



Foundation plays key role in receiving gift of Harriman State Park from the Harriman Family

This is the second in a series of 12 articles about the 50-year history of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands.

By Steve Stuebner

If you've ever visited Harriman State Park in Island Park, you know it's a special place.

Owing its existence to a deep and rich history, Harriman has 16,000 acres of open space, and prime wildlife habitat for trumpeter swans, sandhill cranes, elk, moose and bears. The world-renowned Henrys Fork, a blue-ribbon trout stream, winds through the heart of the park.

Two-thirds of the trumpeter swans that winter in the lower 48 states reside at Harriman State Park.

On a fall mid-week evening, I have sat on the banks of the Henrys Fork by "Millionaire's Hole" – named for the Harrimans and other railroad magnates who built homes here – to soak in the quietude of the moment. It's a pleasant feeling that's possible in a unique park



Historic photo of the cabins built by the Harrimans and other railroad magnates on the banks of the Henrys Fork River in Harriman State Park. (courtesy Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation)

like this, where people can visit, go horseback riding, hiking, biking or fishing during the day, but their presence is only temporary as no overnight camping is allowed.

Orange and purple hues wash over the forest at sunset, and almost on cue, a small group of elk emerges from the forest to graze in the meadows across the river. Just to the north, I hear sandhill cranes sounding off in a vast open meadow complex that extends all the way to the fishing town of Island Park, some 9 miles away.

At moments like this, you can almost imagine Roland



Former IDPR Director Steve Bly looks over the draft Harriman State Park master plan with Roland and Gladys Harriman in the 1970s. (Courtesy IDPR)

and Gladys Harriman wading in the Henrys Fork up to their chest and fly fishing for rainbow trout, with a fresh hatch of bugs hovering over the water, as the sun sets.

Thanks to the Harriman Family, former Gov. Robert Smylie, former Gov. Cecil Andrus, the Idaho Legislature, the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, and the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, this bucolic scene hasn't changed a whole lot in 100 years.

The people of Idaho owe their gratitude to the Harriman Family of New York, particularly Roland and Gladys Harriman, for having the generosity and foresight to gift the 16,000-acre Railroad Ranch to the state of Idaho for the eventual creation of Harriman State Park. Beyond that, the Harrimans made the gift of property contingent on the state of Idaho creating a state park system, managed by park professionals.

They signed the original document in 1961 to gift the Railroad Ranch to the state of Idaho, contingent on the terms mentioned above. Gov. Smylie tirelessly lobbied the Idaho Legislature in multiple sessions to create a state parks system in 1965. It would take years of planning and park development before Harriman State Park was officially opened in 1982.

The Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands was formed by Andrus in 1972, responding to an immediate need for a charitable organization to receive the Railroad Ranch gift from the Harriman Family. The gift included one share of capital voting stock in the Island Park Land & Cattle Company, something the state could not hold.

At the urging of Andrus, the Foundation was

quickly formed via the appointment of a 10-member board of directors. Legal papers were drawn up to register the Foundation as a 501(c)3 non-profit charitable organization, meaning that the value of land donations and cash donations could be tax-deductible.

The Foundation's first board of directors was led by Boise civic leader Hope Kading, appointed as board president, and nine other well-known community leaders including Ernie Day of Boise, Art Manley of Coeur d'Alene, R.J. Bruning of Wallace, former Supreme Court justice Robert Huntley Jr., of Pocatello, and former Governor Robert E. Smylie.

The Idaho Legislature provided \$35,000 to the Foundation as initial start-up seed money to hire an executive director to manage donated properties and tend to the Foundation's daily work.

The Harrimans also wanted to gift "Harriman East" to the state - 1,000 acres of land across U.S. Highway 20 from the Railroad Ranch that provided vital access to the Henrys Fork by the Osborn bridge access area. The Foundation held that property until it was conveyed to the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation in 1994.

"We were an entity that was created to hold these valuable properties until the state was in a position to receive the property and manage it for the public



Ranch hands drive cattle to the corrals at the Railroad Ranch in the 1940s. The cattle operation at the ranch was broadly supported by the Harrimans, Charlie Jones and others. Under the terms of the gift of the 16,000-acre property to the state of Idaho, the Harrimans stipulated that grazing would continue at the ranch in perpetuity. Local ranchers continue to graze cattle in Harriman Ranch today under tight management controls set by IDPR. (photo courtesy Harriman State Park)



Fall cattle drive to Harriman State Park is a favorite scene in Island Park. (photo by Steve Stuebner, courtesy Life on the Range/Idaho Rangeland Resources Commission id.range.org)

to enjoy,” said Sharon Hubler, past president of the Foundation Board of Directors. “The Board was always truly proud of what they were able to do for the state regarding the Railroad Ranch and many other future parks properties.”

Let’s take a moment to reflect on the history of how Harriman State Park came to fruition, the vision of Roland and Gladys Harriman in gifting the property to the state of Idaho, the detailed terms outlined for future management, and how the Foundation’s role in the park development would give momentum

to additional park acquisitions statewide.

E.H. Harriman buys the Railroad Ranch sight-unseen

The Island Park Land & Cattle Company began cattle grazing at the park in the 1890s, when several men from the Oregon Short Line Railroad established the “Railroad Ranch.” In 1908, the ranch came up for sale. The owners approached E.H. Harriman in New York, chairman of Union Pacific Railroad, about buying it.

“They approached him as it being one of the premier grazing spots in the area, there was waterfowl and great fishing. And E.H. Harriman bought it sight-unseen,” Bert Mecham, Assistant Manager of Harriman State Park, told me for a story I wrote about grazing in Harriman State Park for “Life on the Range.”

Over time, prominent railroad and mining executives including E.H.’s two sons, Averell and Roland Harriman, and Solomon Guggenheim and Charles Jones bought shares in the Railroad Ranch, allowing them to build cabins next to the prized “Millionaires Pool” on the Henrys Fork.

“It was a matter of love at first sight for all of us,” Roland Harriman was quoted as saying about the

purchase. “The glorious scenery and weather, the fishing, the hunting, the horseback riding and learning the lore of cattle handling all combined to lure us back there summer after summer.”

Roland Harriman and his wife, Gladys, ended up spending more time than anyone else at Harriman Ranch each summer. They went fishing and horseback riding in the summer, sometimes even helping the cow hands herding cattle, and they pursued upland game birds in the fall.



Gladys Harriman shoots a sage grouse in the rangelands above Harriman State Park. She loved spending summers at the park, fishing, walking, riding horseback and hunting in the fall. (Courtesy IDPR)

When people visit Harriman State Park, they can visit the original cabins built by the Harriman family and Charlie Jones on the banks of the Henrys Fork. Their fishing waders and a few of their bamboo fly rods are displayed in the cabins.

Detailed terms for the gift of “Harriman State Park of Idaho”

On Dec. 4, 1961, Roland and Averell Harriman crafted the original document gifting the Railroad Ranch to the state of Idaho along with Governor Smylie. The 8-page document is quite detailed in the Harriman family’s vision for how Harriman State Park should be managed in terms of what types of land use would be allowed.

The first page of the agreement says, in part, “Whereas for over 50 years the Harriman family has been a part of the Idaho community, enjoying at the Railroad Ranch health and recreational facilities unequaled elsewhere. In return, the Harriman family has conducted a cattle operation thus contributing in some measure to the growth of the Idaho economy and the development of its resources. Recognizing that the wild life of Idaho is not the exclusive property of any one generation but is a limited resource that must be passed on to succeeding generations, the Railroad Ranch has protected game, birds and fish and certain areas have been protected as a sanctuary for all forms

of wild life....

“In keeping with these principles and in order that the people of Idaho in particular and visitors from other states and countries may continue to enjoy these privileges in perpetuity, E. Roland and W. Averell Harriman desire to make a gift of the property known as Railroad Ranch to the people of Idaho to be maintained as a State Park on the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth.”

The agreement stipulated that:

The gift was contingent on the state creating a state park at Harriman, along with the following conditions:

- The Idaho Legislature creates a state parks system managed by professional park managers and overseen by the Governor of Idaho.
- The park would be called “Harriman State Park of Idaho” to distinguish the Idaho park from a New York park donated to that state by the same name.
- The State of Idaho pays Fremont County cash in lieu of property taxes based on the value of the property in November 1961.
- No hunting, trapping or shooting would be allowed in the 16,000-acre park.
- Fishing would be allowed during the normal summer season, but anglers would be restricted to using dry or wet flies only; no lures or bait would be allowed.
- The bird sanctuary for trumpeter swans between the Railroad Ranch and Osborn Bridge would be maintained and potentially closed to the public during nesting season.
- The state would be encouraged to add property to Harriman park in the future through property acquisition or land trades.
- Horseback riding, lodging, forestry and livestock grazing could continue at the park.

After the Idaho Legislature created a state parks system in 1965, it would take a number of years for a development and management plan to be created for the future Harriman State Park.

Another gift of property from Jack Hemingway on the Little Wood River in the early 1970s would be fortuitous as well. The 480-acre gift would become the Taylor “Bear Tracks” Williams Recreation Area, named after Ernest Hemingway’s favorite hunting and fishing guide.

Officials with the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands and the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation learned that donations of private property could be leveraged to bring additional federal money to the state for park development. For example, the Idaho Foundation’s gift of the Jack Hemingway property to the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation allowed the state to provide matching funds for a \$195,000 grant from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to develop a master plan for Harriman State Park.

This would be the beginning of many LWCF grants flowing into the state of Idaho for the acquisition, development and improvement of more than \$60 million in outdoor recreation sites and facilities in Idaho, representing more than 475 projects.

As the Idaho Foundation transferred Harriman land to the State, additional Land and Water Conservation Fund grants were matched and used for: the Harriman Park development, handicap accessibility, Eagle Island Park master planning and support facilities, Farragut Park development. In the end, the donation of the Harriman land to the Idaho Foundation and the subsequent transfer of \$4,750,000 to the state in federal matching funds.

The Foundation conveyed the Railroad Ranch to the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation in 1977. On Harriman East, the Foundation worked with locals Jack and Marva McGarry to manage cattle grazing operations in that area. “They were easy to work with,” Hubler says. “They cherished the area and took good care of their cattle and the resource.”



Solar fence project installed in Harriman State Park in the mid-1980s. (Courtesy Henrys Fork Foundation)

Pioneering, innovative solar fencing project

In the mid-80s, the Henrys Fork Foundation (HFF) worked together with the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, Idaho Parks and Recreation, and Idaho Fish and Game to build six miles of solar smooth-wire electric fence on both sides of the Henrys Fork in the Harriman East property to keep cattle out of the Henrys Fork. Natural resource professionals such as Bill Platts, a Ph.D. in range management for the U.S. Forest Service, Ed Chaney of Eagle, and Dr. Mick Mickelson of the HFF all worked on the issue together. Angler volunteers helped put up the fencing.

“It was a capstone project that we were all really proud of,” Hubler recalls. “Not everybody supported the fencing project, including some of the outfitters and anglers who were worried about fishing access, but it all turned out well for all concerned.”

About 12 additional miles of solar fencing were installed on both sides of the Henrys Fork in the main Harriman State Park property in the early 1990s. With four miles of solar fencing added to Forest Service land on the Henrys Fork, about 20 miles of solar fencing was installed in the park overall.

It was a pioneering conservation project - the first of many riparian protection projects that would be built



Solar fence project installed in Harriman State Park in the mid-1980s. (Courtesy Henrys Fork Foundation)



Large herds of Rocky Mountain elk roam Harriman State Park and the surrounding area in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. Back in the day, the Harrimans brought in more elk to build the Island Park herd. (Courtesy IDFG)

in the state in years to come. The fencing projects ensure that water quality, fishing access and cattle grazing can continue to co-exist near popular fishing streams.

Similar riparian fencing projects (many with buck fence) has been installed on Silver Creek, the upper Salmon River, Valley Creek, Pahsimeroi River and the Lemhi River, among many other locations.

“The electric fences protect important riparian areas along the river, and they’re a symbol of HFF’s commitment to protecting the river,” wrote Charlie Sperry in a recap of the solar-fencing project for the HFF newsletter in Fall 2001. The article was titled, “Snap, Crackle, Moo: The story of the HFF Solar Fence.”

The IFPL also was very supportive of the solar fencing projects, Hubler says. “All of those professional biologists and anglers were really gung-ho.”

Initially, HFF agreed to maintain the solar fences during the cattle grazing seasons. Today, cattle

permittees are responsible for maintaining the fences as part of grazing permits with Harriman State Park. To this day, there are issues with elk and cattle knocking over the fencing from time to time. Prior to snowfall, the “lay-down” fences are dropped to the ground level following the grazing seasons to prevent any issues with wildlife moving to and from the river corridor.

The solar lay-down fences keep the peace between anglers and cattle ranchers who graze livestock in Harriman State Park. It’s an important legacy project by all of the partners involved, one that IFPL is proud of.

Next: The Foundation continues to serve as an important land broker as new conservation properties are donated in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Steve Stuebner is a well-known outdoor and conservation writer

Correction re: January 2022 issue: IDPR continues to own Veterans Memorial Park in Boise. The park is leased and managed by the City of Boise with oversight from IDPR.

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