



The double fireplace, which became a symbol of Parcher's Camp.

◆ THE HISTORY OF ◆

# PARCHERS

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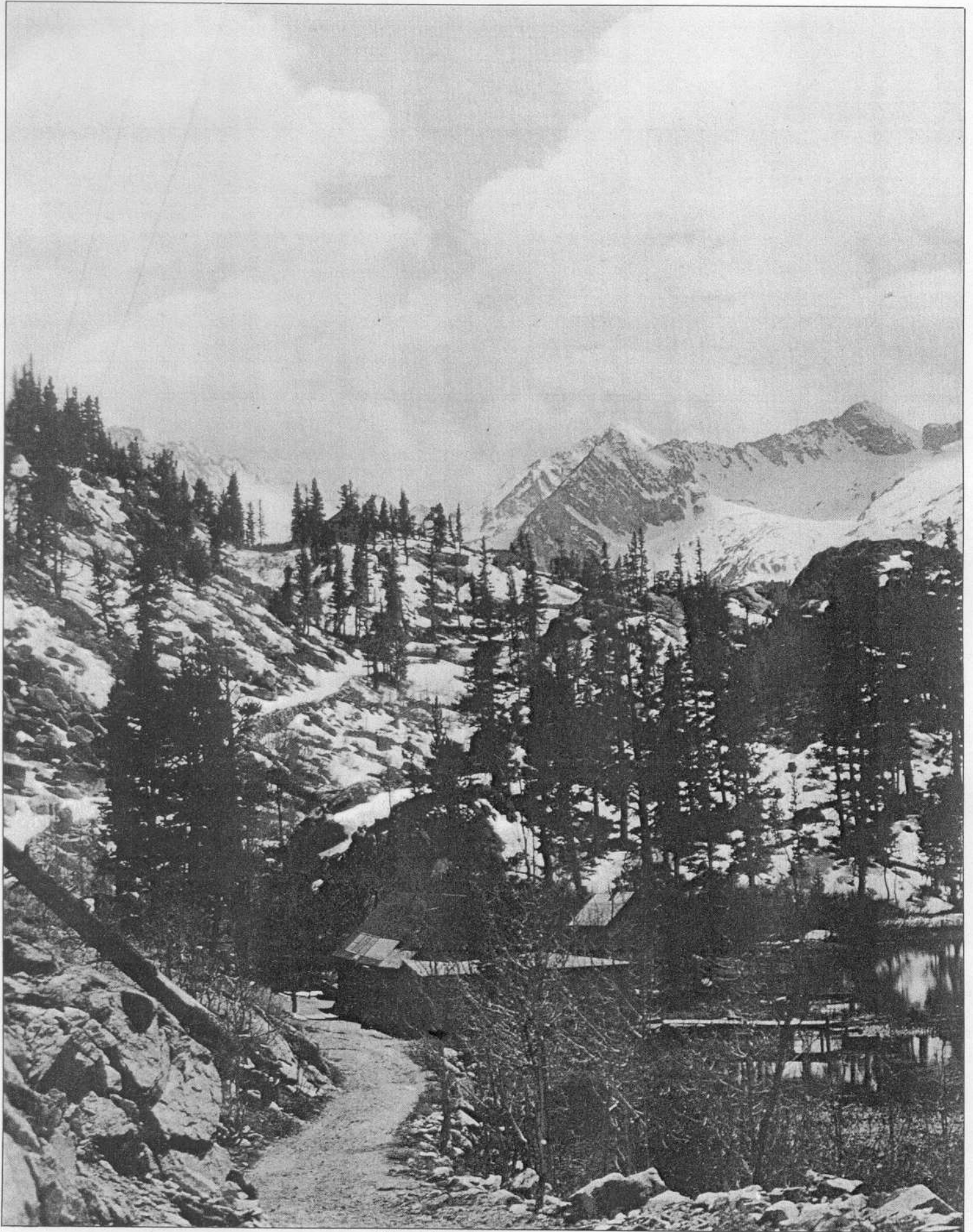
by Marty Forstenzer

The serene, picturesque setting of Parcher's Resort, on the south fork of Bishop Creek, has attracted thousands of guests in its 63-year history. Originally named Parcher's Rainbow Camp, the resort has been a resting place for noted celebrities, and has also been the scene of some unlikely, tumultuous events. Over the years, it has survived the ravages of the elements, wild animal attacks, and the United States Army.

The site where Parcher's Resort now stands was originally a campground, built as an addition to Andrews Camp, where a pack outfit operated. In those days, it was used as a rest-over site for extra pack strings.

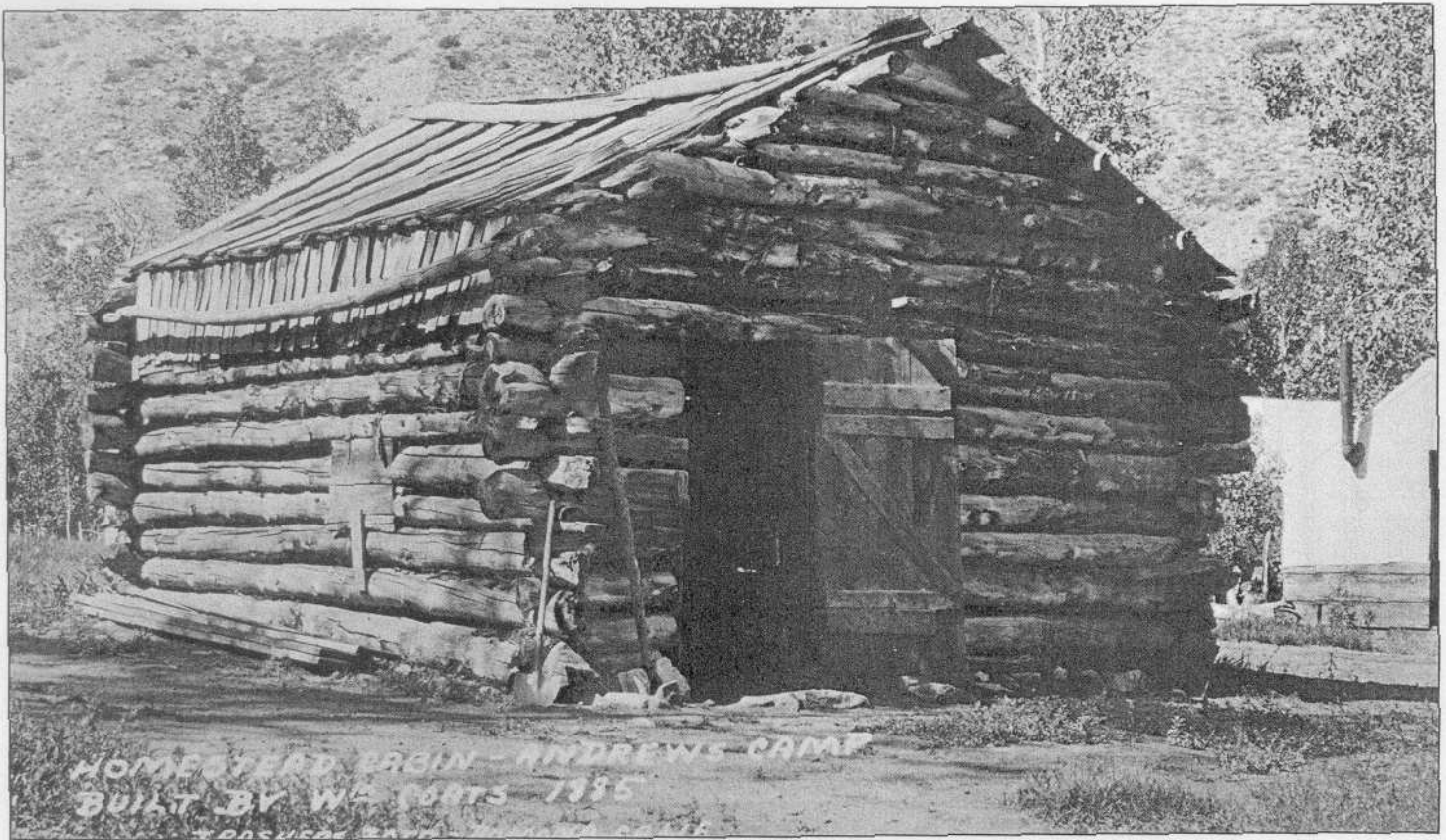
Parcher's Rainbow Camp was built in the early 1920s by William Chandler Parcher and his wife Marie Louise. His intention was to build a resort in a wholesome environment where people could bring their families, and get away from the city.

W.C. Parcher, as he was known, had been in the



The old road into South Lake.





Homestead cabin at Andrews Camp, built by W. Coats. 1885.

newspaper business in Southern California, working for the **Los Angeles Times** and later publishing his own paper, **The Hollywood Citizen**. In 1911, he moved to the Owens Valley and bought the **Owens Valley Herald**. He later sold



William Chandler Parcher and his wife Marie Louise.

the **Herald** and acquired the **Inyo Independent**, while Marie wrote a column for **The Inyo Register**. In 1921, when Parcher decided to build his mountain resort, he began scouting in the Big Pine Creek area. He later decided on Bishop Creek as an attractive and practical place for a resort.

Located on the shore of South Lake, Parcher's original resort was constructed of wooden floors with attached frame tents. The lumber came from the Hotel Istalia which was located on Main Street in Bishop where Safeway now stands. He also built a small cook shack and a building that was used as a recreation room. The Parchers soon found that location less than ideal since strong winds off the lake regularly blew the tents from their wooden frames.

Eventually, the frame tents were replaced by cabins, and the resort acquired a more permanent and comfortable aspect. One of the 'items' Parcher had brought over from the Hotel Istalia was a parrot. He had picked up a few bad habits from his previous owners. One of his favorite sayings was, "I don't like this coffee!" A well-remembered incident occurred one night at the main lodge, as a Hollywood director vacationing there got up to leave, announcing, "I'm going up to bed." The parrot quickly returned, "Well, I'm damn glad of it."

W.C. Parcher was always trying to make the camp more colorful and interesting for his guests. He held talent evenings, with guests telling stories, singing, or creating dramatizations. Mrs. Parcher managed to have a small branch of the Inyo County Library established at the resort.

Parcher's attempts to provide amusement for his guests were always colorful. He had the Captain of the California Highway Patrol fire a bullet into the door of the dining room,



Ward Parcher, Bob and Dolores Hope, Hazel Chamberlain, and Mrs. Shipstad at Parcher's Camp.

letting the guests draw their own conclusions as to how it got there. When famous climber Norman Clyde was staying at the resort, Parcher arranged for a woman to pretend to become stuck on a nearby cliff. When the woman screamed, Clyde climbed to her rescue, while the guests watched in amazement.

After W.C. Parcher's death, the resort was taken over by



A guest cabin at Parcher's, as it looks today.

his two sons, Ward and Frank. Ward managed it with their mother until her death.

Among the celebrities who were guests were the Shipstads, of the Shipstad and Johnson Ice Follies. Their friend Bob Hope and his family came to the camp with them one summer. Comedian Stan Laurel spent two weeks at Parcher's Camp; Louise Parcher Bollinger, W.C.'s granddaughter, describes him as a very serious man who never cracked a smile. "He stayed very much to himself," she says. "He used to spend a lot of time hiking around the mountains, all alone."

The 1940s brought one of the most unlikely chapters in the Parcher's Camp story. The U.S. Government sent a representative to talk with the Parcher Camp owners, and appealing to their patriotism, asked them to lease the resort to the government for use as a missile test base. The Camp was apparently valuable, because at that time, South Lake was the highest elevation in the United States to which heavy vehicles could be driven. The resort was to be used to house men working at a missile test site at South Lake. The owners agreed, cancelling all their reservations and leasing Parcher's Camp to the U.S. Government for two years.

The testing done was related to the work at the White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico. The government was reportedly conducting a research and development





The Bear that attacked Parcher's Camp in 1960, causing considerable damage.

program to test rockets at high altitudes. Although one report says that the work involved only "static" testing, another maintains that missiles were not only fired, but that one missile misfired and was never found. There are said to be launching pads remaining today under the blacktop at South Lake. Among the scientists present at South Lake was famed German-American missile expert Wernher Von Braun.

When the owners returned to the Camp, they were distressed to find considerable damage. Sadly, the natural wood walls had been whitewashed, as were authentic wagon wheels which had been used as chandeliers. Counters had been ripped out, the floors had been oiled, and some valuable antiques in storage there were reportedly stolen. Louise Bollinger refers to those days as "the blackest period of Parcher's Camp."

In 1956, Ward Parcher sold Parcher's Camp to Chuck and Gloria Colvin of Los Angeles. Although he had never been to South Lake, Colvin had been to Lake Sabrina many times. He heard about Parcher's Camp from a friend who had stayed there, and when Ward went to Los Angeles to discuss the sale of the resort, Colvin bought it sight unseen.

Gloria Colvin recalls that there were countless inspectors to be dealt with when they took over the resort, because it was the first time Parcher's Camp had changed hands outside the Parcher family.

The Colvins immediately began to make improvements at the property. They put sinks with hot water in all the cabins, which previously had been provided only with outside cold water.

At the time the Colvins took ownership of Parcher's Camp, the electric power supply was drawn from a water-wheel built on Green Creek, and there was only gas refrigeration. The electric power was erratic; lights would fade and brighten — quaint, but undependable. Chuck Colvin built a hydroelectric plant, a difficult task because the materials and equipment had to be packed on mules up the very steep grade behind the Camp. Among other improvements undertaken by the Colvins were the building of two new cabins, refinishing of existing cabins, and remodeling and improvement of the restaurant and store.

In those days, the only phone service to the Camp was a thirteen-party line, which didn't allow for much privacy. Mrs. Colvin recalls that anything said over the line was soon common knowledge all over town. Also, the phones were the hand crank type, which could deliver a potent shock to anyone using them during a lightning storm!

The only road into South Lake then was a narrow, treacherous dirt road that climbed up one steep canyon then down the next canyon into the Camp. By all accounts, driving on it was quite an adventure. During the Colvin's tenure at Parcher's, Inyo County contracted for a new road



The main lodge was destroyed by snow in 1969. Today, the fireplace and chimney are all that remain.

to be built into South Lake. The new road became an adventure, too, since during its construction, nearly every window at Parcher's was shattered by the shock of dynamite blasts, and many rocks dislodged by the blasting came crashing through the roofs of the cabins.

The Colvins were host to actor Sterling Hayden, who brought his two children to the resort, and to actress Mariette Hartley.

Gloria Colvin tells of one Beverly Hills couple who came to Parcher's to see the 'back country' they had heard about,

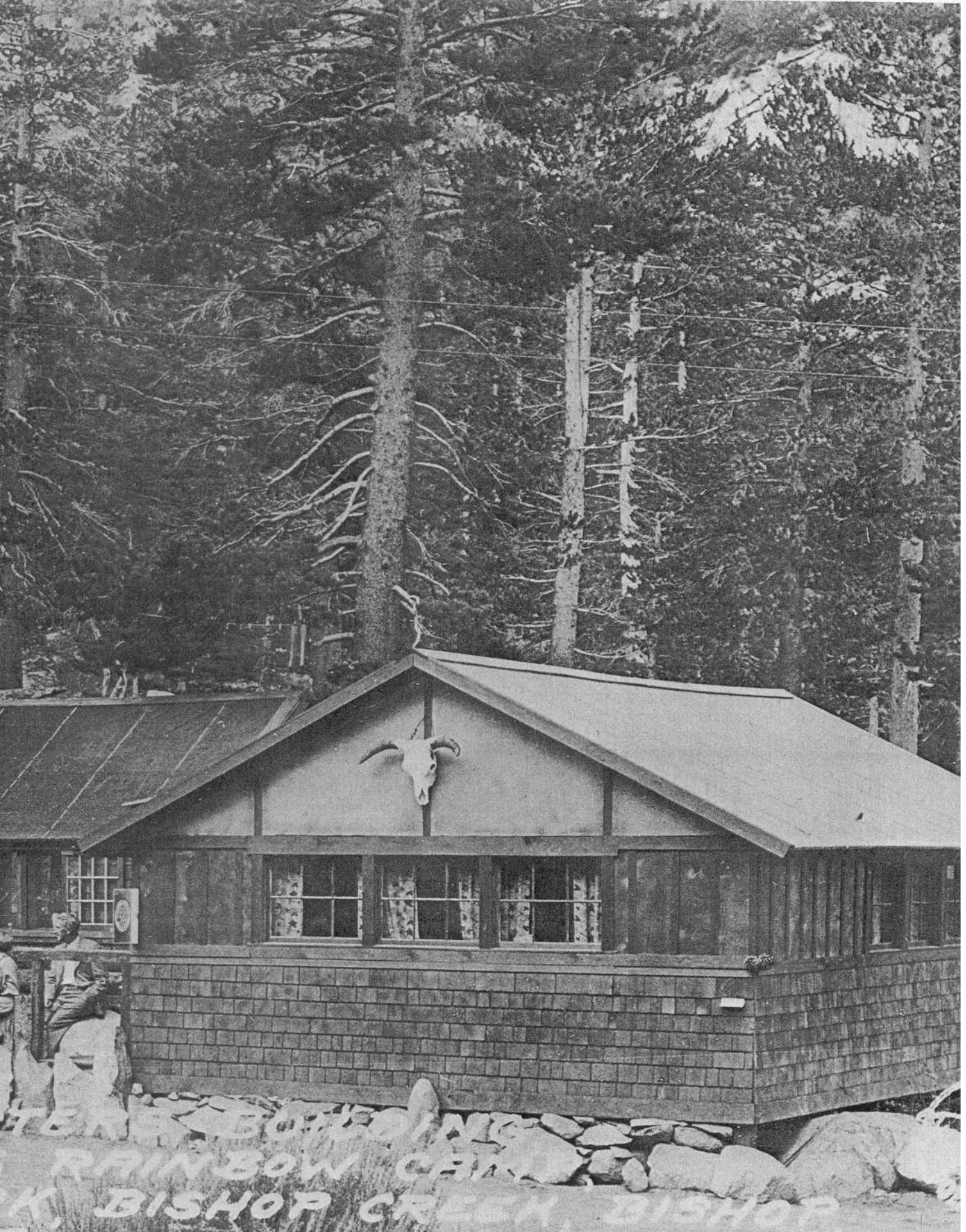
and hired a Camp employee as a guide. She recalls, "They were just going to a nearby lake. I was working in the store that day, and there were some men sitting around drinking beer, when the lady came in and asked for some bait for fishing. When I got her a box of worms, she said, 'Oh, no. I only want one!' The men spit out their beer, from laughing so hard."

(Following page) The headquarters building in the 1920s. At right are Marie Louise Parcher, granddaughters Louise and Harriet, and W.C. Parcher.









RAINBOW CREEK  
BISHOP



1960 was the year The Bear attacked Parcher's Camp. That October, while Chuck Colvin was closing the camp for the winter, he saw a huge animal run across the road. Because bears on the East Slope are almost unheard of at that time of year, no one believed him. But it was not only a bear, it was a big and hungry bear.

In the few months it roamed through the deserted canyon searching for food, the bear caused considerable damage. It entered cabins at Parcher's Camp and surrounding areas, smashing windows and ransacking cabins. With its claws, it reportedly ripped refrigerator and freezer doors off their hinges. According to Jim Brock of Bishop, "it tore open canned hams and ate them, and attacked cans like Popeye, squeezing them until they popped open." In one cabin at Parcher's, the bear ate some red and green Epsom Salts, then left a red and green trail of digested salts behind. It is even reported that the bear broke the tops off some whiskey bottles and drank the whiskey, although there is another report that he may have been 'framed' by some men who reached the cabin later.

Word of The Bear reached Bishop on the day after Thanksgiving. Some men picked up its tracks at the Bishop Creek Lodge, and one of them shot it soon afterward. It took six men to load the bear into a truck, and it was weighed at 620 pounds, still the California state record. The Bear today stands mounted in the window of Brock's Sporting Goods in Bishop.

The winter of 1969 is a fabled one in the Owens Valley, because that year the Eastern Sierra registered its heaviest snowfall in modern history. The snowfall was responsible for widespread damage, and Parcher's Camp was no exception. The eleven-foot pack crushed the roofs of several buildings, never built to withstand that much weight. The main lodge was completely destroyed, leaving only the double fireplace intact, as it remains standing today.

In 1983, the present owners, Howard and Mary Shaw, took possession of Parcher's Camp. Howard, a successful Marin County businessman, says that he has enjoyed backpacking in the Eastern Sierra for several years, and decided to buy the resort when it became available. The Shaws have taken a great interest in the history of Parcher's, and Mary has spent much time collecting stories and photographs of the resort's past.

They are both very concerned about preserving the historic and environmental characteristics of the resort. For

example, in repainting one of the cabins, Howard directed the workmen to leave a space unpainted where some of The Bear's claw marks remain. He explains, "Mainly, we want to fit into that beautiful canyon setting. We want to improve our ability to serve the public, without altering any of the essential features of the place."

And perhaps one of those 'essential features' is *events*, in the finest tradition of W.C. Parcher. One of the most bizarre incidents in the resort's history took place only last August. As the restaurant was closing, two men sat down at the counter, and were noted to be acting strangely. Soon, another man entered and began hollering at the two, then chased them as they ran out the back door.

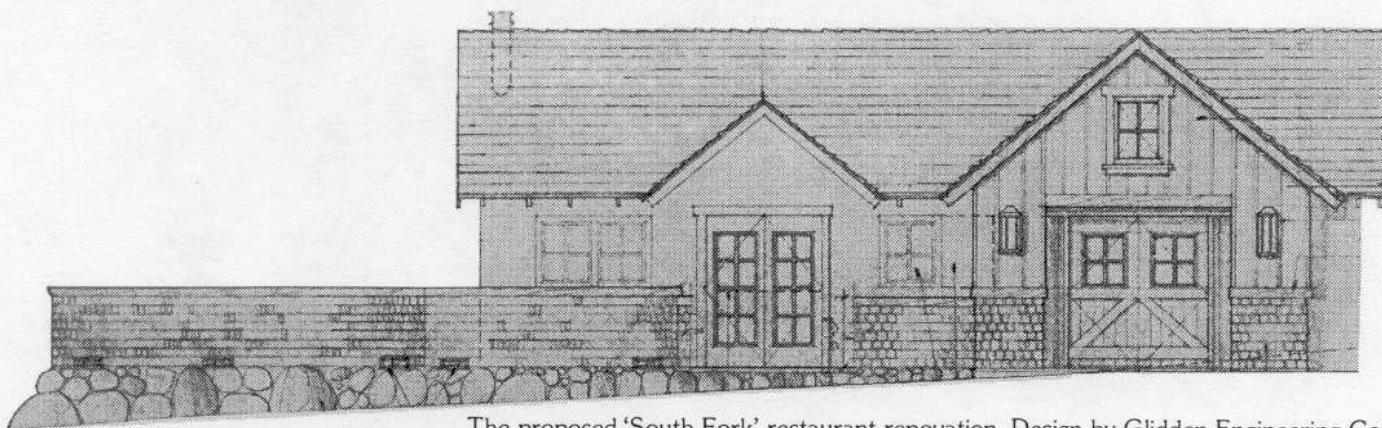
To the shock of employees and guests, gunshots were soon heard outside, followed by the firing of tear gas canisters. Those present were naturally alarmed, until it became known that the National Guard was conducting war games in the area. Some bystanders were hit with tear gas. A south Florida doctor, vacationing at Parcher's, sums up their shock: "It was pure hell. We thought we were as good as dead!"

An Army spokesman said of the war games participants, "Give them an 'A' for initiative and enthusiasm, and an 'F' in smarts." The incident was reported in the **Los Angeles Times**, and as far away as the **Miami Herald** and **The Washington Post**.

The Shaws have plans for a number of improvements at the property, which they have renamed Parcher's Resort. This summer, they intend to build a new store and office building, remodel and enlarge the restaurant, and build a new rental cabin. In the future, they expect to build a new lodge around the old double fireplace, and add several more cabins.

Parcher's Resort is also establishing itself as the base for several seminars and workshops to be offered to the public. Among those offered this summer will be an Orvis flyfishing school, ornithology and wildflower tours led by noted experts, and a photography workshop.

It is gratifying to those familiar with the Parcher's Camp history that the new ownership maintains a respect for the historic and natural attributes of the resort. Says Howard Shaw, "We want to keep the feeling of a rustic, casual place with a friendly atmosphere and warm hospitality. We're intent on preserving the environmental characteristics, and also, on preserving the best of the past." □



The proposed 'South Fork' restaurant renovation. Design by Glidden Engineering Corp.

