

Title: Geronimo!

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Geronimo!

Finding a summer job in forestry in the early 1970s was not easy, especially for a college girl. Before Christmas break during my sophomore year, my Arizona forestry school posted a nationwide listing of summer jobs with the US Forest Service.

This was long before the internet and smartphones arrived on the scene. Students crowded around the bulletin board in the school office, notebooks in hand, jotting down job descriptions, contact information, and deadlines.

“Better apply for several of them,” the dean told us. “Competition is fierce.”

Feeling giddy about the idea of becoming a forest ranger, I daydreamed of riding through the woods on a white stallion. I copied down the information for six seasonal positions.

A big pile of Standard Form 171s, the paper application the Forest Service required for seasonal positions, lay on a table under the bulletin board. I scooped up a handful of them. Printed in dark green ink, the forms folded like an accordion. When I held one by the corner and shook it out, it cascaded to the floor. It stood as tall as me.

I took the applications home over the holidays, and on my parents’ kitchen table I set up my old manual typewriter—non-electric, so I had to hit the keys extra hard when typing. I installed a new cloth ribbon to ensure dark ink for good readability. The machine had no correction tape, and “Wite-Out” had not yet been invented. I typed slowly and carefully, making no mistakes, hitting the manual carriage return lever at the end of each line. It took most of the semester break to complete all six forms, and I put them into the mail just before I returned to college.

In April, an official-looking envelope with a "US Forest Service" return address arrived in my mailbox. I tore it open and my heart sank when I saw what appeared to be a form letter. Disappointment turned to elation, however, as I read it and realized it was a genuine job offer.

I telephoned home with the news. "Mom and Dad, I've been accepted as a Forestry Aid on the Umpqua National Forest in Oregon!"

Mom asked, "What will you be doing?"

"I don't know exactly, but it has something to do with recreation. Maybe I'll get to ride a horse!"

That year I bought my first car, a 1968 Subaru station wagon, and when school let out in mid-May I packed it full and drove north. For days. In wet, miserable weather. Rain turned to snow as I drove over the Cascade Range, then back to liquid again before I finally reached the ranger station.

The paperwork listed my workplace as Diamond Lake, in the mountains near Crater Lake National Park. However, because of lingering, deep snow at that elevation, the high-country roads did not open until mid-June. I spent my first few weeks on the job helping the maintenance crew at headquarters, trimming hedges and fixing fences. Coming from the arid southwest, I'd never seen so much precipitation in my life. It rained all day, every day, and I needed two pairs of work boots. I wore them on alternate days, so one pair could dry by the heater while I wore the other.

The snowpack finally melted, the mountain roads opened, and the crew moved into dormitories at Diamond Lake. We finally learned what we would be doing for the rest of the summer: cleaning outhouses. I called home with the news.

“There are two kinds of campgrounds in this recreation area: modern and primitive,” I told my parents. “The modern washrooms with showers are the hardest to clean. People can be such slob! We have lots of running water for cleaning them but that’s a two-edged sword because these restrooms are bigger and much dirtier than the primitive ones. You won’t believe this, but the women’s bathrooms are far worse than the men’s facilities.”

The full-service campgrounds were always crowded, and sometimes the visitors were quite rude to us. 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, calling the paper toilet seat covers in the stall dispensers “ass-gaskets.”

“It’s fun to clean the back-country primitive campgrounds,” I told my parents. “We get to drive way out into the forest, on two-track dirt roads through some of the most beautiful scenery I’ve ever encountered. It’s not uncommon to see deer and bears, and little striped chipmunks run around everywhere.”

The work truck sported 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 white-painted, metal toilet fixtures and pour air freshener into the pits, while the third person swept floors and replaced bathroom tissue. The fourth crew member cleaned picnic tables, picked up litter, and emptied the trash cans.

I considered it a pretty cool way to spend my 19th summer—until the time came to pump out the vault toilets. They filled up surprisingly fast, so every couple of weeks we had to drive a big tanker truck out to the primitive campgrounds. The wooden outhouses were constructed so they could be lifted off the vault; we did this with a hoist attached to the truck. When everything

ran smoothly, we just dropped a suction hose into the pit, turned on the pump, and sucked the stinky mass up into the honeywagon.

But things rarely ran smoothly. Despite prominent signs pleading with campers not to drop diapers, boots, and other bulky items into the vault, the hose stopped up more often than not. When that happened, some unlucky crew member had to pull on hip waders and heavy rubber gloves, then jump into the pit to clear the line.

I discovered that I am a wimp. Despite holding my breath, I gagged and barfed when my turn came, and most of my fellow crew members fared no better—except for Ralph. The stench didn't bother him at all, and the rest of us could not figure out why.

Ralph, a tall, skinny, shy, hard-working 18-year-old, rarely spoke. However, the young man came to life on honeywagon days. He almost seemed to look forward to a hose clog.

When the inevitable stoppage came, Ralph gleefully pulled on the hip waders and gloves, stepped to the edge of the vault, then shouted “Geronimo!” as he jumped in. It did not require too much effort for us to convince him to take over that task for the rest of the summer.

Only later did we learn that “Geronimo Ralph” had been born with no sense of smell.