

Geronimo!

It wasn't easy to get a summer job in forestry in the early 1970s, especially for a college girl. Before Christmas break in 1973, my Arizona forestry school posted a listing of summer jobs with the US Forest Service across the country.

This was long before the internet and smart phones arrived on the scene. Students crowded around the bulletin board, notebooks in hand, jotting down job descriptions, contact information, and deadlines. A sophomore, I was giddy about the idea of being a forest ranger. I had stars in my eyes and I dreamed of riding through the green forest on a white horse. Being a realist, however, I made sure to copy down the information for a variety of jobs—six of them, to be exact.

I scooped up a handful of 'SF-171s' from a big stack on the table. Standard Form 171 was the **LONG** paper application the Forest Service required for seasonal positions. Printed in forest green ink, the forms were folded like an accordion, and when I held one by the corner and shook it out, it cascaded to the floor. It was as tall as me!

I took the applications home over Christmas, and on our kitchen table I set up our old manual typewriter. Today's students have probably never even seen one of those. It wasn't electric, so I had to hit the keys pretty hard when I typed. I put in a new cloth ribbon so the ink would be dark. It didn't have correction tape, and I'm not sure that 'wite-out' had even been invented yet. I had to type slowly and carefully, making no mistakes, hitting the manual carriage return lever at the end of each line. Fortunately, I was much better at typing than I was at math.

It took most of Christmas vacation to complete all six applications, and I got them into the mail just before I returned to college. In April I was elated to receive a job offer—I'd been accepted as a Forestry Aid on the Umpqua National Forest in Oregon. I wasn't sure exactly what I'd be doing—the letter just said I'd be working in recreation. I was ecstatic.

That year I got my first car, a 1968 Subaru station wagon, and when school got out in mid-May I packed up and drove north. For days. In the rain. It turned to snow as I drove over the Cascade Range, then back to rain again before I finally reached the ranger station.

My eventual workplace was to be at Diamond Lake, high up in the mountains near Crater Lake National Park. But there was still too much snow at that elevation, and the roads there wouldn't open until mid-June. I spent my first few weeks helping the maintenance crew at headquarters, trimming hedges and fixing fences. Coming from the arid southwest, I'd never seen so much rain in my life! It rained all day, every day, and I had to have two pairs of work boots. I wore them on alternate days, so one could be drying by the fire while I wore the other pair. Squishy socks became the norm.

The snowpack finally melted enough to let us into the high country, and our crew moved into dormitories at Diamond Lake. We finally learned what we'd be doing for the rest of the summer: cleaning outhouses.

There were two kinds of campgrounds in the recreation area: modern and primitive. We soon learned that the modern washrooms with showers were the hardest to clean. Face it, people can be slobs. The plentiful running water we had for cleaning was a two-edged sword because there was a much larger area to clean and the facilities were much dirtier. I was surprised to discover that the women's bathrooms were far worse than the men's. Go figure. The full-service campgrounds were always crowded, and sometimes the visitors were quite rude to us.

But we made the best of it, joking and singing as we wielded our mops and brushes. We even came up with clever nicknames for things. Those paper toilet seat shields in dispensers in the stalls were called 'ass-gaskets.'

But it was the back-country primitive campgrounds that were actually fun to clean. We got to drive WAY out into the forest, on two-track dirt roads through some of the most beautiful scenery I'd ever encountered. It wasn't uncommon to see deer and bears, and little striped chipmunks ran around everywhere.

Our truck was equipped with a 200-gallon water tank and a pump, and our crew of four took turns at the various tasks. One person operated the pumper and hosed out the privies. Another would wet brush the toilets and pour in some air freshener. The third person swept and replaced toilet paper, and the fourth crew member cleaned picnic tables, picked up litter, and emptied the trash cans. It was actually a pretty cool way to spend my 19th summer.

Until it was time to pump out the vault toilets. They'd fill up surprisingly fast, so every couple of weeks we'd have to drive the big tanker truck out to the primitive campgrounds. The wooden outhouses were constructed so they could be lifted off of the vault, which we did with a hoist attached to the truck. When everything ran smoothly, we'd just have to drop a suction hose into the pit, turn on the pump, and suck the stinky mass up into the honeywagon.

But things rarely ran smoothly. Despite prominent signs pleading with campers not to drop diapers and other bulky items (like boots) into the vault, the suction hose, more often than not, got stopped up. It was then some unlucky crew member's job to pull on hip waders and heavy rubber gloves and jump into the pit to unplug it. I discovered that I am truly a wimp. I held my breath, but still gagged and barfed when it was my turn, and most of my fellow crew members didn't do much better.

Except for Ralph—it didn't bother him one iota, and the rest of us couldn't figure out why. Ralph was a tall, skinny, hard-working 18-year-old, so shy he hardly ever spoke to anyone. But he came to life on honeywagon days. He almost seemed to look forward to a hose clog. When the inevitable stoppage came, he gleefully pulled on the hip waders and gloves, stepped to the edge of the vault, then shouted 'Geronimo!' as he leaped in. We didn't have to plead too much to get him to agree to take over that task all the time for the rest of the summer.

It was only later that we learned that 'Geronimo Ralph' had been born with no sense of smell.