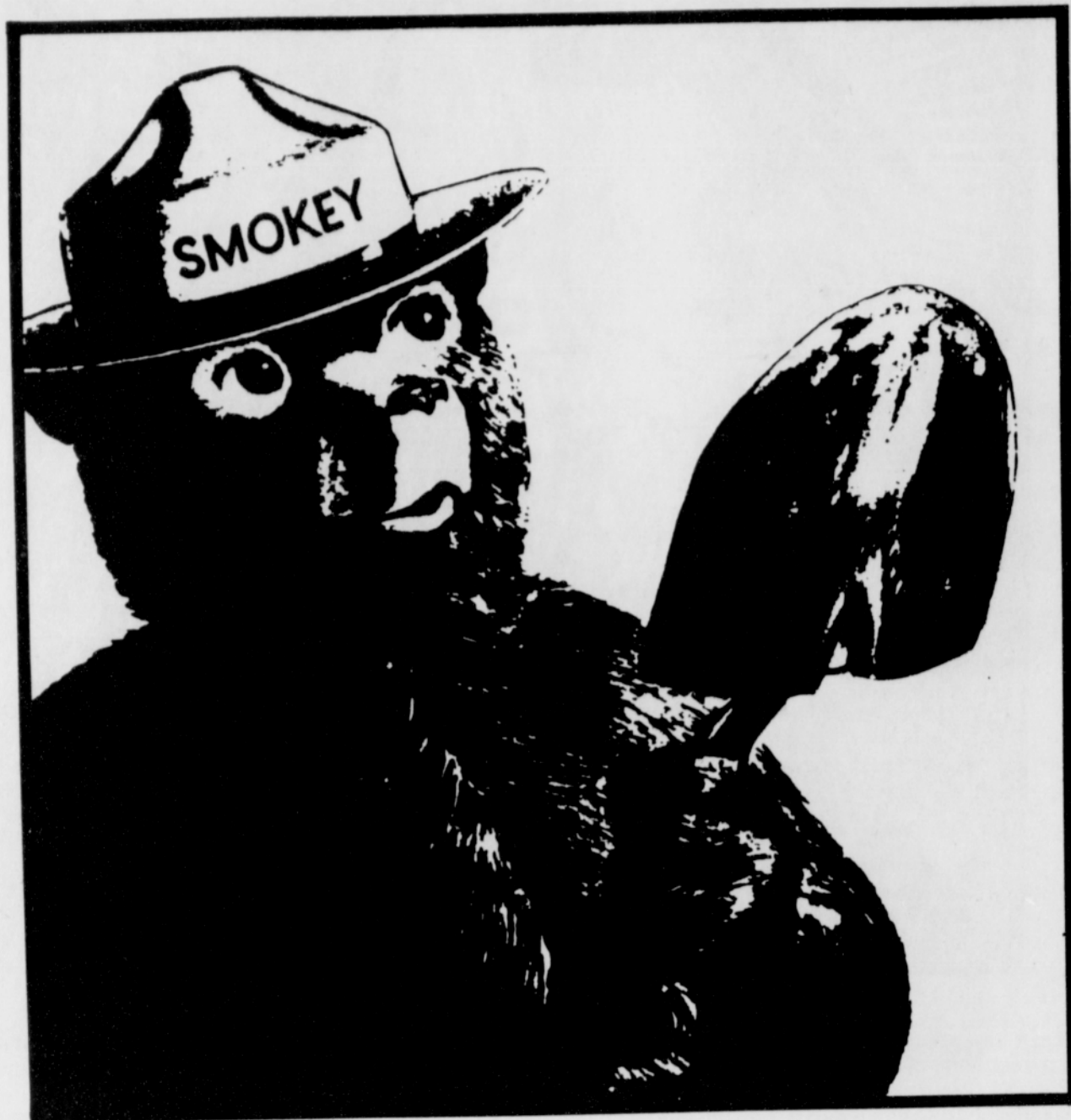


50 CANDLES



USFS

SMOKEY FEELS THE HEAT

BY PHILIP KROHN

Terrifying and little understood, forest fire continues to captivate imaginations and haunt summer campgrounds. If you have ever seen the expanding columns of smoke or heard the unearthly howl of a warning siren emit from the dark reaches of a distant forest, you know what it is to panic. A hot crown fire encouraged by afternoon westerlies can consume nearly everything in its path. It might seem a wonder then that forest ecologists speak so affectionately about fire and its role in a healthy forest and that we would now question the apparent wisdom of Smokey Bear.

For 50 years Smokey Bear has gladhanded America. Calling out from roadside posters in the name of God & Country he has hypnotized us into believing that forest fires are inherently bad, and lulled us into the unconditional trust that our public forests are being managed for the protection of ecological as well as economic values. What Smokey neglected to tell us, however, is that forests are utterly dependent on fire, that long-term fire suppression can lead to cataclysmic forest health problems and that much of the forest we thought was being protected has instead been intensively harvested to the detriment of wildlife, watersheds and long-term timber supply. Smokey Bear may in fact be the best packaged deception in the history of advertising.

But even if Smokey is mucked in unsavory irony and considered a bit of a traitor among his wildlife pals, he will likely remain immune to public retribution or reprisal. After all, it's not really his fault. He is ideally looking out for our best interests. But in trying to keep us from getting burned, he may actually have helped the agency he represents to burn us. Smoke's been found out. And the U.S. Forest Service ought to be scrambling to fortify his campaign with some rhetoric based in science.

As Smokey makes birthday appearances from the World Cup Soccer Tournament to the Pendleton Round Up this summer, you would think his job would be infinitely more complicated than in the past. For years the messenger of a simple soundbite about the evils of fire, Smokey now has the decidedly difficult chore of about-facing and having to explain that fire, though dangerous as ever, is an essential component of a healthy forest. And as a penance for past oversights he may also have to explain that *national wealth* can't always be measured in board feet but rather in the vitality of complex biotic systems of which humans are one dependent part. But so far it's business as usual on the Birthday/Fire campaign trail, a bundle of taxpayers' bread to perpetuate the same illusions.

Philip Krohn is director/publisher of *The Bear Essential*, an environmental newspaper printed in Portland. His article is from the paper's Summer 1994 "Special Fire Issue."

DYING LIKE SQUIRRELS

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Norman Maclean might never have realized how swiftly his posthumously published book, *Young Men & Fire*, would become useful and perhaps necessary to explain the deaths in early July of more than a dozen forest firefighters.

Maclean is more recognized by his very popular book that Robert Redford made into a movie, *A River Runs Through It*. He was, however, obsessed with a 1949 Montana forest fire that killed 11 smokejumpers. He spent years researching and tramping over the killing ground of the August 10 Mann Gulch Fire of 45 years ago, and exhaustively interviewed to enduring friendship the survivors who escaped the terrible deaths of their comrades.

Maclean wrote in *Young Men & Fire*, "Burning to death on a mountainside is dying at least three times...First, considerably ahead of the fire, you reach the verge of death in your boots and your legs; next, as you fall, you sink back in the region of strange gases and blue darts where there is no oxygen and here you die in your lungs; then you sink in prayer into the main fire that consumes you, and if you are Catholic about all that remains of you is your cross."

The men and women who were incinerated in July while fighting a forest fire in Colorado were members of "Hotshot" crews. Being a hotshot in the U.S. Forest Service is equivalent to the hardass, perpetually hardship infantry, and though the media claims hotshots are elite firefighting crews, they are probably still treated like the infantry — if any possessed intelligence none would be either. In the past, at least, hotshots were the dogs of the Forest Service, hardly more classy than prison crews sent out to fight the same fires.

Hotshots battle their enemy with hand weapons just as dogface soldiers; axes, brushhooks, pulaskis, macleods and shovels with which they chop, hack and scrape trails through the burning wilderness. Wildfire is their enemy, inhuman in contrast to soldiers' nemeses. Sinewy, monstrous, incredibly dangerous and threatening, hot as the sun, grasping for fuel and oxygen to remain alive, sucking human lungs dry at the same instant its intense heat evaporates blood and tissue.

Which is what happened to 14 hotshots on a fire in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, working a hotline on a two-bit tree fire that suddenly exploded into a windwhipped inferno and trapped 50 firefighters. Most escaped, though barely. Nine of the 14 dead were from an Oregon hotshot crew, based in Prineville; five men and four women:

John Kelso, Bonnie Holby and Teri Hagen from Prineville; Rob Johnson and Doug Dunbar from Redmond; Levi Brink-

ley from Burns; Kathi Beck from Eugene; Tami Bickett from Powell Butte; and Scott Blecka from Clatskanie.

If it is any consolation, they probably died instantly, consumed as quickly as if a bomb had fallen on them. When each flared like a match, they were already dead from the fire's lungsucking heat bellows, dehydrated crisper than potato chips.

Ten years and five days after the cremations of the smokejumpers in Montana in 1949, 15 members of a luckless Southern California hotshot crew blundered into a box canyon while seeking a tactical advantage over a wildfire. The fire caught them there and everyone of the hotshots died, though the number of dead is disputed. The 11 who died in 1949 are said to be the most deaths of a forest fire crew on a single fire until July. Yet witnesses on other hotshot crews who attempted to rescue the dead hotshots 35 years ago and instead searched for their charred remains, are certain 15 died.

Years later, men who failed to save the doomed hotshots claimed to have heard screams from their enflamed peers. Unless a subliminal empathy of terror connected the dying with their helplessly thwarted rescuers, it was impossible to hear any noise but the roar of the fire, which could be compared with hurricane surf heard from inside a seacave. Pungent human squeals of terror would be unheard.

Past and recent deaths of smokejumpers and hotshots (20 are dead so far this summer) underscore the grim reality that fighting forest fires is incredibly dangerous and is rated the most deadly occupation of government employ with the exception of wartime combat service.

The smokejumpers at Mann Gulch "died like squirrels," Maclean wrote. So did the 15 hotshots in 1959, the 20 killed this summer, and everyone fried out of life on a wildfire. It should not end there, he said, "smoke drifting away and leaving terror without consolation of explanation, and controversy without lasting settlement. Probably most catastrophes end this way without an ending, the dead not even knowing how they died but 'still alertly erect in fear and wonder,' those who loved them forever questioning 'this unnecessary death,' and the rest of us tiring of this inconsolable catastrophe and turning to the next one."

Michael Paul McCusker was a member of the Dalton Hotshots, Mt. Baldy District, Angeles National Forest, USFS, 1959-61.



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