid City, and I moved in.

To start things off the summer employees underwent various training sessions, many of which took place at the Supervisor's Office headquartered in Custer S.D. Everyone took part in fire-fighting and first aid training, and of course we took the infamous "step test" to prove ourselves worthy of the title "firefighter." Some of us went through driver's training to be certified for driving government vehicles. After taking a drive over rugged terrain with a 4WD vehicle, under careful supervision of course, our district law enforcement officer issued me a license and my own 2WD Chevy Luv (a faithful companion throughout the summer).

My job was to head a 2-person cruising crew and, much to my surprise, the other crew member turned out to be Julie Goodspeed (another senior in Forestry at I.S.U.). We were assigned to upcoming timber sales throughout

the district. Julie and I were responsible for making our own cruising maps, allocating the correct number of plots on the area and finding the areas in the field by using topography maps and photos. I estimated and measured heights and diameters (among other things) while Julie recorded the information in an electronic notebook and kept me on track. We became quite proficient at using a compass and pacing off distances between plots. At the end of each cruise we had to take old faithful to Custer and "dump" the cruise data into the computer at the Supervisor's Office. A print-out was then mailed back to the Ranger Station in Rapid City (headquarters for Pactola) with a complete statistical analysis.

Not only did we cruise timber, we were also called out on several fires throughout the summer. I must admit that my enthusiasm for firefighting was severely diminished after the first one, which was in Beulah, Wyoming. The temperature that day was about 100°F and fire-retardant clothing is very uncomfortable when conditions are that warm. If one can tolerate the discomfort, however, the pay is very good. Most fires in the Black Hills do not amount to much more than 1 or 2 acres. But I was out all night on a fire near Hill City (Custer District) and we had the excitement of an aerial drop which

is quite rare for the Black Hills, as the plane had to fly from Denver, Colorado.

Initially I was rather disappointed with my job. It seemed that the district was ill-prepared for the arrival of summer help and we didn't get to cruise until a month had already passed. But this was an opportunity to do some other interesting things such as timber marking, stage II inventory, map-making at the Ranger Station, boundary marking, and touring the district with our supervisor. One needs to get a concept of the sheer size of the agency and of the bureaucracy and policies involved to understand why the Forest Service is not as efficient as one might like it to be.

In general the summer was very satisfying and rewarding. I enjoyed living in seasonal housing at the work center with six men and three women from all over the U.S. Recreational opportunities were limitless. Scenic Pactola Reservoir was merely five miles away and many hot summer afternoons were spent diving into the icy waters. Many secluded camping sites exist in the Black Hills if one takes the time to search them out. Spelunking at the Elk Mountain District with fellow Iowa Staters was one of many highlights. In retrospect, 10 weeks on the Black Hills National Forest went very quickly. ■