

1937 BLACKWATER FIRE INVESTIGATION

As a Fire Management Officer on the Shoshone National Forest, I have studied the tragic Blackwater Fire of August 21, 1937, to learn more about local fire behavior variables and to train firefighters on all aspects of safety during potential blow up conditions. Fifteen firefighters died on the Blackwater when a passing cold front turned the fire's head a full 90 degrees and trapped groups of firefighters on various parts of the fire. Recently, we have been able to develop and present a fire training slide show on the Blackwater Fire to cover the elements of Standards for Survival and Look Up, Look Down and Look Around. Still, there is a story on the investigation of this fire that needs to be told.

The fire investigation was conducted by David P. Godwin, the Assistant Chief of Fire Management for the U.S. Forest Service. Godwin's report is entitled The Handling Of The Blackwater Fire. In addition, A.A. Brown of the Rocky Mountain Region (R-2) assisted with a fire behavior study entitled The Factors and Circumstances That Led To The Blackwater Fire Tragedy.

David Godwin concluded that the leadership on the fire was "intelligent and protective of the men". The Forest Rangers involved with the direction of fire suppression on the Blackwater used the standard techniques of the day. Still, I believe that David Godwin struggled with this tragedy and worked within the Division of Fire Control for ways to improve fire suppression techniques.

Godwin focused on response times to the Blackwater fire from Forest Officers to Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) crews. He developed a chart to display call and arrival times and reported, that in general, "response times were fair". A delay in the arrival of the Tensleep CCC crew lost about two hours in effective control time on the fire. It was a "logical speculation" that if Forest Officers could have had the crew on site two hours earlier, the tragedy might have been averted.

Strong feelings about a traumatic incident are a "prime motivation for action" (See Fire Management News Notes, Volume 56/No 4, Use The Connections-No One Is An Island by James E. Stone). It appears that David Godwin was able to work through the Blackwater disaster and initiate positive actions to develop a new and faster way to put "smokechasers" on the line.

In Stan Cohen's book, A Pictorial History Of Smokejumping it is noted that David P. Godwin is "the man most instrumental in the initial development of the smokejumping concept" (Page-18). One can only imagine the effect that the Blackwater Fire had on David Godwin. The efforts he made to avert a future tragedy by improving fire response times are, however, documented in forest history. All managers in our firefighting agencies should use Godwin's Fire Report and the actions he took as a model for an effective management response to an incident.

The Smokejumper project was developed at Winthrop, Washington (R-6) and in Montana at Seeley Lake and Moose Creek (R-1) in 1939 and 1940. Still, I believe that the Smokejumpers were born through David Godwin's response to tragedy on Blackwater Creek in August of 1937.

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