EDITOR'S NOTE

by James G. Lewis

Last fall I found myself sitting in the hallway of a convention center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The nearest natural light was about 40 yards away at the opposite end of the hall, shining through the doors. It's ironic because attendees were people who had spent much of their careers working outdoors, in the U.S. Forest Service. They gather every three or four years at the National Forest Service Retirees Reunion to reminisce and to learn the latest news and policy positions of the agency to which they dedicated so much time and energy. It's not uncommon to hear people say they worked for the Forest Service for 30 or 35 years, and a few years ago I autographed my book on the Forest Service as a gift for someone retiring after 50 years with the agency. Fifty years! I just turned 50 this past December; I feel lucky to have survived this long, let alone work at the same place for even a decade. But clearly this gentleman loved what he did, and he's not alone. These folks are so dedicated, loyal, and proud to have worn the agency's famed green uniforms that they've been described as having worn green underwear.

The retirees don't use the term "reunion" lightly. One thing I've learned while studying the Forest Service and have seen in person at these reunions is that the retirees often describe the agency as a family—complete with all its attendant annoyances and dysfunctionality and love and support. Believe me, at this family reunion I've encountered the daffy aunt, doting grandparent, and crazy uncle types. And because I never wore the green underwear, I'll never be fully part of the family. I feel more like a son-in-law than a son, but they make me feel welcome and a part of their family nonetheless. I'm already looking forward to the next reunion three years from now.

In the Forest Service, moving up the organizational ladder often meant relocating every three to five years. After a few moves, an employee would be reunited with friends made two or three stops before, and the relationships would renew and deepen. These folks have bonded in ways that many families never do. That can happen when you're living in a place so remote that the only housing available is a railroad boxcar converted into a cabin and the nearest town is 90 minutes away. You learn to get along and support one another and to work through or around any differences. Your colleagues are not blood relations, but they're family and then some because they've chosen to spend time with one another.

After the reunion ends, I rent a car and head toward Boulder, Colorado, to visit my own family. On the way I stop at the Great Sand Dunes National Park to see this geological phenomenon. For millennia, sands have blown across the ancient valley and piled up against the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to form the tallest dunes in North America. They cover about 30 square miles. The tallest dunes at the park top out at about 750 feet.

After renting a "sandboard" (it's like a snowboard) and walking across the dry riverbed and up onto the dunes, I run into the British family I'd met an hour earlier, and one of them takes photos with my phone while I attempt to ride. I manage to stay up the whole way! We'd met at a roadside sign display, where I learned that the mom was Welsh and the dad English. I mentioned my Welsh ancestry but we quickly determined that she and I were not related. It didn't stop us from kidding him about Wales's recent defeat of England in the rugby world cup. He reminds us that the English won the more important "contest" a few centuries ago, but wisely concedes that in his house, the Welsh rule.

The historical marker where we had met described how different tribes of Native Americans have long held the mountains and the land sacred. We compare their fate with that of indigenous peoples who lived under the yoke of British tyranny in India and Australia. None of us are proud of the actions of our ancestors, to say the least. What can you do, except learn from the past and try to do better than your predecessors?

That's another lesson I've picked up from studying the Forest Service. Wise land managers want to know what has happened on their land so that they can learn from their predecessors, or from the land itself, and manage for the future. When they come to the Forest History Society for answers, one place they may turn to is this magazine. Having just completed my 10th year as editor (and with this, my 12th issue), I hope that land managers and others searching for answers to historical questions have found some within those pages, or at least enjoyed their search as much as I've enjoyed working on this magazine. I would like to thank the FHS staff for all their contributions through the years, the many authors and their outstanding work that's been so educational and entertaining for me to edit, Sally Atwater and Dianne Timblin for their outstanding editorial work and advice, and our publications designer Kathy Hart of Zubigraphics for making the task of assembling each issue easy and pleasurable and for making the magazine look so damn good. □