

The “Columbia National Burn”

A History of Fires and Firefighting on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest

Today the Gifford Pinchot National Forest is often viewed as one of the west-side “asbestos forests”, but 100 years ago it was viewed very differently. The three rangers who in 1902 made up the workforce of the Mount Rainier Forest Reserve* knew that firefighting on this forest was a deadly business. In that year, the great fires of the Wind and Lewis Rivers burned over a vast area of the Forest Reserve, and in the words of Ranger John Schmitz, fire “swept through the timber driven by a strong east wind, and nothing could have stopped it after it got started.” And the rangers, whose job included putting out all fires, didn’t even try. Thirty-eight people died in the Yacolt Fire, hundreds were made homeless, and over 130,000 acres of heavily timbered lands were burned.

By 1910 the staff of the Columbia National Forest had grown to about a dozen men, and firefighting was one of their primary duties. But even though rangers were expected to patrol vast acreages every day, climbing up to high peaks to scan for fires, what they did after they found a fire was still a problem. Telephones were the primary form of long-distance communication, but telephone lines through the forest were few and far between. H. O. Stabler, Columbia National Forest Supervisor from 1908 to 1913, highlights this problem in his annual fire report for 1910:

“I am sure that we all appreciate now the desirability of having a complete telephone system throughout the Forests. The history of the discovery of one fire on the Columbia during the past season is interesting as it affects the telephone question. A fire occurred at the north end of Spirit Lake...at noon of August 16. This fire was seen early in the afternoon of August 16 by three Guards, all of whom reported the fire in the following manner:

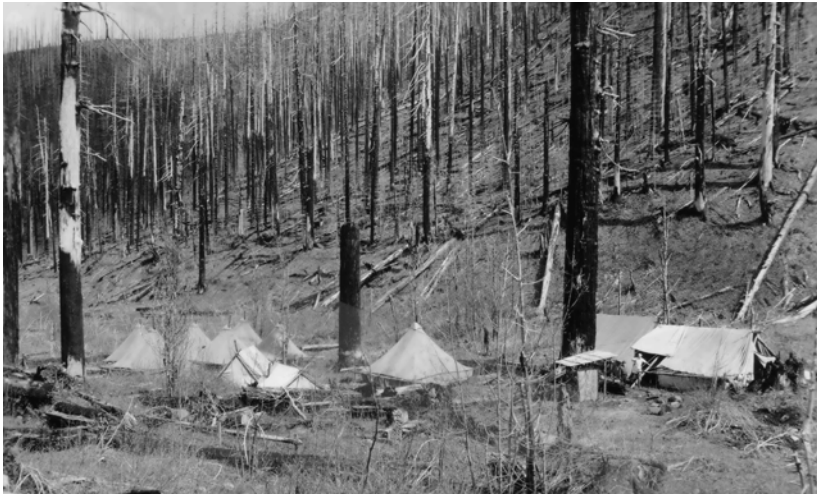
Guard Skaar, located approximately 25 miles from the fire, rode 23 miles in to Guler in order that he might report the fire to the Portland office;

Guard Wetherall, located approximately 30 miles from the fire, rode fifteen miles to the Hemlock Ranger Station to report the fire to the District Ranger;

Guard Lewis, located approximately 26 miles due south of the fire, rode seven miles to the Government Soda Springs in order that he might report the fire by telephone to the District Ranger.”

And then there was the danger of fighting fire in areas that had been previously burned. Stabler described how “Fires in these old burns are a most difficult proposition because to head a fire it would be necessary to cut a fire [line] from 100 to 400 yards in width, and such a course is a physical impossibility where the snags are as numerous as they are...” In fact, so much of the Columbia National Forest had been recently burned that it prompted H. O. Stabler to state in his annual fire report for 1910 that “The term ‘Columbia National Burn,’ is, I regret to say, somewhat applicable...”

(*After the Forest Reserves were transferred to the Department of Agriculture, the initial plan was to call the former Mount Rainier Forest Reserve the St. Helens National Forest, and for a year or two it was Rainier National Forest, but by 1908 they decided on Columbia National Forest. In 1949 it was renamed Gifford Pinchot National Forest, to honor the first chief)



Copper City Camp

Over the next two decades, fires continued to burn repeatedly over the Forest. Several of these were large fires, such as the 60,000 acre Cispus fire in 1918. The firefighting crew included army recruits from Fort Lewis. Ranger John Kirkpatrick described this fire in a diary entry “It is 2 P.M. when I strike the McCoy Creek trail, I eat my lunch here and watch the progress of the fire for more than two hours. It is a fearful sight as it leaps from tree to tree and spreads out in a solid wall of fire 20’ to 40’ high along the side of the Mtn. Causes one to realize more and more the insignificance of the very best human efforts that can be put forth when pitted against the irresistible forces of the natural elements. Man and the best that is in him is of small consequence. . . .”

Many of these fires were reburns within the 1902 Yacolt Burn, including the Sunset Fire in 1919 (5,000 acres), the Clark County Timber Company fire in 1922 (15,000 acres), the Rock Creek Fire in 1927 (46,000 acres), and finally the Dole fire in 1929 (60,000 acres). Firefighting tactics had changed in many ways by 1929, but the Dole fire still proved to be a deadly one.

In 1929 a firefighting crew on the Columbia National Forest might consist of the District Ranger and whatever men he could hire off the streets (or the bars) of Portland, assisted by the remaining permanent workforce of the Forest (which might mean another six men). In September of 1929, Spirit Lake District Ranger Al Wang had hired twenty men from the Portland area to help fight a small fire within the old Yacolt Burn, in the East Fork Lewis River drainage. They set up base camp at a Forest Service Guard Station called Copper City. Wang was met there by Jim Huffman, the Ranger of the adjoining Hemlock District, and a handful of other Forest Service men.



Mount St. Helens Lookout

Wang’s description of their ordeal highlights the problems firefighters faced in 1929, at a time when they still relied on miles of #9 wire strung through the forest for communication with distant lookouts. Wang described how, on September 15, 1929, their crew was sent out to search for spot fires near Silver Star Mountain, but “the atmosphere was extremely smoky and it was not possible to get any definite reports of

what was going on.” The next day a nearby lookout on Gumboot Mountain was finally able to see the fire, and the crew began to head in that direction. But as they approached the fire, the humidity dropped and the east winds began blowing at 50-60 mph. Because the smoke was coming down in dense clouds, they had no idea of where the main fire was nor how fast it was traveling. They recognized the danger, and sought shelter in the only place they could think of - a mine shaft along Copper Creek.

Wang realized they would be burned over, and they attempted to pack food supplies and equipment the quarter mile from their camp to the mine shaft. The smoke and heat made it difficult to even breathe. At 5:30 that evening Jim Huffman, Al Wang and Bob Lambert made the last trip from the mine shaft back to camp for their bedrolls, estimating that the fire was about a mile away.

Al Wang described this last trip: “By the time we got to the camp we noted that spot fires were starting in our vicinity and were spreading very rapidly. We got our beds and started the return trip. This was a race with the fire which was starting spontaneously all around us and seemingly closing in from every direction. The last 100 yards or so was a race for life and we made the tunnel a half minute before the full force of the fire swept over it.”

The men hung blankets at the mouth of the mine shaft, and took turns throwing water over the blankets to keep them from burning. They spent 5 1/2 hours in the cold wet mine shaft, while the worst of the fire burned over them. They emerged at 11:30 that night, but could not travel because of the danger from falling snags. The next day, Wang noted: “The smoke was almost impenetrable and the day would have been totally dark, except that it was lighted sufficiently by blazing snags to enable us to get around without lights.”

The crew had to pack out under very smoky conditions, with blowing ash making breathing even more difficult. Huffman was so weakened at this point that it took him nine hours to hike the seven miles to Yacolt, the nearest road. District Ranger Jim Huffman died within a month, probably from pneumonia brought on by their ordeal.

The last of the “big fires” on the Columbia was the Willard Fire of 1939, and the forest called on Civilian Conservation Corps crews to assist with firefighting. Almost seventy years later, there are few who would remember the “Columbia National Burn”.

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