

Dwight Eisenhower loved to fish and hunt. As a boy in Abilene, Kansas, he could walk seven blocks from his house along the Santa Fe railroad tracks to Mud Creek. There with a willow shoot, a length of stout string, a 5 cent hook from the general store, and the worms that he collected while hoeing the family corn patch, he could catch sunfish, bullheads, carp, and drum.

All six of the Eisenhower brothers loved to fish. They got together for a much publicized two day bait and plug fishing trip to Northern Wisconsin, for muskies in 1946. Soon afterwards, Ike settled into fly fishing almost exclusively. He told a press conference once, I don't use worms. I want fishing to be a challenge.

Dwight Eisenhower started fishing at the Bal Swan Hereford Ranch in Pine, Colorado in the early 1930's with his friend, the Danish born, Aksel Nielsen. Nielsen was a Mortgage Banker and financial adviser to Eisenhower's father in law, John Sheldon Doud. Doud had been a successful meat packer in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, when he decided, in 1904, at the age of 34, to semi-retire and move his family, a wife and four daughters, to Colorado for their health. The Doud's first moved to Pueblo, then to Colorado Springs, and finally in 1906 to 750 Lafayette Street in Denver. Dwight became a member of the Doud family when he married Mamie on July 1, 1916, in the parlor of Lafayette Street house. Ike had met Mamie while serving at Fort Sam Houston in Texas, his first posting after graduating from West Point in 1915. The Doud's spent the winter months in a second home they had in San Antonio, Texas, near Fort Sam Houston. Mamie was a very popular 19 year old while in San Antonio and Ike would often sit on the porch talking history with Mamie's father, John Doud, while waiting for Mamie to return from a date. But Ike was persistent, so that on Valentine's day 1916, Mamie accepted Ike's marriage proposal. Originally, they were going to wait to be married until after Mamie had her 20th birthday on November 10, 1916, but the wedding was moved up to July because of the fears that Ike might be sent with a detachment to try and capture Pancho Villa, a Mexican bandit that was raiding Texas towns on the border.

The Eisenhower's didn't have a permanent home until they bought their Gettysburg farm in 1950. Colorado had become a second home to the Eisenhower's, during the more than 37 different postings in Ike's military career. The Eisenhower would return to Colorado, throughout Ike's military career between assignments to repose themselves. They had many friends in Colorado outside of their military family. It was no surprise that on receiving the Republican nomination for president in Chicago, 1952, that Ike picked the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, as his campaign head quarters. He was then quickly off to the Byers Peak Ranch, outside Fraser, Colorado, to relax, to get to know his running mate, Richard Nixon, fish, and plan his campaign strategy.

Eisenhower had been coming to the Byers Peak Ranch since shortly after the end of World War II. Eisenhower's friend, Aksel Nielsen had bought the ranch along with Carl Norgren, from Jessie Arnold, who had operated the ranch as the Byers Peak Ranch for Boys from 1932 through the early 40's. Both Nielsen and Norgren had children that had attended the ranch camp. Norgren's daughter, Gene, the future Mrs. Walter Koelbel, was even a councilor at the camp.

In Eisenhower's autobiography, "Mandate for Change" he explained the allure of Colorado, and the Byers Peak Ranch. "...I found it advisable, and at times essential, to seek periods of relaxation and recreation away from Washington. Such so-called vacations could not materially reduce the need for incessant study and conferences but they did have some effect in slowing the pace of personal activity. This came about largely because absence from Washington made me less accessible to those in and out of government who were seeking appointments for reasons of secondary import, as well as to those who merely wanted to "drop in." This relief was provided by the comparative isolation of such spots as

Denver, Colorado; Augusta, Georgia; and Newport, Rhode Island. Moreover, wherever I was, I always had the valuable assistance not only of my staff but also of military personnel and communications, furnished by the Air Force at Lowry Field in Denver, the Army at Fort Gordon, Near Augusta, and the Navy's installation at Newport.

But a President is President no matter what his location. For example, during eight weeks in Denver in 1954 my staff and I worked every day other than Sundays, including the six that I spent in the mountains at Fraser, Colorado, with Aksel Nielsen. During those weeks I saw 225 visitors, not including my own immediate staff, made four official trips out of Denver, delivered six speeches, made three television appearances, attended five official luncheons or dinners, considered 513 bills from Congress, signing 488 into law and vetoing 25. Finally I signed 420 other official papers or documents—all of this business of direct concern to the running of the Executive branch. While this schedule might sound like a strangely hectic vacation, it was largely free from purely ceremonial activities and, as I have said, from welcome but time-consuming visitors.”

Ike would go on to say “My two favorite fishing places were at Aksel Nielsen's place, the Norgren - Nielsen ranch near Fraser, and Bal Swan's ranch on a branch of the Platte River. At both spots my hosts made our party most welcome—they were thoughtful of my need for some privacy and generous in their provision of every convenience.”

Ike would further explain “in the Fraser area, which I started to visit just after World War II, Aksel and I liked to stay for several days at a time. The gatherings were always a small group of men, and I--- with my faithful Moaney---always the cook. In simpler, pre-presidential years, this meant cooking, at the most, for three or four. But once I started traveling with Secret Service men, signal detachments, and staff assistants, our simple fishing expeditions became as elaborate as troop movements.

From “Fishing with the Presidents” Bill Mares wrote that in Eisenhower's eight years as president, he would fly-fish over forty times in Colorado, Maine, Vermont, Rhode Island, Maryland, Georgia, and Pennsylvania and even once in Argentina. Eisenhower would play over 800 rounds of golf in the same time frame. Though fishing may appear to be a distant second to golf, golfing had become part of his weekly routine, fishing still held a special place, requiring planning and plotting. In a press conference in his second term, Eisenhower observed that “there are three (sports) that I like all for the same reason---golf, fishing, and shooting—because they take you into the fields.....They induce you to take at any one time two to three hours, when you are thinking of the bird or ball or the wily trout. Now, to my mind, it is a very healthful, beneficial kind of thing, and I do it whenever I get a chance.”

One chance to fish came in August of 1954 when Eisenhower invited former President Herbert Hoover, to come to Colorado and fish. From the letter Eisenhower sent Hoover, “Dear Mr. President: I was delighted to receive your telegram this morning saying that you would plan to go back with me to Denver on August thirtieth. If you are in Washington that day, suggest that we be ready to leave shortly after lunch. If you should be elsewhere, we can still easily work out the details of getting together.

Hope that, on our way to Denver, you will not greatly mind making a short stop in Iowa, where I have promised to attend the State Fair for a matter of an hour. In fact, I could think of nothing that would please those people more than if I could have the privilege of appearing at the Fair escorting the only living Republican ex-President (especially because it would be in the State of your birth).

Note it was Hoover Day at the Iowa State Fair.*

As to fishing: there are a number of varieties available to us in the Denver area. My own choice is to

go over the Berthoud Pass to Fraser. The Altitude of my friend's little ranch there is under nine thousand feet. There is a small stream on which we catch ten and twelve inchers, and of course there is always the chance for the occasional big fellow of something on the order of sixteen or seventeen inches. I assure you that you don't need to be especially terrified at the prospect of living on my cooking for a couple of days. My culinary reputation is pretty good---but my repertoire is limited. It is only after about four days that my guests begin to look a little pained when they come to the dinner table. It is a grand place to loaf and we will have absolutely no one with us except my great friend who owns the place, and possibly my brother Milton.

The little stream has many pools that can be fished easily from the bank. Even if you should be compelled to cross the stream occasionally, you will find it remarkably easy to wade. I cannot tell you how delighted I am at the prospect of the two of us having a period together in such a quiet retreat.

With warm regard, Sincerely

From an account in a book titled "Hoover the Fishing President" by Hal Elliot Wert, Eisenhower and Hoover did attend the Iowa State Fair on their way to Denver. At the fair Eisenhower at the end of a speech on foreign policy, he told the crowd, "Now, my friends, Mr. Hoover and I have a very important date with a few finny comrades up in the high Rockies, and it is about time we were getting along." Later that afternoon..... they flew to Denver and drove off into the mountains to fish St. Louis Creek, at ten thousand feet, was just across the Continental Divide, a cold, fast-running stream surrounded by snow-capped mountains. The weather was perfect. At night the temperature dropped to below freezing, and during the day it climbed back into the low sixties. Lovely rustic cabins with large fireplaces were near the creek, which made for comfortable evenings—a marvelous escape to an earlier time. In front of the fire after a hard day outdoors and a good meal, "we get repose," Hoover wrote, "from the troubles of soul that this vast complex of civilization imposes upon us in our working hours and our restless nights. The quiet chortle of the streams is soothing to our 'het-up ' anxieties."

In a book written in 1954 by Merriman Smith, a United Press White House Correspondent, that traveled with the President, titled "Meet Mister Eisenhower", tells the difference between fishing at the Bal Swan Ranch in Pine and the Byers Peak ranch in Fraser. "When the President visits the Nielsen ranch at Fraser, on the western slope of the Rockies and at an altitude of about nine thousand feet, the fishing is more complicated than at Pine.

The stream on the Nielsen property is St. Louis Creek. For the most part, there are heavy overhanging bushes and trees at the edge of the creek, whereas at Pine most of the fishing water runs through uncomplicated pasture land with only small growth along the banks. The bushy condition of the creek banks at Fraser quickly separates the men from the boys because an inaccurate, flailing fly caster of my type encounters great difficulty in putting the fly up under the bushes and trees where the trout lurk during much of the day.

Life at Fraser consists of much more than fishing for Ike. He is the chief cook and bottle washer, and when he's not fishing or puttering around the kitchen, he's somewhere around the ranch, painting an old settler's cabin or the snow-streaked mountains in the background.....In a week at Nielsen's in 1953, Ike concentrated much of the time on one wise old trout. He became so caught up in his campaign after this fish that one day he quit fishing entirely and, armed with a big shovel, grubbed in the side of the stream for hours, improving the contour of a pool to make it more attractive for his quarry.

Finally, within a matter of hours before he was to return to Denver, the President connected with his adversary and landed him with whoops of joy that brought Nielsen and the White House staff running to the stream. It was a rainbow that measured about fifteen inches---the best fish of that summer for the chief executive.”

From an article that appeared in Time Magazine, Monday, August 29, 1955, titled “The Presidency:Five Days with Grandfather”.....”After two days shaking off his Washington tensions, The President left for five days at the mountain ranch of his good friend, Denver Banker Aksel Nielsen. Ike had hoped to commute regularly by air between Denver and the ranch this summer, and had brought his twin-engined Aero Commander plane along as a taxi, but Presidential Pilot William Draper felt that the thin mountain air and the sudden thunderstorms made flying too risky, so Ike reluctantly made the 75-mile trip by Cadillac.

David Eisenhower wrote of his Grandfather in “Going Home to Glory” “One of Granddad's favorites was a painting of the Byers Peak Ranch in Fraser, Colorado, the home of his long time friend Aksel Nielsen, which he had visited often before his heart attack. Eisenhower once said that being in Fraser was a religious experience. The mountains brought him closer to the mysteries and intagibles in life more than anywhere else. In the painting, he converts the ranch scene into a bold juxtaposition of sensations that Colorado evoked in him. Aksel Nielsen's ranch house is sheltered protectively by thick, prosperous pine trees. The adjoining fields are richly productive. The cottages appear to be large and comfortable, set back from distant neighboring mountains, which tower into the heavens like the Himalayas of *Lost Horizon*, impenetrable barriers between the ranch and the outside world. The colors are vivid and bold. Yet in reality, the Byers Peak ranch house and surrounding cottages are small and primitive. Fraser sits on a plateau near the timberline, and therefore the air is thin and the trees are small.”

Obviously David wasn't as impressed with the Fraser Valley as his Granddad was. However, I think his observations suggest that Ike, who had seen much of the world, yearned to come to the Fraser Valley for the inspiration in that thin air. Ike loved to come to the Fraser Valley, but not to work. He came to kick back, match wits with the wiley trout, and relax in our natural beauty and our isolation from the demands of the outside world, even though the work sometimes followed him up here. His heart attack on September 24, 1955, ended his annual working vacation to Colorado, the summer white house and the escape to the Byers Peak Ranch retreat. Health concerns would have Eisenhower's working summer vacations moved to Newport, Rhode Island for the remainder of his presidency.

After returning to Washington DC after recuperating at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Aurora, Colorado after his heart attack, Eisenhower wrote to one of his Fitzsimmons doctors, Dr. George M. Powell, on November 16, 1955 “ While I am, of course, delighted to be “home”, I confess to a strong feeling of nostalgia (for Colorado)...The weather here (in Washington, DC) is murky, damp and cold- and there is none of that beautiful and beneficent Colorado sun”