

U.S. FOREST SERVICE 1944
Gilbert E. Belcher, Firefighter

Somehow I muddled through 9 months of the eleventh grade. I was now 17 years old and had my first car, a 1932 Ford V-8 roadster. It was a Hot Rod (see pictures). I recruited Donald Bradley to work at Tenaja U.S.F.S. with me as Richard Bell was off to the Marines. Don was madly in love with Shirley Gollaher and not sure he could exist away from Corona.

My mother was working at a small grocery store and Don and I were able to buy 3 months of canned goods and flour products. These were bought at wholesale prices and saved us a lot of money.

The Forest Guard was A.J. Jones. He had been in the peace time army, getting out just before the war. Also, there was a Dee Parvin who was a patrolman. The camp had a government horse with U.S.A. branded on its' rump and on each hoof. It was a very wise horse, an army mind of its' own. When Don or I mounted it, it would head for the nearest tree and leave us on a low branch or the ground. Parvin was an old buckaroo and he became the master..

Dee Parvin rode horse patrol into the Trabuco Dist. There were trails hacked out by the C.C.C.'s. We never got on them. Parvin rode off in the mornings, sometimes staying overnight. He was in his 40's, an old man to us, and could spin some good yarns. He, Jones and their wives stayed in the residence.

There were some unbranded wild cattle in the thick brush which couldn't be herded out so Dee would rope one and drag it to camp. He had a stake side truck and would haul the cow to Los Angeles and sell it.

Dee didn't stay the whole summer. He left for town one day with some cows he had drug out of the brush, having passed through 2 or three gates he had a mishap and several cows fell out of the truck and he couldn't catch and reload them. A rancher came upon him and recognized his cattle and started to ask questions. Dee Parvin, wife and truck just faded away. The army horse got a transfer.

Fred Varney and Clair Miller came one day and showed us how the C.C.C.s cut brush with brush hooks. They were very good. They could cut brush faster than A.J. Jones, Donald and I could throw it off the line.

A contest was held for the best camp. All camps worked hard to be #1. The winner got a green pennant to fly under the Stars and Stripes. Tenaja won it !!!!!

Two weeks before Tenaja opened, a Lockheed P-38 crashed just west of camp beside the road to El Coreso. Clair Miller was the first to arrive and the pilot was sitting on the wing trying to bandage his bloody head. One propeller had broken off and skipped off to the north. It hit the ground and cut a deep slice about every 50 yards. Don and I spent many hours after work looking for the runaway prop. It may still be there.

The camp routine was much the same. The road grading crew arrived and stayed a week. Part of them had been there in 1943. They graded roads all over the Cleveland Forest and had lots of stories to tell.

My knowledge of the district was nil. All I knew then was the road to Corona and to the Look-out. And this grading crew got to everywhere. I wish I could remember their names. One was named Clinton and he had known my Dad when they were kids in Texas. He worked out of the Arcadia HQs. and came to visit my Dad, Earl Belcher, several times.

The camp was more liberal in 1944. I was allowed to walk to the Santa Margareta Look Out, arriving there about 8P.M., stay the night and be back at 7A.M. I went two nights a week. The lookouts name was Yokum, we called him " Little Abner ".

Donald and I got every other Friday night off. We took turns with the '32 Ford. My father worked for Charlie Hoover who ran the Chevrolet agency. Charlie was on the City Council and the Gas Rationing Board. He was a "wheel" in those days and got me a "B" gas ration which allowed more use of the Ford. Don and I took all of our weeks laundry home and washed it to hang out at camp the next day.

There were two men at the lookout--Yokum, and I think Mike

Shanard who was my age. Yokum had a Dodge sedan, a 1934 or '35. At night the telephone was switched over from the Corona Dispatcher to the local telephone Co. The operators seemed to have some spare time after 9P.M. so we could call one and flirt. One, whose name I don't recall had a great bedroom voice and I got a date with her. I borrowed Yokums' Dodge and went to town on "cloud 9". That's when I found out the sound^{of} ones voice could be much different than looks. She was as wide as tall, did I ever take a lot of kidding over that.

Yokum drank, and it could be detected on the telephone. One morning he put the flag up upside down and the Marines at Camp Pendleton came charging up to see what the National Distress was.

Clair Miller, the F.C.A., made lots of trips to Tenaja and the lookout. The lookout could see the dust coming his way and clean up the cab and hide the booze and do all the cover-ups drinkers do so as to appear on the ball.

Yokum finally took a walk and we went up to clean and paint and haul off the trash. The Lookout had an underground water cistern. It filled up during the winter. A hand wobble pump put the water up to the cab. The new lookouts were very religious and asked A.J. Jones if any alcohol had ever been in any of the containers as they could not ever use them. A.J. said no! Good thing we had walked out the brush as far as one could throw, and picked up the bottles.

Clair Miller came up one day to train us on the new S-X radio. It was a small wooden box with two folding lids which hinged up like a picnic box. It had a small head set and a button to push down to transmit. A wire antenna was held aloft and could transmit and receive several miles in line of sight. We couldn't have been more impressed if it was the Hope Diamond.

A Marine artillery shell landed outside of Camp Pendleton in the San Mateo Canyon. I don't remember how I got there, but my first job was to fill 400 canteens from the creek.

A fire camp was set up but there were not any hand tools. We waited two days until tools arrived from a fire in the Palomar Dist. All tools were then sharpened. It was my first field fire

camp experience . I was assigned 125 Marines and told to hike to the fire and find Fire Boss Johnny West. A lot of the Marines took off for L.A. and many of them threw away their tools. West gave me a drawing of the fire and where to start building the line. Here I was with zero (0) fire experience and doing the job of a Crew Boss. I met Gene Shipman on the line.

We had our canteens, K rations, but no flashlights. Our fire line ended up in the creek, but it was dark. I told the Marines to walk down stream on their own as without lights we had no organization. The bottom of the canyon was a jumble of boulders and very slow going. I found a Marine who had jumped down and broken both ankles. He was in much pain. I did a lot of hollering, but could not attract any help. I got him on my back with my arms under his legs and him hanging onto my neck. We stumbled around for hours and soaked his feet in the creek. It was getting light when we got to camp. The Marine left in a Jeep. Someone at camp determined I was used up and sent me back to Tenaja.

Bradley was at the Lookout. A radio had been set up and he relayed messages by radio and phone. I envied his job and he envied mine. While overseas in 1945 I talked with Marines who had been on that fire.

Fire broke out all over So. California. After that, and I can't remember the order of events. I was a Crew Boss on two timber fires on the Palomar Dist. I met and became friends with Jerry Muratet who was stationed at Rome Hill Station on the east end of Lake Elsinor.

Don and I were at Tenaja when school was about to start. I was going to work longer, so I bought his share of the remaining food. I was on days off and was called to Headquarters. Muratet and I and 2 others left in a pickup to a fire on the San Bernadino Forest. Fire camp was at Del Rosa Base Line Rd, San Bernadino.

A fire had started at the base of the mountain and ran up to Crestline. I was assigned a crew of army soldiers and 2 Pacific Marine pumps to work down a creek and wet down both sides. We came out at the Arrow Head Springs Hotel, which was then a

Naval Hospital.

The next morning I was told to drive a pickup loaded with barrels of gas and two riders to the Kenworthy Guard Station on the Idyllwild Dist. I told him I was a crew man and he said again to drive the pickup. I finished the season as a driver. This was the fire that started just east of Hemit and went to the desert, 70,000 acres I think. I was gone for three weeks and wore out a pair of boots. I knew then that my lifes work would be firefighting.

I spent a week or two at Corona HQs. Sam Munhall had left for the service. He was the District Ranger and his office was in Santa Ana. Lee Barraman replaced Munhall and had his office at Corona , or at least was at Corona a lot.

His personal car was a 1941 Mercury Club Coupe. Maroon color, we spent a lot of time looking at and drooling over it.

Gene Shipman may have been on the grading crew, his older brother, Louie, was guard at Silverado. I last saw Gene in 1947 Jack Osborn was guard at Temiscal Station. There was a Jackie Smith and an Ernie Smith. Bert Johnson was away in the army, while working for the U.S.F.S. he drew a picture of the Trabuco Dist. i it was at Corona and inspired me to be a cartoonist. I visited Gene OLson in Mejeska around 1979 and he had Johnsons' cartoon. Kenny Seebold had given it to him.

1944 was a busy season for everyone. I met many other employees, made a lot of fire lines and saw a lot of other forests---I had spread my wings!!!

I turned 18 years old Sept 29. I knew I'd be getting my greetings from the President (draft) I was getting messages from high school to return to school.

When I got back to Tenaja, A.J. Jones was gone. I became a driverat Rome Hill for a short time, then back to Tenaja

David Roberts was the high school class ahead of me. At this time he was in the Marines at Camp Pendleton. He was denied liberty (a pass) and went over the hill. I was alone at Tenaja and he stayed with me for 10 days. David had a large motorcycle. We were like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. We rode every truck trail, slipped off to Fall Brook and Murietta for ice cream and newspapers,

hiked the nearby mountains, swam in the creek, played cards and had a swell time.

Dave knew he was in deep trouble and went back to Camp Pendleton. He was, of course, slammed in the Brig. Marines were very hard on prisoners. He went through some unpleasant routine for days which made you hate the service and vow to never again get in the Brig.

David Roberts and Dick Bell were on the same ship and fought the Okinawa Battle in the Fifth Marine Regiment, First Division. I've never seen him since.

Cecil Bronson was hired as the Forest Guard. I soon returned to school, then the service.

I wanted to enlist, but my folks, like most folks, followed the war news and knew Hitlers' days were over as our armys sped across Europe. Japan was losing island after island, and most of its' ships. One could walk around town and see the gold stars in the windows and parents would press to keep their sons out of the war.

I was drafted in Nov., told to report in Jan., 1945. I elected to be a Marine like Richard Bell and David Roberts. I was in PLT.2 San Diego Boot Camp Jan. and Feb. In March I looked at Santa Margareta from the Pendleton side. In June I was wounded while serving with "B" Co. 1st Bat. 1st REG. 1st Marine Division at OKinawa. Discharged April 1947 in time to go to Forest Guard School at Julian, Calif.



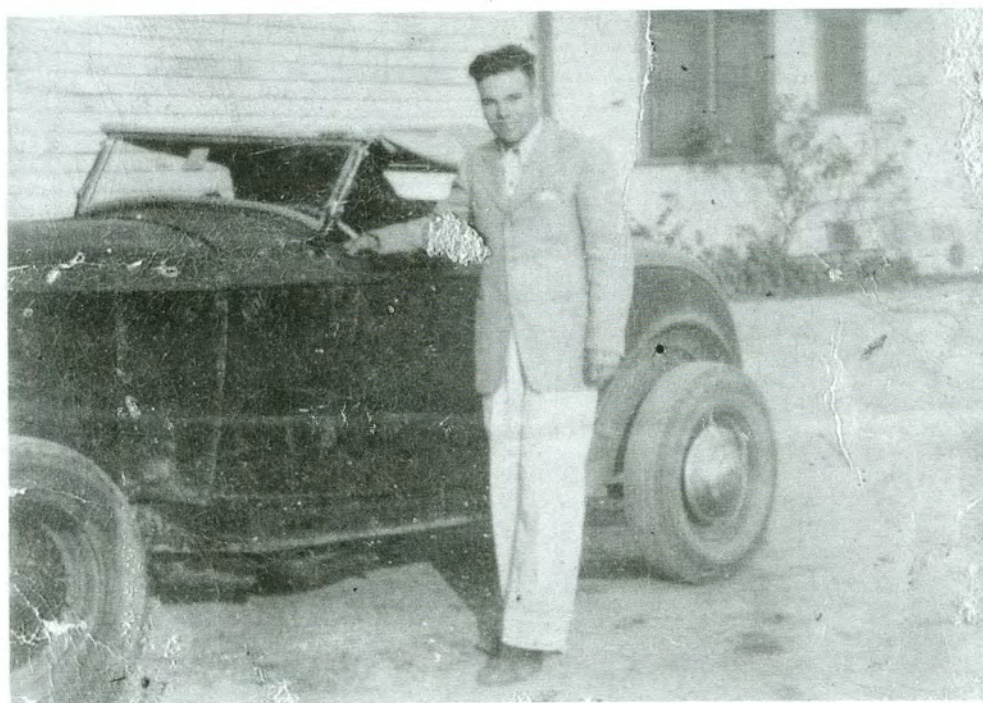
Tenaja Guard Station. On south edge of Trabuco District, Cleveland National Forest. This was the office and residence for the Forest Guard. Weather station on left.



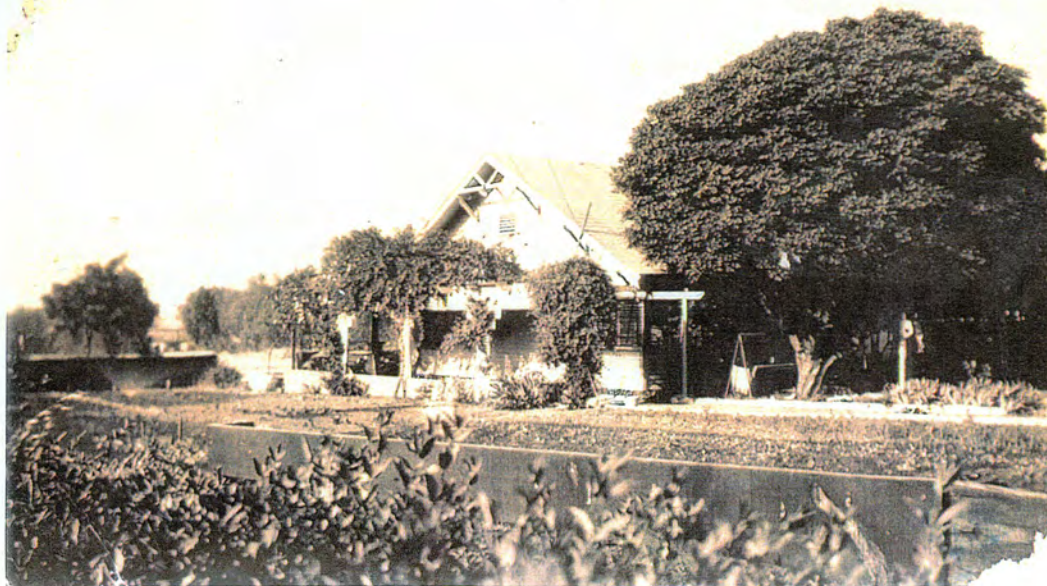
Fire Suppression Crewman, Gilbert E. Belcher and Donald Bradley, with 1935 Chevrolet truck, #572



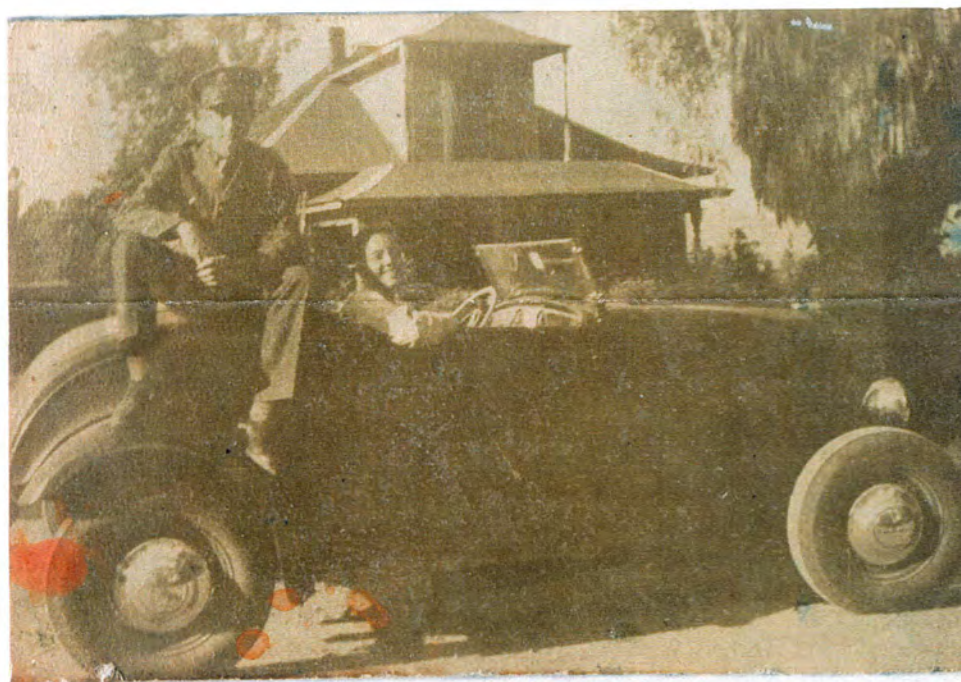
Fire started by Marine artillery in San Mateo Canyon. Picture taken at Santa Margareta Look Out



Richard Silva and 1932 Ford roadster. Windshield has been cut down, body lowered, and 16" wheels. It had a stock engine. Sold to Silva when I went into the Service



Thomas Earl and Gladys Gertrude Belcher home, 606 West 5th St. Corona, CA. Victory garden, large China Berry tree. My sister, Billie, sent me the picture when I was overseas, 1945.



Wm. Thomas on Army leave, David Roberts on Marine leave. Car in front of Thomas residence on Commercial St. now named Circle City Drive, Corona, CA.