

FIGHTING FOREST FIRES

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By David Weirup Scott

1948-- 17 years old Junior in H.S. Thought I wanted to be a "Ranger". Wanted a summer job outdoors. Dad suggested I write to the Fish & Wildlife agencies for both Wisconsin & Minnesota. Wisconsin said no. Minnesota said no but thought Superior N.F. might have jobs. Wrote to USFS in Duluth who came back with a job offer of work in a Blister Rust program at an exCCC camp on the Tofte R.D. 95c/hour minus 50c/meal. Spent a couple days pulling ribes followed by a week on a fireline. My first wildland fire—no training. Caught a small widow maker on the back of my neck. Radio communication from point to point around fire perimeter. No radio would cover the entire fire. Cardboard & charcoal sign hung on tree along the fireline said "Bye Bye Blackbird" somebody's sense of humor. District Ranger Tyler S. Gill. Laid off with no notice and no money. Borrowed \$10 for a \$9.50 ride home on the bus including a one nite layover in Minneapolis.

1951--Summer Camp-University of Idaho, McCall, Idaho. Fire Control was part of curriculum. Whole class called up for Rapid Creek fire on the Payette N. F. My second wildland fire. Very little training. Again a log fell on my back. Left a scar for about 20 yr. On the fire 2 or 3 days.

1953-- Finished school. Temporary appt on Deerlodge N.F. Attended guard school. There about 3 weeks. Took a permanent appointment on the 6 Rivers N.F. at

Salyer. Pay \$3410 per year. While at Salyer went on a fire between Willow Creek and Hoopa. Given the nite shift as crew boss with about 15 inmates. We were the only ones on the fire. Very little experience with fire control and no experience with inmates. Fire went out. I think by itself! Also lightning bust where I served as camp flunky. There about 6 weeks before transfer to Dunsmuir on Shasta N.F. Six weeks on the Shasta N.F. when draft caught up to me.

Oct53—Oct55-----U.S. Army

Back to USFS (S-T) in time for the 1955 Xmas flood in Trinity County. All Roads in and out of Weaverville were washed out. FS (Horace Jones and Myron Nelson) by default took charge of Trinity County for about a week. No overtimes paid on Ranger Districts. Overtime paid in Forest Supervisor's office.

1956---Moved to Trinity Center in March. Spent about 4 months scaling logs.

Learned a lot about the woods commuting to and from work in the crummy w/ the loggers. Went to guard school at Lakeshore on Shasta Lake and was taught to tie a diamond hitch by Bill Lunceford. Can't do it anymore. Smoke chased a couple lightning fires. Put one out on Scott Mtn with snow. July promoted (G5-7) and transferred to McCloud. Big deal! Learned how to drive dodge power wagon pumper.

1956---At McCloud most memorable was lightning fire near Six shooter Butte in the Lava beds with Jay Miller. Walked right to the fire thanks to precise directions from

Paul Friday. Spent 8 or 10 hrs working and walked out. Was surprised the next winter to read a report on the the success of using Stearman Aircraft for dropping fire retardant on live fires. One of the fires cited was on Six shooter Butte. Best I could tell Jay and I were the only ones on the ground and nobody ever talked with us about our experiences. We know the retardant drop came close but did not hit the fire.

1957---A near record year----100 lightning caused fires Seemed like everyday about 2PM the cloud buildup peaked and down came the lightning Paul Friday the District Fire Control Officer seemed to know exactly what to do. At the time there were only four yearlong people on the District but in the summer we beefed up with about 10 additional fire people stationed throughout the Dist. In addition we had a 20 man Tbr. stand Improvement crew stationed at Ash Creed which was used on fire as needed. In addition to the lightning fires I spent about a week on the Woodwardia fire on the Angeles. Also a fire on the Los Padres with Whit out of Fillmore but can't remember the name. These last two may have occurred a year earlier or a year later. Memory plays tricks.

Fall 1956---The Inaja fire occurred on the Cleveland N.F. that fire claimed the lives of 7 or 8(?) men including two from Mt. Shasta, Andy Anderson and Forest Maxwell McCloud ranger Chuck Abell was given the job of telling one of the wives. Chuck took me along. I guess for moral support. The man's first name was Forrest. I'm sorry I don't remember his last. Not nice!

1958---Big Year! Was married June 22 to Audrey, the school nurse. About 10 days later I was on the Nickle fire on the Cleveland N.F. Most interesting was that December found me again on the Cleveland on the Stewart fire which burned right over the top on the Nickel fire. Met Bob Cermak. Barely made it home for our first Christmas together.

1959---June, moved to Weaverville as acting District Ranger while Horace Jones was off doing the Nat'l Forest REC Survey for the whole Shasta T My directions from Horace were to prepare the Soldier Cr. Timber sale and don't have any big fires. 1959 was the year the S-T burned up from the Lave fire on the McCloud to the Jones fire on the Yolla Bolla and points inbetween. I drove Bill Beatty my neighbor DR to the Pole fire near Minersville planning on dropping him off and returning home (15 miles) that evening. The fire had gotten to 300 acres but was quickly slowed down by Bob Gray, Harry Grant and others. By the time things looked good another fire was reported on the Trinity Dist on Ramshorn creek about 25 miles to the north. Leaving the Pole fire for Bob Gray, Bill Beatty and I headed for Ramshorn Cr. We just about caught it that night but the next day a strong north wind came up and things went to hell. Thirteen days later and about 10,000 acres I came home wearing the same clothes as when I left but I had thoroughly learned the duties of a plans chief from Bill Dresser and Jack Heinen and would act as such in many future assignments. In late summer or early fall the Rarick fire started up Canyon Cr from Junction City. Good work again by Bob Gray and the Junction City crew headed by Harry Perkins stopped the fire at about 125 acres. The thing about this fire is that we appraised, sold

and logged that fall. Did some site preparation and completed tree planting by March the next year. The season ended with the Power Fire on Hwy 299 near Junction City. It started about four in the afternoon burning both sides of the highway. Horace came back as the fire boss. Divided the fire in half with CDF taking the southside of the highway and the FS taking the North. This fire burned about 5000 acres and was under control by evening the next day thanks to Horace Jones, Bob Gray and Jim McKnight.

The Power fire was the last of 5 or 6 class E fires on the S-T in 1959. By the time this one started the Redding Dispatch was gun shy and figured we had another week long project on our hand. They hadn't reckoned on the fire being under control in 24 hours. They just sent us manpower and supplies as quickly as they could. Much of the manpower never went out on the fireline. We ended up having to feed about 100 people for several days while transportation home could be arranged. We also ended up with a large supply of perishable food much of which went to the Weaverville Hospital. The last was a pick-up load of melons. What to do with it? Bernie Leas our oldtimer prevention man said he would take care of it and he spread the melons out on the lawn of the Ranger Station. Lo and behold, the next morning they were all gone! Problem solved! And I stayed out of jail.

1960----Still "acting" District Rgr in Weaverville A few lightning fires. One on White's Creek off the North Fork of the Trinity got to be about 2 or 3 acres in size. Crew walked to the fire from Hobo Gulch campground about 5 in the evening. For whatever reason I decided I had to see this fire personally. About 8 PM I drove to

Hobo Gulch (end of the road), took off my boots and walked across the North Fork. Walked a couple miles up the North Fork, then a couple miles up Whites Cr to the fire. The crew was working hard and everything was well in hand. It was clear my presence was not needed so I reversed my course and made it home at one or two in the morning. Not a smart thing to do, to wade the river twice and to wander up the trail in the black of night.

Another lightning fire up remote Grizzly Creek was a single log burning in the middle of a large talus slope. The FCO looked at it from the air and suggested to me that we do nothing! Unheard of! It scared me but after looking from the air took his suggestion and of course, this fire eventually burned itself out. We did not report this course of action to the S.O.

August---dispatched to Wolf Cr fire on the Tahoe NF with Gil Ward and Bob Mace as a short sector team. After 3 shifts we saw the smoke plume from the Donner fire on the horizon. Ate dinner, drove to Sierraville. Bedded down on R.S. lawn and caught cold but luckily Gil Ward gave me a snort of Jim Beam. Next morning drove to Lewis Mill G.S., met a large group of millworkers and loggers and ate breakfast of macaroni and cheese sent up in hot cans from Reno. One or two shifts out of Lewis Mill and then moved to Hobart Mill the main camp. Don't recall how many days there but do remember it was two weeks before I got home. First went to Squaw Valley for a shower and short rest then flew home from some Air Force Base near Sacto. Also remember Bill Powers died on that fire from carbon monoxide poisoning while sleeping in a vehicle with motor running.

1961---Moved to D.R. on Shasta Lake in late June. A week later I was greeted by a lightning storm which left 30 smokes on the district. The Supervisor's office was all nervous about our capabilities but after about 36 hours Harold Peterson the District fire control officer (FCO) had every smoke manned and in another 36 hours every smoke was out. Being new to the district there was not much for me to do but to watch "Pete" do a beautiful job of handling a difficult situation. I did fly recon every morning and afternoon which was some help.

1961-65-----I'm sure there were some off forest fires but at this time I can't remember them. We had one large fire (about 1800 acres) on Behemotash Mt. on the west side of Shasta Dam. We had a big organization consisting of a FCO, Ass't FCO, lookouts on North Fork, Brock Mtn, Hirz Mtn, Sugarloaf Mtn, and Bunchgrass Mtn. Prevention men at McCloud Bridge, Squaw Cr, and one by Boat from Turntable Bay. All the lookouts were women but one and all were veterans returning year after year. We had two 6 or 7 man fire crews---one at Lakeshore and one at Big Bend, each with two tankers.

1966-69-----San Bernardino N..F. Forest Supervisor Don Bauer informed me that the Recreation staff job carried with it the job of Plans Chief. My memory has become a little dim but I do remember three fires in this period. The Lytle Cr fire, Mill Cr fire and Wellman fire. The Lytle Cr fire quickly burned about 5000 acres and I was plans chief for the fire boss Lynn Biddison. The fire slowed down dramatically after about four shifts and things looked good. A second fire broke out on the San Jacinto district

and Lynn was dispatched to take care of that leaving me to fire boss the remains of the Lytle Cr ;fire. This fire was in pretty good shape with mostly mop up to be done but none the less with my first large fire boss assignment I was greatly worried about safety on the men on the line. Thank goodness we had Jerry Ewart (Arrowhead FCO) there to put out the fire while I spent my time worrying. "All's well the ends well." The Mill Cr fire was held at about 500 ac by some super work by engine crews from all over the Forest. My stint as fire boss lasted about 2 days before it was turned back to the Ranger District.

A team of Biddison, Palletti, Gaddy, and Scott was dispatched to the Wellman fire in the San Rafael Wilderness of the Los Padres. We worked a zone out of an end of the road camp where most all crews left camp to their line assignments on foot. About a week later we established an aerial drop camp at Hurricane Deck within the wilderness. Biddison was in charge of the new camp leaving me to look after the old zone camp. Several days later we had a fire line around 100,000 acres of tough country. Somewhere during this 10 or 12 day episode the Santa Barbara newspaper published a picture of all sweaty and dirty Lynn with the caption of "These are the type of tough and knowledgeable men that are in the mountains protecting our cities." The rest of us got wind of this later on and promptly established the annual "tough and knowledgeable" award on the forest. I still poke fun at Lynn even forty five years later.

This same team was dispatched to the "Round" fire on the Mendocino N.F. Only took two or three shifts before we were done. The unique experience here was standing at the Ukiah (I think) airport waiting for a plane home and watching a

retardant plane land on its belly with NO landing gear. Nobody was hurt. The plane scrapped the retardant tank off its bottom but otherwise suffered only light damage.

1969-70----- Moved back to the Shasta Trinity and my next to last fire assignment. It was on the Wenatchee N.F. Don't recall the name of the fire but it consisted of several fires that had joined together and included the Entiat River drainage. Smoke was exceptionally dense. The fire boss and plans chief had a hard time knowing exactly where the fire line was. My job along with Chuck Burke was to interpret aerial infra red images and map the actual fire line. We had received some training about 5—10 years earlier but this was the first time we tried to put it to use. I never was sure se did any good.

1971—1984---R-8, W.O. R-6 No fires but in ATL I was acting RF for a single day when a FS aerocommander went down in North Georgia killing both pilots on board. _____ Merrit was a longtime FS employee; Carl _____ was on his first day of a new job. My job was to inform Carl's spouse. Not nice! Sorry I can't remember their full names.

About 1985 Regional Office R-6-----Fire suppression, especially with heavy equipment, was being asked to be more sensitive to wilderness values and to try to get the job done with minimum impact on the land. A crew of three of us, Gordon Schmidt, Grover Paine, and me were sent to the Umatilla N.F. to view work being done on a fire partially in the Nork Fork of the John Day Wilderness. It was an interesting assignment and a harbinger of things to come in fire mgmt.

Here endeth the story of one man's experience in Fire Control on the Nat'l Forests of the U.S. 25 years after retirement memory does indeed play tricks. If anyone who reads this wants to dispute names, dates, and places, I will be happy to hear from them and will make changes as needed.

Epilog: Now as I hear of Forest after Forest being burned up while the "incident commander" is wringing his or her hands in a fire camp 40 or 50 miles from the nearest fire line I wonder what it's all about. I am being told especially by the mass media and, more and more the agencies themselves that my work of 30 yrs is a major contributor to today's conflagrations. Could that be true? I doubt it.