

# Leaders

## We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



### Interview with Jack Wilson

by Russel Rivera



Jack F. Wilson was born April 2, 1919 in Salt Lake City Utah. He was raised on a west Utah cattle ranch where he had his earliest experiences with fire. "...I started fire fighting when I was about 10 years old on a ranch out in Utah, and I thought that was great, and I got 25 cents for it... I was rich." Jack graduated from high

school in Park City, Utah in 1937. He went on to receive his Bachelor of Science from Brigham Young University in 1942 and shortly thereafter served in the Army Air Corps during World War II from January 1942 until May 1946. Jack began his career with the US Bureau of Land Management in Rawlins, Wyoming in December 1948 as a Range Conservationist. He later moved to Pinedale, Wyoming and was put in charge of that office as Area Manager in 1952. He then moved back to Rawlins as District Manager in early 1954. Mr. Wilson transferred to Burley, Idaho in 1958 as District Manager, and in 1968 moved to Riverside, California where he served as District and Land Office Manager in the California Desert District. He went on to become the Director of the Boise Interagency Fire Center in 1972, there he also served concurrently as the Director of the Department of the Interior, Office of Aircraft Management from 1981 to 1987. Jack returned to the Fire Center in 1988 and retired in 1992. During his career he also received advanced degrees at the University of Utah in Computer Science, The University of Montana in Forestry, and at Pennsylvania State University in Public Administration. Although retired, he continued to work during the fire seasons of 1992, 1994, and 1995 in jobs as needed.

On a cool fall day, we sat down with Jack Wilson to learn more about the man who has been an inspiration to those following in his footsteps. He has served as a leader to the wildland fire service, and has helped usher in a new age of interagency cooperation. Some say that "without Jack Wilson, there would be no NIFC." Always a proponent of interagency cooperation, Jack Wilson's impact on the wildland fire service is seen today at NIFC, in the appropriately named "Jack Wilson Building" where seven federal agencies work together on wildland fire issues.



Jack Wilson

**“Know your people: help 'em, train 'em, support 'em, trust 'em, reward 'em, and if they don't do their job, boot 'em, or at least find something they can do.”**

## When did you come to the Fire Center?

"I came here in 1972...then NIFC was called BIFC, or Boise Interagency Fire Center. I started with BLM when it was pretty small. I started in 1948 at the Rawlins Wyoming District, about four million acres. There were three of us, and our primary job was to manage the natural resources, primarily grazing and wildlife. We also had a sentence on the end of our job descriptions that said 'also fights fire'... so irregardless of what we were doing when we got a fire, we all jumped in the pickup and started fighting fire. I retired in January of '92."

## Do you still follow the fire seasons?"

"I still get the sit report and keep track of what's going on."

## What was your view of the wildland fire service, were there some changes that you feel needed to be made?

"Back then and clear up until the mid seventies we were very much agency oriented. Park Service fought their fires, BLM fought their fires, Forest Service fought their fires. I felt at that time it was kind of ridiculous that we couldn't get together and fight them. One incident that sticks in my mind was a fire on the Burley district at Jordan Flat, and above on the ridge, probably a half mile ahead of us, was the Forest Service boundary. We were down there killing ourselves on BLM land try to fight the fire and it was gettin' away from us. I looked up and on the horizon a whole lot of green...a line of equipment, dozers, men, who wouldn't come down and help us. They wouldn't until it hit the forest boundary; by then it was too big for them to handle."

## What makes you want to follow somebody, or what would make somebody follow you, or a leader?

"I guess what would make me probably want to follow somebody is two or three things: I'd like some assurance they knew what they were doing; I'd probably want to know if they would look out for the well being of all of us; Know what was going and keep track of the dangerous situations, and just generally take care of us." "I would look at experience, knowledge, education, training, past performance, if they showed some wisdom, some enthusiasm for what they were doing."

## Why would other people choose to follow you?

"I'm not one of those stand out 'follow me' wave the flag, 'let's charge' kind of guys. I'm much more conceptual, trying to look more forward to what happens, but

probably more important is, I look for good people. When I find good people I give them a job, and when I give them a job, it's their job. At that point I'm out of the picture. I do keep track of their progress and I am always available to them. I don't tell them how to do it, I tell them as best as I can when I want it, chances are pretty good I have some idea what I want. I basically wanted things to be different, at least be coordinated and cooperative. For instance I could see very early in the game that one of the big problems in the fire management business was fireline communications. Forest Service had their frequencies, state foresters had their frequencies; BLM had their frequencies, all of them had separate frequencies, never the twain shall meet. You're not allowed to cross the frequencies, you could get slapped in the can for doing it. The only way I could communicate with the Forest Service was if I borrowed their radio. So I hired a couple of pretty sharp guys, and just turned them loose. I told them what the problem was and said you've got to be able to do something better. I had no idea what they could do, I had no idea what the band frequency was, but I knew something had to be different. First thing they found out was that even BLM couldn't talk from one part of a mountain down into a hole because they were line of sight radios, so they just simply taped a transmitter and a receiver together and put it on a peak so we could have a repeater and go up and down. Then we had frequencies in the airplanes, Forest Service had a frequency, BLM had a frequency. We got them both in the same airplane so they could listen to one or the other, well it didn't take a pretty sharp radio communications guy to figure out that we could put them both in the same radio, which he did. So we figured from there we could move on to the multi-channel radio, which they did. If we would have had this on 9/11 the New York Police could talk to the New York Fire Department. Then we went on to lighting detection, remote weather stations, satellite communication, satellite infrared, the whole spectrum, which I really didn't know anything about but I had people that I could trust, and I could let them run. My job was to make sure I got the resources for them, the money, travel funds, the head count. I guess I could say the best type characterization I could make of my type leadership is: 'wait for me I'm their leader'. I had great faith and trust, and confidence in people, and when they succeeded I rewarded them.

## Who was your fire role model?

"My fire role models would be... probably the first one, was M.W. "Scoop" March. Scoop was a racehorse type; he also liked to fight fire. Scoop was one that probably built the Idaho fire fighting system long before the BLM or anybody else had one. He thought in terms of engine crews and standby crews, and airplanes long before anybody did."

"Later on... Merle Lowden, Merle was the chief of the Forest Service of Fire and Aviation. He was a quiet guy that could see the same problems that I could see. He helped immensely in getting the Forest Service to move over a little bit and let somebody else be recognized also in the game."

"Hank DeBruin... When I came here the Fire Center had Forest Service BLM and the National Weather Service. He did a lot particularly for the Fire Center. BLM Director Roger Robinson had a national mission. Forest Service was in the same position across the isle was a fire control officer on the Boise National Forest, and in between there was nothing. Hank took his deputy Bob Bjornsen, and put him out here, so Bob and I had a level playing field, that's when things started to happen. So Hank was quite an inspirational guy."

"Russ Penny was another one... he was probably most influential in my career for getting me going."

### Are leaders born or made?

"Well you can be a leader pretty easy, you can be a quarterback and be a leader, you can be a congressional appointee in the patronage system and be a leader, but the problem I see between being a good leader and a not so good leader is, to me any good leader is about half born and about half made. If he doesn't have in his upbringing intellect, values, morals, ethics, integrity, he can never be a leader because he can never generate trust. That's born in you, or brought into you at a very young age. You can be a leader by actual experience, by training. You know the old saying: 'good judgment comes from bad experience'. You can learn to be a good leader. So it goes both ways, but it cuts more heavily towards the first one. I like one that's conceptual, looking ahead, that's thinking what can be done better but also knows his people, respects his people helps his people, looks after his people."

### What are your strengths?

"A can do attitude, discipline, consideration for people, knowledge."

### What are your weaknesses?

I'm not a tub-thumper, I don't want a lot of publicity, I don't want a lot of credit, I want to get the credit for those that earn it.

### Since you started in 1948 what are some of the biggest improvements you've seen in the wildland fire service?

"By far the biggest thing is right here epitomized by the Fire Center... interagency cooperation and coordination. We fight fires together today, we train together today, we

use the same equipment. When I came here, the nozzles and attachments on the BLM's Boise Fire District wouldn't match the Burley Fire District, let alone the Forest Service or CDF. We've made some remarkable improvements technologically, training is far superior, it's coordinated and there's a good system to distribute the training. We have excellent people doing the teaching. And all that came about through interagency cooperation and coordination. That to me is the greatest thing that's happened. Now there are some other things that come to mind: fire line safety, but again that's a two edged sword. I think to acquire that safety we may have leaned too far away from what I would call more aggressive fire suppression tactics. We don't fight fire at night anymore. We don't send smoke chaser crews out to find smoke, we put them in a helicopter. It's a combination of litigation, a combination of safety, and it's a combination of 'if something happens, your' gonna get your butt in a jam.'

### Would you consider those some of the worst changes?

"No, I think they are just changes, it's not the worst change. I think probably the worst changes, and maybe I'm wrong on this one because I've been away from it for 10 years. The worst change is that Line Managers have pretty well built up their fire staffs, and they're no longer interested in what happens to the fire program and the fire people, or at least they pay very little attention to it. Now, there may be some that do. I know Bob Abbey, the State Director in Nevada for BLM, is very much involved in the program. On the other hand I knew a State Director from Colorado that didn't even know how the fire program was funded. Most of them they sit up there and say 'well you come to me and I'll tell you what the standards are, then you go fight the fire.'"

It's the only reason I liked to fight fire, because fire was very straight forward. You knew what your enemy was. You knew you weren't going to get any favoritism, or any quarter. If you made a bum decision you're gonna find it out pretty fast. You knew you were gonna get your performance rated by how you put the fire out. You knew the people working on the ground, and what they were going through how they were living; and what they needed, and I think that ought to be carried on from the line on right up to the top, so they appreciate what it's like.

### Can you describe a few of the toughest decisions and dilemmas you have faced?

"Well I've made lots of good ones and a lot of bad ones, that's a normal part of leadership. You're gonna have to learn how to deal with adversity. You can't let 'em throw you, because tomorrow will be another day. Probably

one of the worst fire decisions I've made was back in 1966. We had been fighting a series of fires up in the Lewiston area, south of Lewiston, Idaho, China Creek and Eagle Creek, they were some nasty fires. They were on state forest land, we were called in to help the state. I was on the overhead team so I did that, we corralled them, and the night we declared them contained we got a phone call from a little place called Coulin up in North Idaho. The state had another fire up there and they wanted us to take a look at it and see if we wanted to take it. So I and a couple of other guys got in the plane and flew over Coulin and found the fire. It was gettin' towards evening and it looked to me like the crews down there pretty well had it corralled. They had line around it, and it looked like there wasn't any problem there so we said 'no we don't think you've got a problem, we're not going to take over it.' Well, little did I know they would go home that night. The next day we had the Sundance Fire. So I'm sure had we gone in that night we probably wouldn't have had the Sundance Fire. That was a bum decision."

### **What helped guide you through some of those good decisions and bad decisions?**

"A lot of us experience, knowledge, understanding of what your options are and what the possibilities are, recognizing your limitations."

### **When did you realize you had a significance influence on people?**

"When did I? I don't know that I ever did. Probably when I found out that good people wanted to work for me."

### **Do you have a handful of lessons learned that you would offer a young leader today?**

"I think the biggest lesson for today is: 'know your people: help 'em, train 'em, support 'em, trust 'em, reward 'em and if they don't do their job, boot 'em, or at least find something they can do. Everybody is not equal, some folks can do things a lot better than others, find out which ones. If a guy's a misfit and can't do a job, find something else for them. Then you might just find one that's no good so don't fool around, dump 'em. Or if you find them doing things they shouldn't do, stealing, passing dope, don't fool around just sack 'em."

### **Have you read any books recently?**

"Yeah, I read all the time, I'm a junk reader so I read everything I can get my hands on. In the fire world of course there's Stephen Pyne's books I've read them all, he's a professor at Arizona State University. The one I'm

reading now is "Guns Germs and Steel" by Jared Diamond.

### **What ideas or projects are you currently working on?**

Now? My garden and my golf, they're both going to pot.

### **How do you go about initiating a new idea in order to put it into practice?**

"The first thing I would do is see if in fact it was a 'new idea'. If I think it has potential, then I'd try to figure out where it would be used, what it would do for us, or what it might hurt. Then I'd find somebody that was interested in it, that wanted to work on it, then turn 'em loose. Back them up and support them, and stay out of their way. I might even give them a general timeline, sometimes you have to put a little pressure on them, although with most good people you don't have to push them, you have to hold them back."

### **Do you think legacy is important?**

"To me it isn't important. I think if you do well, you'll probably be a legend. I always look for something that needs to be done, and do it well. For example after I retired, I worked pro-bono, in the fire retardant operation."

### **So what did you do there?**

"Pumped mud into airplanes, that and helped in the retardant pits mixing the stuff, pumped it in the airplanes, then cleaned them up. In fact in the summer of 94, we set a record for the amount of retardant we pumped out from an Idaho base, it was just under 3 million gallons."

### **Can you think of 2 or 3 major issues facing the wildland fire service today?**

"There's an awful gap, or an artificial barrier between structural fire and wildland fire. I don't know if today wildland firefighters are allowed to enter structures and fight fire in structures. Now some agencies already have that responsibility, Park Service for instance has had that for a long time because they have a structural fire department and a wildland fire department. Most agencies, Forest Service and BLM at least when I was working wouldn't allow wildland firefighters to fight structure fires. And I think the same thing goes the other way, most of your municipal firefighters won't fight wildland fire. Firemen are still pretty provincial."

## Are there any other issues you can think of?

"We've made so many darn good improvements, the budget, fiscal structure is a lot better now than it used to be. The agencies realized that firefighting is not a part time job, and we're starting to get a lot better feel on what we can do in the way of managing fire. For instance up here on the Boise forest they're talking about burning blocks of 10,000 acres. As scorched and tortured as the Boise Forest has been for the last ten years I would think they could burn in corridors. It would accomplish the same thing and you don't have to burn the whole world. Better planning. Equipment, I'm sure there are better things coming down the road now, satellite telemetry, predictive skills, but you've gotta think way out ahead of those things if you're going to realize the benefits."

## Most memorable fires?

"There's two of them in my mind that stand out. The first big fire that BLM ever had was the Wheatland Fire in

eastern Wyoming. Nobody thinks BLM has any timber, but there were 36 inch Ponderosa Pines all through that area. This was in 1954 when a lightning strike in early July started the fire. This was the first time BLM ever had a huge fire. Boy did we learn a lot on that fire. I think it burned about 9,000 acres. It ran over the camp and burnt the camp, but a couple of guys went in there and back fired and saved part of the camp so we didn't lose everything. The second one was the Magic Fire [1966] south of Twin Falls, Idaho. That fire jumped 35,000 acres the first night, killed 600 cattle 1,000 sheep. Thank God we got the herder out. That was a vicious fire, it went to 80,000 acres."

## Do you have any favorite quotes, or words to live by?

"Everybody is important."

This interview with Jack Wilson was conducted by Russel Rivera in Boise, Idaho on September 28, 2004.