

Tom Kinzel , the last mountain man in the Mount Hood area.

By: Lloyd Musser

One day while flying in a helicopter, mapping noxious weeds, I spotted two small cabin like structures out of the corner of my eye, in a meadow. At the time I had been working on the Bear Springs Ranger District of the Mt. Hood National Forest, for 15 years and thought I knew where every structure was located on this 122,000 acre Ranger District. I made a quick mark on my map as we continued on our way to the next noxious weed survey area. I planned to revisit the site on the ground later and investigate these structures. I wanted to know if these structures were new or old, what was their purpose, who built them and when? Why did they not appear on any official maps and records?

A few weeks later I set aside a day to investigate these structures I had spotted from the air. I parked along the Skyline Road at a spot I had determine to be the closest to the structures. I figured the first structure was only about 1000' from the road. I'll just stroll through the trees, with a camera around my neck, and cruiser vest with notebook, measuring tape, etc. Wrong, the open trees soon turned into a nearly impenetrable tangle of Rhododendrons, swamp alders and other wetland shrubs. The going is extremely slow and difficult. Most of the time I was walking on the brush not solid ground. Suddenly I stepped on what appeared to be leaf covered ground and found myself in cold water up to my waist. Not a good way to start my day.

After studying the aerial photographs, I decided to approach the structures from a road on the other side of the meadow. I parked my rig at the end of logging road. I walked through the open forest out into a dry meadow named Warm Springs Meadow. From this vantage point a large expanse of this 30 acre meadow can be seen, but there is no sign of any structures. Am I in the right place? We were flying fast and I only saw the structures for a second. There is another meadow very near here called Trapper Springs Meadow. I proceeded to the north end of the meadow, where I had intended to go on my first attempt to find these structures. I walk easily across this dry meadow. Suddenly, at the edge of the meadow, nicely camouflaged by bushes is a small man-made structure. It had to be is the smallest log cabin ever built. It is 6' long, 4' wide and 4' to the eves. It is made of 4" diameter logs. There is a 2' wide door and no windows. The roof is hand split shakes. Normally roof shakes are made from Cedar trees. There are no cedar trees nearby, as this meadow is too dry to support cedar trees. I found a stump of a large White Pine tree nearby and scraps left from making the shakes. It is amazing but the cabin logs and roof shakes were in good condition for being at least 50 years old. The only thing in the cabin was a small cast iron wood stove. The stove was just the right size to heat the cabin and serve as a cook stove.

Now what and where is the second structure I had seen? I soon locate the second structure. It was on dry open ground, but was situated such that it could not be seen from the first cabin or from the edges of the meadow. This structure is constructed of the same materials, design and size, except is 7' tall, with a full-size door. Once I cracked the door open, I knew this was a trapper's fur cache. The inside was completely covered in hardware cloth. Hardware cloth is galvanized, light weight 3/8 screen material. This material would have prevented varmints, from mice to porcupine, from getting to furs and supplies stored in this structure.

Once I discovered the fur cache, I knew who built it and the rest of the story. Some years-ago Harold Dyke had told me about Tommy Kinzel. Harold worked on the Bear Springs Ranger District for over 30 years starting in the 1940's, and he was a story teller, a historian and a joker. I learned a lot of local history from his stories but one had to be careful to separate the facts from fiction. Rarely did Harold have the complete history associated with any of his stories.

Harold regarded Tommy Kinzel as the last of the mountain men. He was a prospector, miner, trapper and sometimes packer. A wiry small man he walked everywhere. It is not known exactly when he came to the Mount Hood area. We know he was active in the Mt. Hood National Forest south of Mount Hood to Mt. Jefferson and east to Maupin. He had a prospective gold mine south of Government Camp. A small lake and tributary creek to the Salmon river was named for him. There is a hard rock mine east of White River that belonged to him. He dug a tunnel horizontally in the side of a mountain that a tall man can walk into several yards. It is not known how much if any gold was mined here. We are not sure when, where and what animals he trapped. We know for sure he had a Marten trap line along the Skyline Road. It starts on the Skyline Road at Warm Springs Meadow and runs south along the road for several miles. Martens are fur bearing mammals of the weasel family and about the same size as a weasel. They are a very curious and inquisitive animal. Trappers learned if you chopped a hole in a tree, the marten will stick his front paw in the hole. Kinzel's Marten trapline is a series of selected trees along the Skyline road. Every 500' feet or so a trap was set in a tree. The snow in this area likely averages 10 feet during the trapping season. The traps were set about 6' above the snow line. The traps were set in 4" holes chopped in the trees at about 16' from the ground. A small spring loaded, leghold trap was set in hole and secured to the tree with a short chain. A marten comes along, see a hole in the tree and sticks his front paw in the hole and is caught. The trapper walks along the trapline on snowshoes and collects his catch. Marten skins were in demand before and after World War II for women's fur coats.

Apparently, trapper Kinzel would stay in this cabin for months during the winter trapping season. There was not a trail or path leading to the cabin or cache. Kinzel likely used the cabin only in the winter when the ground was snow covered. The cabin and cache were so well concealed, and I doubt if anyone else ever visited them. Had I not observed them from the air, I would have retreated after falling in the water to my waist.

I can relate somewhat to what conditions Kinzel would have endured during the winter staying at his cabin. My first US Forest Service job was on the Lakes Ranger District, where I lived in the old Silvertip Bunkhouse. I was the only one in the bunkhouse one New Year's Eve Day. As I was not yet 21, going the bars in Estacada to ring in the New Year was not an option. I decided to ring in the New Year by myself at Olallie Lake Guard Station. I was able to drive all the way to the Warm Springs Guard Station from the Clackamas River Road. It was cold but little or no snow on the ground. I didn't need snowshoes to hike the 15 miles down the Skyline Road to Olallie Lake. I knew the road well as this past summer, I was the Leader of a survey crew that surveyed the Skyline Road from Warm Springs Guard Station to Brietenbush Lake. The Forest

Service intended to reconstruct this single lane dirt to a double lane paved road to provide better access to recreation opportunities associated with the many lakes in the area. This section of the

Skyline Road was never upgraded, and remains today much the same as when it was constructed in the 1920's.

I reached the Guard Station in good time. Moved a good stack of firewood inside by the fireplace. Got a nice fire going in the fireplace and discovered it was not going to heat to cabin very well. I moved the bed right up in front of the fireplace. When I got cold, I could reach one arm out of my sleeping bag and throw another log on the fire. Sometime after midnight I was rudely awaked by a gun blast just outside the cabin. What the heck, I didn't think there was anyone within 50 miles. I stumble outside to investigate. It is very cold, likely below 0 degrees, but no wind. With the light of a full moon I could clearly see all around and across the lake. Of course, there is no one with a gun in sight. As I turned to retreat to my warm bed another blast echo off the surrounding hills. It finally dawned on me that the shotgun sounding noise was caused by the lake ice freezing harder and contracting. In the daylight, long cracks in the ice radiated all over Olallie Lake. One night of this cold was enough for me. It is hard to imagine how Tom Kinzel endured the weather and isolation all winter long for years.

Kinzel made a habit of stopping by the Bear Springs Ranger Station on his way to Maupin or The Dalles. He stopped by the Station in the fall of 1957 and was very excited. He said he had been prospecting in the Mount Jefferson area and he found it! As he left the station, he was carrying a burlap bag of rocks, headed for the assay office in The Dalles. On his way he was struck and killed by a car in the blind curves on the road to Maupin. A couple of the Rangers heard of the accident and visited the accident site in hopes of finding Kinzel's rock samples, to no avail. Harold Dyke, one of Rangers that had talked with Kinzel speculated this long-time prospector thought he had discovered a uranium deposit.

Gold prospectors and miners of this era were aware of uranium. The search for uranium intensified after WWII. There was a uranium boom in western United States in the early 1950's. Uranium deposits were discovered in Lake County, Oregon in 1955 and mined there until 1965. Sadly, we will never know if this long-time prospector actually found uranium in what is now Mt. Jefferson Wilderness Area.

I have been studying, researching, and documenting the history of the Mt. Hood National Forest for over 50 years. Other than the few facts shared here so far, I had no other history associated with Tom Kinzel. Thanks to Covid 19 pandemic I had lots of time and nothing better to do but search the Internet for Tom Kinzel history. So here finally is a brief history of a man who for forty years left his mark and foot prints on the lands from Mount Hood to Mount Jefferson and east to Wapinitia, Maupin and the Deschutes River Canyon.

Tom Kinzel's real name was Thomas Kienzle. He was born in Germany in on January 11, 1877. He immigrated to America in 1899. The first documented evidence that he was in Oregon is the 1920 US Census. Thomas Kienzle, with a middle initial of J. or K. is listed as being single and living in a rented home in Wapinitia, Oregon. The next documented reference of Tom appeared in the Maupin Times newspaper on December 31, 1920. Under the heading of

WAPINITIA, is this statement “Tom Kinzel came out of his winter home near Mt. Hood and reports poor trapping due to lack of snow in the Mountains.” We suspect Kienzle was active in the area for some time before 1920. The Geographic Place Names records indicate Ranger Joe Graham named Kinzel Lake and Creek for his friend and neighbor in 1922. It is highly doubtful that Ranger Graham, who had been assigned to this District since 1905, would have that if he only knew Kinzel for two years. Tom Kinzel’s named would appear in the Maupin Times newspaper many times over the decade. The Maupin Times newspaper was published from 1914 to 1930. This newspaper rarely published in depth local news articles. It regularly printed one-liners about people under the community they resided in. Kinzel’s activities always appeared under the community of Wapinitia. One such report in 1929 said Kinzel was spending time at his ranch in Deschutes River Canyon, which is just east of Wapinitia. Some other one-line reports on the activities of Tom Kinzel allow us to validate his lifestyle. Here are some typical one-liners: Jan. 16, 1923 Tom Kinzel came out of the mountains with some fine furs. He wanted to know who won the November elections. March 8, 1923 Tom Kinzel came out of the mountains on skis and reports 10 feet of snow at Lemitie (a place near the end of his Marten trap line previously described). Feb.14, 1924 Tom Kinzel is in town today getting supplies to return to the mountains for another month. Each of these trips from the mountains to Maupin involved a 30 – 40-mile trip on foot, snowshoes or skis one way.

The name Tom Kinzel appears repeatedly in the Maupin Times newspaper in legal notices. Homesteaders needed to testify before a Government Land Office administrator that they had met the criteria required to get title to their claim. Witnesses were required to support each claim. Based on the number of times he is listed as a witness, Tom Kinzel must have been a reliable witness and a respected community member.

The Maupin Times newspaper never spelled his name correctly. His name was however spelled correctly on his death notice and on his grave marker. Thomas Kienzle is buried in the Kelly Cemetery, close to Wapinitia and Maupin, and in view of Mount Hood and the Cascade mountains he explored for 40 years or more.