

PROTECTING THE WATER, WILDLIFE AND OUTDOOR HERITAGE OF THE CROWN OF THE CONTINENT.



Headwaters Montana



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Debating Wilderness IN the Wilderness Friendly Foes Reach Accord

August 13, 2013

Dear Friend:

It was an unusual assemblage of customers and animals. Eight mules of gentle temperament, six riders of various abilities, and three hikers who went along to, er... help pick up any pieces. Their destination, [Mount Thompson Seton](#), stood six miles and 3,020 feet up a quiet wilderness trail. Their purpose, to debate the pros and cons of designating the 110,000 acres roadless lands in the north end of the Whitefish Range as congressionally protected Wilderness.

The leader and host, [Frank Vitale](#), is an accomplished packer, professional farrier, and a man of eloquent passion for the wild. His guest and debate opponent, **Larry Wilson**, is a North Fork Flathead landowner, retired logger, head of the "North Fork Irregulars", and a curmudgeon-with-a-purpose on wilderness.



Bob Brown
Bob has chaired the Whitefish Range Partnership since September 2012 with the goal of reaching consensus on future management of the 400,000 acre Whitefish Range. (Click to view larger image.)

Bob Brown filled another saddle. Bob represented Whitefish in the Montana legislature for years, served as Secretary of State, and ran for governor against Brian Schweitzer in 2004, and currently serves as chair of the **Whitefish Range Partnership** (more on that later).

John Frederick rode yet another mule as long-standing president of the **North Fork Preservation Association**, and long-time advocate for a Whitefish Range Wilderness. **Ted Forkum, Dale Duff, and Rich Marriot** provided mules for riders and gear. **Amy Robinson, Debo Powers,** and yours truly, all foot soldiers, hiked in.

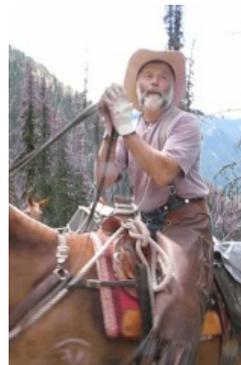
The concept of a mountaintop wilderness debate had great dramatic appeal. Frank and Larry both love wildlife and wild country. They would sit on the mountaintop like Greek gods with their heads in the clouds and debate the fate of the mortals below them and the vestiges of their Wilderness heritage.



The Four Amigos

John Frederick, Larry Wilson, Frank Vitale, and Bob Brown on the summit of Mount Thompson Seton.

The trip was conceived as a debate between Larry and Frank on the merits of designating 110,000 acres of the northern Whitefish Range as congressionally designated Wilderness. (Click to view larger image.)



Cast of Characters

As Frank Vitale prays for a safe journey (i.e. no 'mule train wrecks') our riders pass by looking cool in the saddle. (Click on image to watch video.)



Ride Along

Click on the image above to watch a short YouTube video of the riders approaching Mount Thompson Seton in the Whitefish Range.



The Whitefish Range

Headwaters Montana has worked for years to protect the North Fork Flathead River watershed from inappropriate development. The current focus of our efforts is the lasting protection of the Whitefish Range, a vital wildlife corridor

And this debate would have happened but for the fact that Larry and Frank had already reached an understanding on "The Wilderness Question" over preceding months of conversation. Frank had invited Larry on the ride more than a year earlier. In the intervening months they'd debated wilderness in the Whitefish Range Partnership around a table like normal humans and reached an accord.

Larry wrote a glowing report of this trip for the **Hungry Horse News** which you can read [here](#). Of his and Frank's non-debate, he wrote, "over the course of the [Whitefish Range Partnership] meetings, we both became fully aware of the other's feelings and concerns about wilderness. Thus, there was no big need for a mountain-top debate..."



Leaning Towards Wilderness

Participants in the outing (l-r): Dave Hadden, Frank Vitale, Amy Robinson, John Frederick, Debo Powers, Bob Brown, Dale Duff, Larry Wilson, Ted Forkum, Rich Marriott. A perfect day out!
(Click to view larger image.)

Were the rest of us disappointed? Not hardly. No better moment exists than when adversaries come together as friends, ascend a mountain, and stand at the summit to break bread - or in this case, share venison jerky. We had fair weather, rain-washed air, vistas in every direction, several varieties of wild game jerky, and Larry's flask of single malt Scotch to pass around. We all had smiles that threatened to break our faces, and hearts full of joy at the day.

But who had the best day that day? Larry who's in his seventies, said when he got down from the mountain, "That was the best day of my life in the last ten years." Some of us replied, "Larry, that's the Wilderness your praising!" To which he countered, "**Proposed** wilderness." Larry my friend... point taken. We'll make that **Designated** Wilderness soon enough!

Epilogue: Do you know the feeling of coming off a mountain peak and the sense of deep satisfaction that you carry down the trail, all the way home? It was no different amongst this motley crew. We reached the cars and trucks and mule trailers in late mid-afternoon. Dale Duff the mule skinner dragged out a cooler of ice-cold beer. It took nearly an hour for the good-natured ribbing and stories to come to an end.

What is the Whitefish Range Partnership?

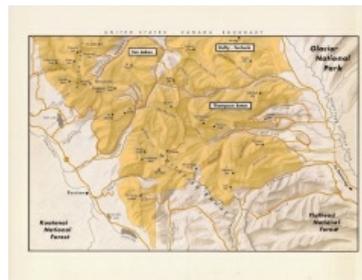
We will report on the Partnership in an upcoming newsletter. This group - convened with the help of *Headwaters Montana* - has been meeting since late 2012 and will produce a set of management recommendations for the 400,000 acre Whitefish Range of the Flathead National Forest. The group plans to complete its discussions before the end of October.



360 Degree View

Click on the image above to see a YouTube video from the top of Thompson Seton. This mountain summit sits in the center of the proposed Whitefish Range Wilderness and some of the best grizzly bear habitat in the Lower 48.

that connects Montana with the Canadian Rockies. Dark areas on map are Inventoried Roadless Areas, the core undeveloped lands. (Click on image to enlarge.)



The Whitefish Range Wilderness

The Mount Thompson Seton "debate" centered on the proposed Wilderness that extends from west the North Fork Flathead River to Roosevelt in the Tobacco Valley, incorporating the Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area on two national forests (the Kootenai and Flathead). The Flathead Forest portion is approximately 110,000 acres in size. The Whitefish Range Partnership is discussing wilderness, forest management, recreation, and other components of a revised Flathead National Forest management plan. We will report on the Partnership in future e-newsletters.
(Click on image to enlarge.)



Flying Low but Effectively

Headwaters Montana has been working all winter, spring and (now) summer on the incremental outreach and community building necessary to reach our conservation goals for the Whitefish Range. We will report on our participation in the Whitefish Range Partnership soon. **We can always use your financial support. Won't you please consider becoming a monthly donor?!** (Click the Donate Now Button to make your donation!)
Thank You!



A Natural Seat

Larry Wilson astride **Doc**, one of Frank's gentle but sturdy mules. In his 70's, it had been a while since Larry had been on a mountain summit. He called it, "the best day of my life in ten years!"
(Click to view larger image.)

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