

## Tough as nails, but gentle as a lamb

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Working until 1996 as a backcountry ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, Burns Biggs spent much of the year working alone with horses and mules to patrol remote areas of the Shoshone National Forest in Park County.  
Courtesy photo

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**C**ODY - In Wyoming, there are a few occupations in the great outdoors - rancher, oil field worker, backcountry ranger - that seem to define what life in the Cowboy State is all about. Burns Biggs has done them all.

Biggs also spent several years in the U.S. Army, fighting in World War II and the Korean War.

And though he retired in 1996 from the U.S. Forest Service, Biggs, 87, still gets calls from hikers, outfitters and hunters looking to tap his encyclopedic knowledge of Park County's wilderness.

"I can tell you about any place you want to travel on the North Fork, South Fork or the Thorofare," said Biggs, who supervised backcountry work crews and patrolled the forest.

"He goes places where the outfitters who have been back in there for decades have probably never gone," said Bob Beal, a backpacker from Oregon who calls Biggs for advice before planning a hike in Wyoming.

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Beal regularly hikes the mountains around the Shoshone National Forest, where Biggs worked for years. He ran into Biggs on a hike in 1995, and they have remained friends and kept in touch ever since.

"I called Burns when I was planning a trip last winter, doing armchair work looking at maps. I had a couple of tough spots on the map, and I was wondering if a person could go that way," Beal said.

"He didn't fail to surprise me with his memory for the country," he said.

"I try to pick out the 'back-and-beyond' places to hike, and consider the southern Absarokas the best backpacking in the lower 48, and Burns knows more about that area than anybody I know. He has spent more time there than anyone I know.

"And he's lived a pretty interesting life," Beal said.

#### Trails and travels

Biggs is happy to share tips about trails and travels in the backcountry, but said he can't imagine why someone would take an interest in the details of his life.

But after more than a little prodding, he recalls his time as a paratrooper in World War II, dropping behind enemy lines during the June 1944 invasion of France.

"I remember those clickers they gave us," he said, recalling a novelty toy issued to soldiers who landed at night by parachute, using the devices to identify friend from foe without alerting German forces.

"I would click once, and if you answered me with two clicks, well, all right. But if you didn't answer me, I would ask again with one click. And if you still didn't answer, I shot the (heck) out of you," he said.

Biggs also fought in Africa and Italy, putting his skills with horses and mules to good use during tough travels in Italian hills and villages.

He served six months in a German prisoner of war camp but downplays the brutal treatment his friends say he endured.

"They treated us pretty good. It was the infantry they treated like hell," he said.

Biggs remained in the Army after the war, employing his horse expertise again in helping care for and decommission hundreds of horses that had been used by cavalry units that were being deactivated.

Six months after being discharged by the Army, he was called up again to serve in the Korean War, where he was wounded in combat, shot in the elbow, hip and back.

Though he was born in Billings, Biggs also lived in Burlington, working there as a rancher. He returned to Custer after the Korean War and later came to Cody.

Let it ride

"In the war, we got \$21 a month. I sent \$15 of it back home to my mother each month. The rest I put into gambling, and I did pretty good at that. I came out with enough money to buy 30 head of cattle," he said.

Near Meeteetse, he worked his own ranch of 640 deeded acres and additional grazing lands leased from the Bureau of Land Management, raising sheep and cattle.

"I had 1,500 head of sheep, but didn't have enough land for them," he said.

During the 1970s, he worked in the oil fields, driving a hot oil truck.

More than fighting for the Army, patrolling the backcountry or herding livestock, "the hardest work was the oil field," he said.

"And the most dangerous, too. In just two years, I saw three oil trucks burn up," he said.

Biggs began working for the Forest Service in 1982, spending weeks at a time in the backcountry.

"There aren't many guys like him left in the Forest Service," said Ken Blackbird, a photographer who worked for the agency, often accompanying Biggs on pack trips.

"He pretty much lived on the trail, 10 or 20 days at a time alone in the woods," returning only for a day or two to report in and get supplies, Blackbird said.

"Running around the mountains by yourself with a pack string and going up some of those trails is a pretty treacherous thing, but he thought nothing of it. He enjoys being outside," he said.

Blackbird said Biggs always rode his own horses, which he trained to obey verbal commands.

"He was an expert with those horses, and had them trained to do anything, all by just talking to them," he said.

"He mentored a lot of kids, mainly out of Meeteetse, that worked on crews under him," Blackbird said. "He taught them how to work, but he was really good to them, too, getting up early to make them breakfast."

That tradition continued until Biggs retired at 75, still a formidable horseman, Blackbird said.

"After a 12-hour day, riding 20 miles on horseback, he would be up first thing the next morning, ready to go at the crack of dawn," he said.

"He's the most generous man in the whole world," Blackbird said. "He's a gentle and peaceful person, and I have the greatest respect for him. I'm grateful to know him."

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