

Tunnel Guard Station

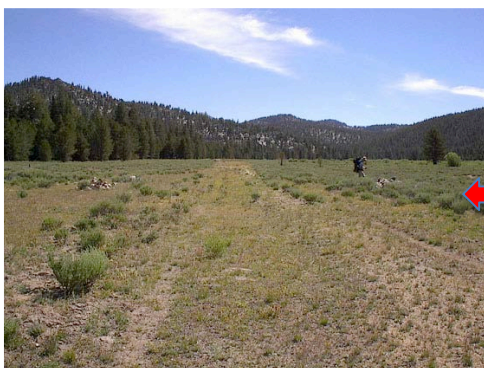
by Bill Leet

At the end of the spring semester, 1965, I was finishing up my course work for a master's degree in fisheries and simultaneously looking at job possibilities. One day in mid-May, I looked at the bulletin board in the fisheries building and there was an announcement seeking an individual who had completed all the course work for a master's in fisheries, who had firefighting experience, and who had experience handling horses. I went home and said to Theresa, my wife, "The only way they could have narrowed the qualifications to fit me better was to require sailing experience." I read her the job description and she said, "Let's do it."

At the time we had two daughters, ages two and one. We would be going to the 10,000-foot-elevation Kern Plateau, just south of Mt. Whitney. The nearest town, and for that matter, the nearest road, was 30 miles away, and we would be stationed there from early June to October in a cabin with no electricity. "Are you sure?" I asked, even knowing that Theresa was every bit as adventurous as I was.

"Yep," she said, "it sounds like fun." She proved that summer what I already knew: that she was a trouper.

When I reported for work in Lone Pine, California, we were told that I would ride the thirty miles to the Tunnel Guard Station on horseback and Theresa and our daughters, Julie and Mary, would fly to a landing strip that was two miles from the log cabin that would be our home for the next half year. My paychecks would be sent to the grocer in Lone Pine who would hold them until we emerged in the fall. He would deduct the cost of the groceries that we would order once each week to be flown to the landing strip where there was a small camp run by a cowboy who would also conduct horse pack train trips for people who were willing to pay for such things.



**Tunnel
Airstrip**

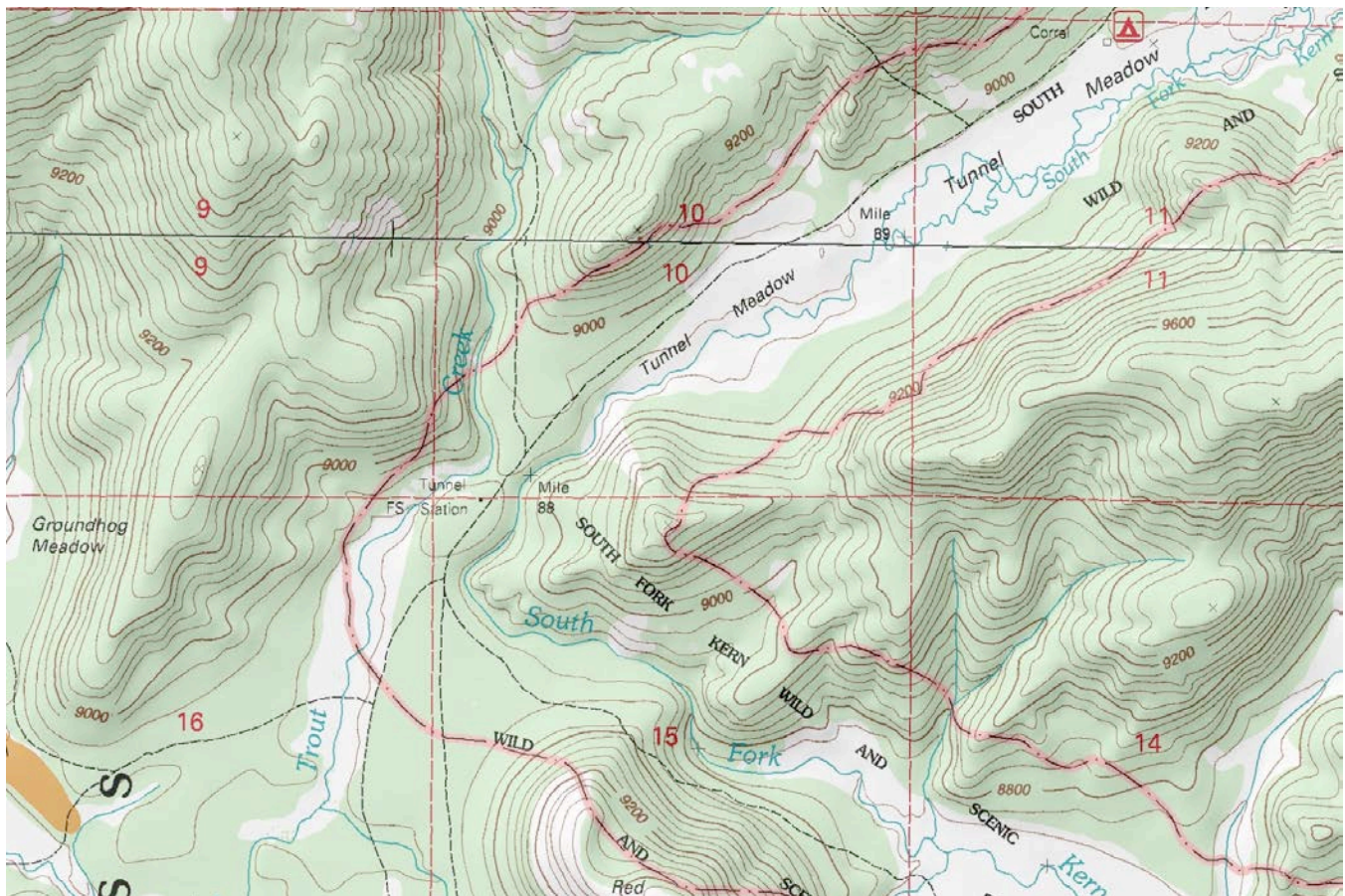
**Today
1960's**



The guard station was a log cabin located at a place where Golden Trout Creek and South Fork of the Kern River converged to within 150 yards of each other. Our water came from Golden Trout Creek via a pump to a very leaky redwood water tower and from there by gravity to the cabin. We had an electric generator, but until I fixed it in the middle of the summer, we had no electricity. The cookstove was a wood-burner. It had a short array of galvanized pipes through it to heat water, which moved by convection to a small, insulated tank. There was a bathtub in the cabin that had been constructed by pouring concrete into a form. It was big enough for two, and it was such a heat-sink that both bathers had better be ready to jump in as soon it was filled.

Because of the close proximity of Golden Trout Creek and The South Fork of the Kern, ranchers in the South Fork drainage had, in bygone years, constructed a tunnel at the convergence to capture the Golden Trout Creek flow. Battles among the ranchers in the two watersheds ensued and eventually the tunnel either collapsed or was blown up.

Our transportation was by horse or by wagon. There were two saddle horses, two mules, and a wagon that the mules pulled as a team. There was nobody there to show me how to put the harnesses on the mules, so I had to figure it out myself. The whole array is fairly self-explanatory: the collar goes on the neck, the hames go into a slot in the collar. There's a loop that fastens under the tail, so puzzling over how to harness the mules was like solving a puzzle, but not a long-term proposition. I did, however, make a key error. Each of the reins is forked so that there are two ends to each rein. The correct way is to put the right fork of each rein on the right side of each animal, and the left fork on the left side of each animal. Thus, when a given rein is pulled both heads are pulled in the same direction. Not knowing this, I connected the right rein to the right side animal (one end on each side of the head) and the left rein to the left animal.



At the point where the tunnel between the two rivers used to be, there is a curve and depression in the road leading to the landing strip two miles away. So our first trip to pick up groceries was an adventure. Theresa and I loaded ourselves and the two girls into the wagon and headed out. The curve was no more than a hundred yards down the road, and there ended our first wagon ride. I pulled on the rein to guide the mules around the curve and they went straight. The wagon tipped over and we all fell out. "I must have done something wrong," I say to Theresa. I don't remember how I reasoned out what

the error was, but I did, and we got the mules to tip the wagon back on its wheels and pull it out of the ditch. From then on we never had a problem. One side note: At the time there was an Air Force base in Nevada not far from Tunnel and the pilots apparently tested the responsiveness of the aircraft to the



craggs and valleys of the Sierra. Sonic booms were common. I feared that one might occur while I was fastening the tail loop to a mule and the boom would scare the beast into kicking me. Eventually, the feared event happened, and the mule did nothing.

Incidental to our indoctrination, we were told that a rancher by the name of Bill Thornburgh would be driving his cattle past our cabin on the way to a place two or three miles farther along the trail where he had a Forest Service grazing allotment and cabin. Indeed, a few days after we got settled in, Bill came through accompanied by his two daughters aged about ten and twelve, I would guess, and about 100 head of cattle. The daughters were dressed identically in green and white western shirts and white cowboy hats. They rode straight in the saddle and both had a long single braid. I couldn't help thinking, wow, maybe that's my two girls in ten years or so. Bill chatted briefly and said he'd be back to see us in a day or two.

Since we had no expenses other than groceries, we ate well. At the time, Theresa and I were both beer drinkers and the first time we called in the order on the hand crank phone in our cabin, we included a couple cases of beer. Fred, the grocer, told us that he wasn't supposed to send beer up, but he'd send us one case. I told him to include one case each week with whatever else we ordered. He agreed. So each week we had 24 cans of beer to share and the question became whether to have three cans a day or to skip some days so we could have more. Occasionally, we would skip several days in a row to stockpile some of the beer.

We'd been there a couple of days when Bill Thornburgh came back to visit. He had a couple of pounds of liver from a steer he had just butchered. I have never been a fan of liver, but this one was good. He said the steer was hanging and he'd be back with some steaks. A week or so later he came back with the entire loin. He sat around for a while and we talked ranching. There was a meat saw hanging on the wall in the kitchen, so I cut the loin up, wrapped it in some freezer paper that had been left, and put it into the small freezer atop the propane refrigerator. We rationed the steaks out over the summer, although later in the summer Bill brought us more. He became a regular visitor, sometimes just to chat and sometimes to help with some chore or other that I couldn't accomplish on my own. Once a week when we went to the airstrip to pick up our groceries, we would visit with Bud Loniker and his wife Treva. In addition, hikers, fisherman, flying enthusiasts, and others would often stop on their way past the cabin, so we had a social life of sorts, even in this remote locale. At one point a couple of reporters from the Fresno Bee showed up to write an article about golden trout and what we were doing. We spent most of one night playing bridge and talking trout management.

We continued to ration beer, and during the course of the summer, we accumulated a stockpile. So we decided to have a party. Bill came down from his place, and Bud and Treva came up from their camp and we drank beer, sang songs, and had a fun time. It was pushing midnight when they all mounted up and rode home. Near our cabin, there was another small cabin that was occupied by Orville Leo, a huge guy who was an offensive lineman at University of Nevada, Reno. He was in training and that included not drinking beer. He was constantly trying to bum beer from us, and I always said no, if he wanted beer he could buy it and go off his training routine. The guy would fume. Anyway, we didn't invite him. He never said a word.

My job was elementary: primarily creel census and stream bottom sampling. Three days a week I did labor-like chores for the Forest Service: painting the various outbuildings, maintenance, and the top priority, fire fighting as required. Lightning strikes up there were frequent, and I suppressed (to use the USFS word) three or four small fires. We had a wooden box hand crank phone that was connected to three different guard stations by a single wire. Each cabin had an identifying ring. During the first storm I got a call from the Forest Service office telling me that there were two old-fashioned blade-type switches under the eaves that I should throw whenever there was a storm. I said, "Let me go out and see if I see them." As soon as I dropped the receiver, lightning struck the wire and a ball of fire a foot or two in diameter emerged from the phone. It floated slowly through the cabin and lasted some 15 or 20 seconds, I would guess, and eventually just disappeared. It was an instance of ball lighting, and there are reports of fatal explosions being the ultimate fate of the phenomenon. As I remember, I put the receiver back in the cradle, threw the switches and did not use the phone again until the storm passed.

Theresa was required to record daily weather data from station there, but we could usually work around her schedule to take rides. On a couple of occasions we loaded the two girls into pack bags on the mules and went on rides to fish, and sometimes do some sampling.



On Golden Trout Creek there was a gigantic beaver dam and through some sampling procedures I ascertained that the insects that were being produced in the beaver pond were undesirable species, mostly houseflies. In the open flowing stream, the insects were mayflies, stoneflies, caddis flies, and other desirable species. Bill, as a cattle rancher, found the concept of different productivity and different insect production in different reaches of the stream interesting, and at one point he suggested that we take out the dam. We talked about how that might be possible, and he finally said that he had just the horse for the job. He showed up one day astride an enormous Appaloosa that he called his hog. With some ropes and the horse, we dismantled part of the dam, and Golden Trout Creek resumed its natural course and flow.

This is all to say that Bill Thornburgh became a pretty good friend during that summer. However, of all the people we met that summer, we only kept in touch with one – Bruce Peet who came through on a survey of some kind and wound up having to do some fire fighting – but eventually we lost track of him, too.

Fifteen years later, Theresa became ill and after a couple of sadly deteriorating years lost her life. Ten years after that, in 1990, my new wife, Mary-Helen and I were watching "Unsolved Mysteries" on television. Robert Stack, in hosting that show, had a Rod Serlingesque style, so it was with mystery and drama that we were told that the bleached skull that had been found in the desert east of Lone Pine had been identified as belonging to Bill Thornburgh. The hole in the skull could only have been made by a bullet fired at close range. "I knew that guy," I say to Mary-Helen, as my scalp prickled.

Although we listened with rapt attention, I don't now remember many of the facts that were given on the program. Recently, I have tried to find any reporting of the apparent murder, but have not been successful. My recollection, though very vague, is that the primary suspect was the husband or boyfriend of one of the daughters. During the show, one of the daughters was interviewed. I don't remember what she said, but I do remember that she was not attractive. She was overweight, had sort of a pasty complexion, and short messy hair. My memory of how she had looked as a child returned, and I could not imagine that this was the girl I had seen. Nor can I remember the assumed motive of the

killing. Clearly, the best part of this story has escaped me, but as I have never moved in circles where murder is a way of life, the feeling of seeing that an old acquaintance was not only a victim, but a nationally publicized one, was very eerie.

One of my supervisors in the golden trout survey was Phil Pister, one of those rare naturalists who have encyclopedic knowledge of the flora and fauna of the Sierra. Some fifteen years or so after seeing the Unsolved Mysteries episode there was an article in the California Monthly about Phil's accomplishments, and through the information therein I got in touch with him. He filled me in on a few of more details of the murder. Bill Thornburgh never did get along with one of his daughter's boyfriends, and the feeling was mutual. Bill had a ranch somewhere near Lone Pine, and each morning he would go out to his hayfield to move wheel lines. One morning this character was waiting for him with a gun and shot Bill in the head. I think he was tried and jailed, but escaped. Later they caught up with him at an airport in England.

Theresa and I stayed at Tunnel until the snow flew in late October, and from there we went south to my next job on the scientific staff of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission in La Jolla. The Tunnel area was later designated as part of the Golden Trout wilderness area. The cabin is no longer there. It blew up in a propane explosion, which severely injured (maybe killed) the man who was living there at the time. Bob White, who flew us in and out, and flew our groceries in each week, also brought people in to the small tent camp his packer, Bud Loniker, ran at the landing strip site. Some years after I knew him, he completed a round trip, he lay down to take a nap in a building at the small landing strip in Lone Pine and died.

