

The 320 Ranch

by Connie Staudohar

Buffalo Horn Creek. Ramshorn Lake. Tepee Pass. Sunken Forest. Connect the dots between these sites and the 320 Guest Ranch fits within the contour. Situated in the folds of the Gallatin Canyon, just five miles shy of the northwestern boundary of Yellowstone National Park, the 320 Ranch has an intriguing history.

Dr. Caroline McGill, the long-time owner of the ranch, first viewed the area in November 1911 from the back of a bobsled.¹ With heavy wool blankets layered around her from head to toe and her hands burrowed inside thick gloves, she resembled the bundled tubercular patients she had left behind in the Butte hospital where she worked. Just as the cure for tuberculosis was simply being out-of-

doors, Dr. McGill sought to restore herself by taking a hunting trip in the Gallatin Canyon. Now, nearly a century later, ranch manager Pat Sage invokes McGill's spirit to attract visitors to the 320.

"The history helps—it is a part of the ranch," Sage explained. When Dr. McGill's 1911 hunting party crossed Buffalo Horn Creek en route to their destination, they too learned the ranch's history. The Buffalo Horn Creek Resort (the 320's original name) was one of the few active dude ranches in the Gallatin Canyon, and McGill's host, Dr. Safely, was among the canyon residents who informally provided lodging for hunters in the fall and winter. As more people from cities toured Yellowstone Park, stories of the large elk herds and other plentiful game spread among



Will Brewster, photographer, courtesy 320 Guest Ranch

The 320 Guest Ranch lies in the Gallatin Canyon a few miles from the northwestern boundary of Yellowstone National Park. Homesteaded in 1899, the ranch became a year-round dude business called the Buffalo Horn Creek Resort in 1907. After visiting the ranch for several years, Butte doctor Caroline McGill bought the 320-acre resort in 1936.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Dr. McGill, shown here relaxing on the porch of a guest cabin, continued the ranch's tradition of western hospitality, providing wholesome food and comfortable cabins for twenty-five to thirty guests at a time. Today, visitors may still eat in the 320's original dining room, and McGill's two-story cabin remains available to guests, complete with her hand-carved sign, "McGill," placed over the doorway.

hunters. Providing board and room for these visitors brought in much-needed cash.

The owner of the Buffalo Horn resort, Sam Wilson, had brought his young bride, Josie, to homestead on Buffalo Horn Creek in 1899. The Wilsons expanded their homestead and started a year-round dude business in 1907. In the Buffalo Horn's early years, only the wealthy could afford extended vacations, and the dude ranch life was a sought-after alternative for people whose lives had become over-run by "upper-class social mores, political

involvements and family traditions."² Cowboy wranglers made the guests comfortable, cooks dished out wholesome food, and the cabins provided shelter and warmth. In addition to lodging and hunting, dude ranches also offered a sense of peace and quiet. It was this combination—adventure and rest—that appealed to dudes.

Dr. McGill, too, found the Buffalo Horn resort a marvelous refuge from her demanding medical practice, and it became her retreat of choice. "The relaxation of the outdoor life," McGill wrote, "made it possible to carry on my heavy workload." McGill's visits to the ranch became more frequent, and her concise, descriptive journal entries multiplied. A sampling of these entries over time indicates her growing passion for the place: "Horsed at 320. Got cabins." "Up Ramshorn Peak alone." "Drove into Park. Many Elk." "Sandhill Cranes." "All hay cut. Barn full, big stack." "Rode to Sunken Forest." "Forget-me-nots, moose, elk." In early August 1930 she wrote that she had rented a horse and ridden alone to Ramshorn Lake, some eight and a half miles from the ranch. "Fished from raft. Got 12 trout." An entry the following spring simply listed the wildflowers she saw: "Anemones, carpet pinks, saxifrages, buttercup, spring beauty."³

In 1936, after many visits to the Buffalo Horn, Dr. McGill made an offer to Josie Wilson to buy the entire resort, including an adjoining homestead once owned by Sam Wilson's father. The two land parcels added up to 320 acres, and the resort soon became known as the 320 Ranch. McGill and the locals referred to it simply as "the 320."

Dr. McGill envisioned the 320 as a place of renewal for herself, her friends and family, and convalescing patients. To keep the place running, she convinced Park and Susie Taylor, experienced ranch managers from nearby Madison County, to move to the 320 year-round. What the Taylors did not know was that Dr. McGill collected antiques and had in mind a grand scheme to refurbish the run-down cabins with the overflow from her Butte apartment. Beautiful antiques, old clocks, silver teapots, and marble-topped tables found unlikely new homes in the simple log cabins. Electricity, provided by a gasoline-fed generator, came to the 320 in 1938—eleven years before an electrical line allowed for lights in the rest of the canyon.⁴ The ranch handled just twenty-five to thirty guests at a time, but between Dr. McGill's stream of guests, and an equally steady current of paying guests, the 320 thrived.

Dr. McGill cared deeply about the land and the wildlife in the Gallatin Canyon. She was a charter member of the Montana Wilderness Association and also became involved with the issue of local elk management, which had been a

1. "Before the Three Twenty," p. 1, folder 3, box 1, series 1, Caroline McGill Collection, 1909-1958, Collection 945 (hereafter McGill Collection), Montana State University Libraries, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Bozeman.

2. Janet Cronin and Dorothy Vick, *Montana's Gallatin Canyon: A Gem in the Treasure State* (Missoula, Mont., 1992), 79; Lawrence R. Borne, *Dude Ranching: A Complete History* (Albuquerque, 1983), 92.

3. "Before the Three Twenty," pp. 1, 3, 5, 6, 15, 8, 3.

4. Cronin and Vick, *Montana's Gallatin Canyon*, 213-14.

source of controversy since the 1890s when the state first set big-game bag limits. Early limits allowed the taking of eight deer, eight mountain sheep, eight mountain goats, two moose, and one elk per hunter, and many hunters came to the Gallatin Canyon to fill their elk quotas. Debate about the Gallatin elk herd continued for the next half century. In 1945 Dr. McGill bought land on Porcupine Creek, and in 1950 she agreed to sell the property to the state Department of Fish and Game for use as elk winter range. Her decision to sell the land in the interest of the elk was a sensitive one. This McGill property, along with a few other parcels, became the Porcupine Game Range, a refuge used by park elk when winter snows are heavy.⁵

The area's heavy snows presented an annual dilemma for motorists traveling through the Gallatin Canyon. Grading on the rough canyon road started in the 1920s and continued over time. However, road improvements, according to McGill's journal entries, did not provide as easy access to her remote refuge as she might have wished. A month after purchasing the 320 in January 1936, McGill attempted a winter visit. The road proved impassable midway up the canyon, and McGill had no choice but to return to Butte. She tried again—and succeeded—in mid-March but commented cryptically, "much snow." Two weeks later snow again blocked the road, forcing another retreat to Butte. In early April McGill once again attempted to get to the 320. The road was closed. This time she left her black Buick and started walking in on the crusted snow. She stopped to rest twice but covered the entire twelve miles on foot. She noted that she saw many elk and arrived at the 320 by 7:30 P.M. The next day she rode back up the main road in a bobsled and only had to walk the last few miles.⁶ Her toughness created lore about McGill that canyon residents circulated and passed on to 320 guests.

5. *Ibid.*, 179, 216; Allan Lovaas, *People and the Gallatin Elk Herd* (Helena, Mont., 1970). Dr. McGill bought additional canyon property, including twelve sections of land on Taylor Creek, to gain pasture and hay ground.

6. "Before the Three Twenty," 5.

7. Gail Goodrich, "Dr. Caroline McGill," p. 15, Museum of the Rockies library, Bozeman, Montana.

Another McGill anecdote people loved to repeat was a Good Samaritan story. On one of McGill's many trips up the canyon, she met a carload of women who had run off the road and were stuck. McGill grabbed a shovel from her car and went to work. Soon the car was free, and one of the women said to the doctor in awe, "You're Dr. McGill, aren't you?" "Yep," replied McGill, "and the best damned shoveler in Gallatin County," at which point she reputedly hopped into her car and drove off without another word.⁷ Whether that qualifies as the "real western hospitality" that the current 320 Ranch brochures advertise, Dr. McGill's active involvement with residents of the canyon, and the 320 itself, has undoubtedly contributed to the dude ranch's continued success. Dr. McGill died from natural causes at the 320 in 1959 at the age of seventy-nine.

Today, guests may still eat in the 320's original dining room, a log structure, and read McGill's history along with the menu items. McGill's original two-story cabin remains available to guests, complete with her hand-carved sign, "McGill," placed

over the doorway. New buildings, some thirty-five log cabins and a two-hundred-person convention facility, have imposed a modern feel on the McGill cabin site, but her "Christmas cabin," tucked in beside the creek and not open for guests, retains the discrete character of earlier times.

The 320 Guest Ranch is located twelve miles south of Big Sky, Montana, on Highway 191. It remains a year-round guest ranch offering a variety of activities and accommodations. Public access to the popular hiking and riding trails to Ramshorn Lake is gained by driving through the 320 Ranch to a designated parking spot. Contact the ranch at (800) 243-0320, (406) 995-4283, or visit www.320ranch.com.

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