

# Heppner Forest Ranger Tells Firefighting Problems

The following article was written for the Gazette-Times by Victor Kreimeyer, forest ranger of the Heppner Ranger District, Umatilla National Forest, who spent most of the past week directing operations on one of the major Eastern fires. Since writing this he has returned to the scene to direct mop-up operations.

**VICTOR L. KREIMEYER** During the past two weeks headlines, radio and TV broadcasts have been filled with reports on the large fires in Montana, Eastern Washington and Oregon. Millions of Americans about the United States have seen on international TV trips the walls of racing and towering smoke of fires burning on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

As in timber, rangeland, homes and other personal property are now valued in the millions of dollars, not to mention loss of lives and the injury that will cause to many people for years and possibly years to come.

I thought the readers of the Gazette-Times may like an account of one of the major fire fronts although I am a Forest Service man of the Heppner Ranger District as well as a woods and mill crews have been dispatched to and may even be working on many different fronts throughout this area.

It is a report of some of the incidents on the Heppner Creek fire. Many of the newspaper reports have referred to it by name along with the name of the Heppner Ranger District.

Superior selected me to be boss of this 6000 acre fire. The fire had most of its control by the time I arrived; it now controlled it is capable of destruction if not extinguished.

First orders were received July 23rd. At the time the message came through, I was in Dixon Butte lookout observing the tremendous smoke created by the Anthony fire on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, then a fire on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, then a fire on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, then a fire on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

The next four days all seemed to blend into one. Day crews came in as night crews went out. For fire overhead the day started at 4:00 a.m. and quit at 11:00 p.m. Sporadic radio messages and telephone calls came the night through. Only such high lights as another canyon lost to the fire, a heart attack, an evacuation of a man who fell from a rim in the dark night seemed to identify the days. The ever-ready and willing 'copter pilots were like angels of mercy. They airlifted the emergency cases to the hospital. They ferried food and water to tired and thirsty,

There were briefings, plans made, orders placed for men and machines. All night this continued. Just before daylight there was a 30 minute attempt at sleep—most of which was spent in silent contemplation, planning and prayer. Of course there was the usual exchange of greetings of old Forest Service friends not seen for many years; friends made at other fires, training schools or assignments, but over it all rode the feeling of anxiety, stomachs knotted and appetites conspicuously absent in all except the hardest veterans.

By 5 a.m. Sunday morning, I was at the Pomeroy airstrip waiting for a helicopter to take me to the Wenatchee Guard Station already established as the fire headquarters for the Wenatchee Creek fire. With me was a plan to control the fire. It was prepared by those who had seen or been on the fire, who had scouted it from the air; men who had personal acquaintance with country; a plan subject to change as the fire might change.

The 'copters, piloted by Wes Lamatta of Columbia Helicopter Service, landed me within a few feet of the Wenatchee Creek Guard Station. To greet me as I crawled out of the 'copter, was my line boss, Bill Orr, a veteran firefighter from the Willamette National Forest plus an already haggard and tired group of firefighters, Forest Service men and National Guardsmen, who had fought this fire from the beginning but had lost their battle and were forced to retreat, leaving their tools and equipment behind on a ridge that was now surrounded by miles of blackened snags and white ashes.

Although I had not eaten since about 5:30 p.m. the day before, a steak hastily bolted down at Tupper G.S. prior to catching the plane at Big Rock Flat, food was far from my thoughts. There was an organization to get set up and men to be dispatched to different locations to begin the dirty, tiresome job of building and burning out a fire line in an attempt to stop the spread of the fire. In addition to scouting the fire, hundreds of men began to roll into our base camp. These men had to be organized into divisions, sectors and crews. Men to old for the rugged job of building fire line down over rock and rims had to be shuffled into jobs they could handle. Men with oxfords or with hangovers had to be weeded out and returned to the breadlines. The bulk of these men were not woodsmen but men from the breadlines in Portland, Seattle and Spokane.

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hungry men down in the canyons or out on a rocky point where other aircraft or even pack animals could go only with extreme difficulty.

There were spectacular shows by the fire at night as heavily timbered canyons were consumed by fire in a matter of minutes, and yet there was always this hope by the firefighters—"Today's the day. If we can just hold it today, it will burn itself out!" This was the Wenatchee Creek fire, located in Washington on the Pomeroy district a few miles downstream from Troy, Oregon. When I left the fire Saturday morning, the 30th, it was approximately 6000 acres. An accurate map was just being made by the scout. About 450 men had been on the fire at one time. Six cats were busy building and strengthening the fire lines; two helicopters were in use shuttling food, men and supplies. Fixed wing aircraft were used to drop borate, a fire retardant, on hot spots likely to get out of control before firefighters could get lines built and

burned out. There were no casualties on the Wenatchee Creek fire when I left, but there were numerous serious injuries, including a heart attack, a broken back, shock due to burned feet, sunstroke, a collapsed lung and numerous cuts and bruises.

There were many people who helped fight and control this fire who will never receive any thanks from those of us responsible for its control. These are ranchers, their wives and children, who, unknown to us, were on the scene before the organized firefighters arrived. They fought the fire by hand or with farm machinery. They patrolled fire lines at night and carried water in buckets to help put out spot fires that jumped the fire line. Some spent anxious hours as the fire advanced toward their houses and farm buildings. At least one family will return to find their home burned to the ground. These folks deserve your thanks and your sympathy.

Fortunately, conditions favorable for such a catastrophe exist only a few times in a normal

lifetime. Old timers in the Forest Service, whose thinning hair and silvered temples tell of their years of service, remember the middle thirties. The Heppner District still bears the mark of this period. Still older men recall the early 1900's when fires burned uncontrolled until fall rains quenched them and winter snows finally cooled the rocks melted by the intense heat.

1960 will be remembered by a newer generation. A year that saw great forest fires in spite of all the modern methods of firefighting such as smoke jumpers, slurry planes, bulldozers and helicopters.

This is only the middle of the 1960 fire season. The Heppner Ranger District can expect this extremely hazardous condition to exist until the middle of September or the first of October. We can't prevent the electrical storms that triggered the Wenatchee Creek, Cummings Creek or Crooked River fires, but we can certainly prevent fires that may be caused by our carelessness with cigarettes, campfires, faulty spark arrestors etc. We

## Monument News

Monument forestry reports for the month of July, 21 lightning fires and two debris burning fires, one fire is around 1500

can be prepared to meet emergencies as we enjoy our Sunday drive in the woods by carrying a shovel and axe. Thusly prepared, if we see a small fire burning along the road we have a chance of controlling it immediately before it grows into another Wenatchee Creek.

Should this letter be read by those who helped on the Wenatchee Creek fire or by someone who may know one who fought this fire, extend to them my many thanks for their cooperation and valiant efforts.

As for the folks who live adjacent to the Heppner Ranger District, whether it be in Heppner, Spray, Monument or Kinzua, I am confident that if the chips are down, you too will give all your support to prevent or help suppress a possible "Wenatchee Creek" here in our local forested area.

acres, one 3500 acres, one was 255 acres and the rest were from 101 to 3 acres in size. The state fire crew of Monument wishes to thank all who so willingly helped on these fires. Also for the equipment which was so badly needed at the time. The state fire crew here has had no weekend or days off for the past month and a half because of fires. The overtime put in above their normal working days for July was 580 hours, by a seven man crew.

Saint Elmo Lewis passed away July 28 at the John Day hospital. He was born November 26, 1894. Final rites were Monday, Aug 1 at 2 p.m. at the Community church with Rev Phillip Ryan of John Day officiating. Organist was Janice Cork, music by the Community choir. Pallbearers were Bud Engle, Archie Glenger, Clarence Holmes, Verne McCarty, Fred Shank and Owen Smith. Interment was in the Monument cemetery.

Frank Christenson was up from San Jose, California to visit his mother, Mrs Helen Brown. The Owen Smiths and Norris Stubblefields spent Sunday at Spray.

## Lexington News

By DELPHA JONES

Mrs Eidon Padberg entertained one day last week with a bridge party honoring Mrs Lois Hunt on her birthday. Those present were Inez Huffman, May Gilliam of Heppner, Juanita Carmichael, Gena Leonard, Gladys Van Winkle, Lorene Ledbetter and the hostess and honoree, Mrs Hunt and Mrs Padberg. Birthday cake was served.

Mr and Mrs George Hermann, Mr and Mrs Johnnie Ledbetter, and Mr and Mrs Dean Hunt were Hat Rock visitors Sunday.

Mr and Mrs O W Cutsforth were visitors at the river on Sunday.

Mrs Edna Munkers, and Mrs William C VanWinkle were Pendleton visitors one day last week.

Mr and Mrs Steve Sawyer and family of Hobart, Ind were weekend visitors at the W E McMillan ranch. On Sunday they and Mr and Mrs Eugene Sawyer of Pendleton and Mr and Mrs McMillan spent the day at the Cutsforth cabin in the mountains.

Mr and Mrs Newt O'Harra have returned from Portland where they spent several days at the home of their son and family, Mr and Mrs Jack O'Harra. Steven O'Harra returned home with his grandparents for a few days visit.

Mr and Mrs M A Dopplemeier and Mrs Virginia Miller of Portland were visitors at the home of Miss Dona Barnett and Mrs Trina Parker last week.

Mr and Mrs Cecil Jones and children were visitors at Prairie City on Sunday where they were dinner guests at the Byres Dardorf home.

Mrs Bob Davidson and children Herbie, Greg and Anita returned home Sunday from Grandview, Wash where they had gone to visit a daughter and family, Mr and Mrs Vern Viall and infant daughter, Margaret Louise.

Mrs O W Cutsforth and daughter Lisa were Pendleton visitors on Friday of last week.

Hugo Leyva motored to Portland Sunday returning that evening with Butch Eatch. Both boys left on Tuesday for an extended trip to Mexico and way points.

Alice and Judy Wihlon visited their father Armin Wihlon over the weekend from their home in Pasco.

Guests at the Cecil Jones home on Monday night were, Mr and Mrs Steve Sawyer and children Mike and John from Hobart, Indiana, Mr and Mrs Butch Sawyer and children of Pendleton, Mr and Mrs W E McMillan and John Spence and Mr and Mrs O W Cutsforth and daughters. Mr and Mrs Oscar Meracle and family have moved into the Jack Griffin home.

Mike Griffith spent the weekend in Pendleton where he visited with Mike Graves.

Robert Parson in the U S Air Force is visiting his sister, Mrs George Steagall from St Charles, Va. He has been stationed in Texas but is enroute to Alaska where he will be stationed.

Mr and Mrs Serge Covall of Gearhart, Oregon are the proud parents of a son, Thomas Serge, born July 29.

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**2 JARS 45¢**

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**2 CANS 69¢**

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