

COMPARATIVE RECORD FOR FIRST SIX MONTHS
MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL FORESTS

Cause	1986 No. Fires	N.F. Acres Burned	1987 No. Fires	N.F. Acres Burned
Railroads	15	.....	1	3
Smokers	26	.....	38	277
Campers	34	.....	6	37
Debris Burners.....	156	.....	31	1613
Incendiary	149	.....	92	3102
Lumbering	315	.....	20	1159
Miscellaneous	8	.....	6	179
	703	17,048	194	6361

(OAKLAND-6-9-37-6.000)

FIRE CONTROL NOTES

SEPTEMBER 20, 1937

Forestry cannot restore the American heritage of natural resources if the appalling wastage by fire continues. This publication will serve as a channel through which creative developments in management and technology may flow to and from every worker in the field of forest fire control.

BLACKWATER FIRE ON THE SHOSHONE

DIVISION OF FIRE CONTROL

Washington, D. C.

Preliminary reports in hand as this issue goes to press show that initial action on this lightning fire was alert, prompt and vigorous—quite remarkably so, considering that the Shoshone is rated as a low-danger forest, and doesn't even have lookout stations. The country was high and steep—just below timber line. In spots the lodgepole and fir were dense and limby—the familiar patches of rather scrubby jungle found on the better sites at high elevations. There were steep slopes covered with dense but not jungly stands—just the setting for wind-driven crown fires of intense heat. Pictures of the area show bare ridge tops and open places here and there. Fuel on the ground seems to have been quite light—as would be normal under such conditions. One would guess that the fuel experts would rate the area at “Low rate of spread” and “Low resistance to control.” But when the “heavy” wind started sweeping this way and that on Saturday, August 21, fifteen men lost their lives. Six of these died from their burns after the blow-up.

The danger from such accidents probably is statistically less than the danger from automobile accidents, which is so familiar we largely ignore it. But such fire accidents do happen and impress us all the more because of their infrequency. This is the largest loss of life from a single National Forest fire since 1910. It is the irony of fate that it had to occur on a National Forest which, so far as can be determined from the records here, has had only one other large fire during its whole history. The latest reports on size of this fire put it at 1,100 acres.

To the men who died in this disaster, all fire control men everywhere pay tribute. To the bereaved families they extend the deepest sympathy. To the survivors, and particularly the exceptionally large number of in-

jured men, is extended appreciation and cordial concern from all those engaged in the high adventure of protecting American forests from devastation by fire.

District Ranger Post's statement is published as an authentic case record of the processes of judgment in such situations where a man must think first and think clearly about the safety of the men in his crew. His words will recall to all experienced men many days of harassed effort to get the line ahead and the fire mopped up before something happened—but always with a running accompaniment of a plan (sometimes unconscious) for the best way to safety for the crew if something went wrong.

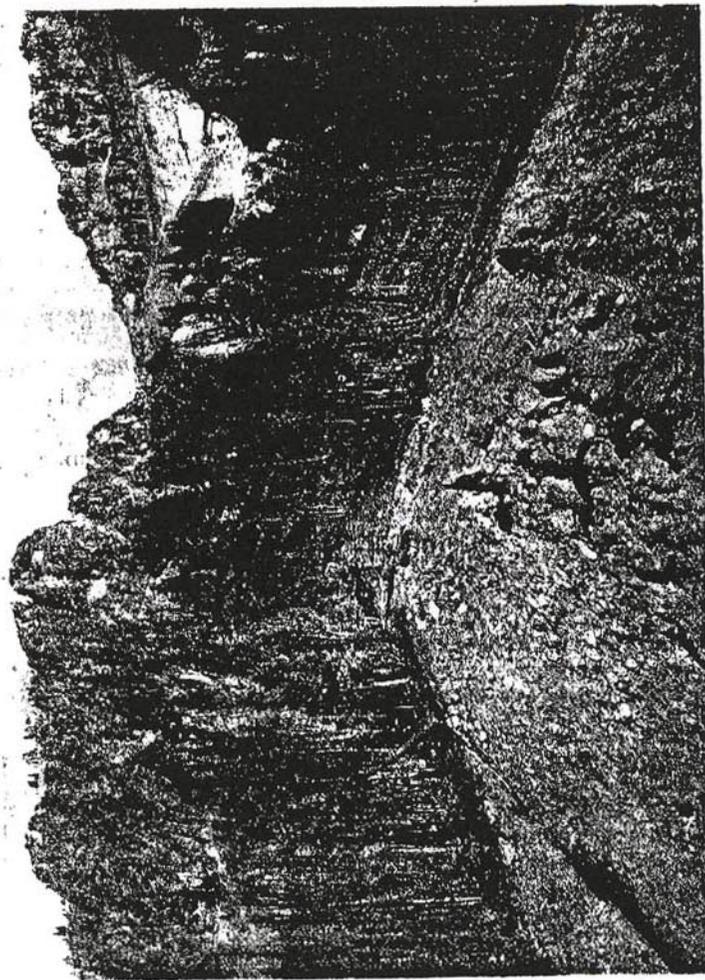
His statement is also a technical case history of the handling of men in such crises. His record could be followed better with the aid of a map, but even without it much can be gleaned from the story.

As a record of unassuming heroic conduct the statement needs no comment. It was dictated straightaway in the presence of D. P. Godwin, with no rehashing or editing except the correction of the spelling of one name and the insertion of the name of Bert Sullivan in one place. Post has some bad burns, and both hands and both sides of his face are heavily bandaged. He is out of danger, but will bear scars.

Junior Forester Tyrrell of Ranger Post's party died later from his burns. In speaking of him in his signed statement, Enrollee Alcario Serros says:

"Then we saw that we didn't have no chance to go back, so Ranger Post told Mr. Tyrrell to take care of us, and he took us up to the rim rock. The fire started from the east, and then south, and then the west. It was the west fire that burned us. As the fire came closer to us we layed down on the rock ridge. Mr. Tyrrell layed on top of me. When the fire burned Mr. Tyrrell he ran and I ran, too, about 10 feet."

District Ranger Clayton, whose message Ranger Post received, died with six of his men. A seventh got out, but died from his burns.



When cut off from the safety sought to the east above timber line in the picture, Post and forty men who followed his instructions survived by taking what shelter they could, first on the left (north) side, then the right side of this bare spot in a ridge. Junior Forester Tyrrell died later from burns inflicted by the flames and heat which swept over them.

STATEMENT BY RANGER URBAN J. POST

I was in camp at the Road Maintenance Camp on Granite Creek, Shell District, Bighorn National Forest when I received a telephone message through a summer home permittee at 12:30 a.m. Saturday morning, August 21, to the effect that Mr. Conner had ordered me to report to the Supervisor on the Shoshone Forest for fire duty. I left camp in a pick-up with an outfit probably not later than 12:40 or 12:45 and arrived in Cody at the Supervisor's Office at 4:30 a.m. Mr. Anderson and Mr. Marion were in the office on fire duty and it was there I learned that I was to have charge of a group of men coming from the Bighorn.

We talked the situation over and decided that there was nothing to be gained by my going into the fire area ahead of this crew, so it was decided that I would take the necessary tools from the fire stock at the Cody Warehouse, drive on as far as trucks were permitted to go towards the fire and await the arrival of the men. This was done and I arrived at the end of the truck road on Blackwater Creek approximately 9 a.m.

There was some delay in the men getting there and I believe it was 11:20 or 11:25 a.m. when the crews from the Bighorn arrived at the end of the truck road on Blackwater Creek. During the interval between 9 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. all preparations were made to handle the crew after their arrival, tools were laid out where they were readily accessible, the Army was requested to prepare food so that the men could be fed before they started up the trail and our men from the Bighorn were fed as near as I remember at Noon, 12:00 a.m. As soon as any reasonable number of men had finished their meal, I left orders with the Foremen, Tyrrell and James Saban accompanying the men as to the tools to be taken and other preparations to be made.

James Saban arrived with the last truck load and was instructed to bring up the rear of the party and see that all the stragglers arrived on the job. At approximately 12:20 the head of the party moved up Blackwater Creek from the end of the truck road toward the scene of the fire. We continued right on up past the Upper Camp. At approximately 1:30 the head of the column arrived at the burn of Friday the 20th on the main Blackwater Creek. There we met Supervisor Sieker who outlined the action of the day before as nearly as possible, the conditions existing on the fire at that time, the length of time and condition of men who were already on the fire line, and I was instructed to proceed to the east with my party. We followed the edge of the fire with instructions to pick up all Cody Camp men who were on patrol, turn them over to their Foreman and send them in for

rest. Likewise, I was to contact the Foreman of the Park Service men and instruct him to the patrol line already built. We were to go beyond the line constructed which included line constructed by the BPR Party, who were east of the Park Service crew and start construction beyond this point.

Mr. Sieker informed me that the Basin to the east was the only bad place left, that the other portions were fairly well caught up, that he was very tired from his work of the day and night before, and that he would turn over the job in the Basin to me and he felt that he would have no worry. He told me that there had not been much line constructed to his knowledge in the Basin and that after that part of the line was controlled, he was sure that the whole fire would be managed. In fact, our conversation led me to believe that there was no more than ordinary fire duty and so as far as he was aware, no extraordinary danger existed.

At that time he asked me how long our crew would be able to take the work. I replied that if he would see that lunches were brought to us some time during the night that I saw no reason why our crew could not function through the night provided we were relieved during the following morning. Mr. Sieker expressed his satisfaction of this arrangement.

About this time Ranger Clayton arrived on the scene and I met him for the first time. We had a very brief visit because we were quite anxious to get on the job. I was concerned at the present time particularly with seeing that the Foremen understood that all water bags, canteens, and back pack pumps should be filled before leaving Blackwater Creek because the information available at that time did not indicate that water was available in the area into which we were going. Men with back pack pumps were ordered to only half fill the cans because of the stiff climb ahead. The party left Blackwater Creek with myself and Paul Tyrrell in the lead, James Saban was to bring up the rear and we proceeded southeast up an open ridge along the fire of the day before. At about one mile distance we contacted the Park Service crew. Arrangements were made with Mr. Wolcott (Park Service CCC Superintendent) to patrol the line that he had built and send men back to the line being patrolled by men relieved out of the Cody Camp. One spot fire about 35 feet in diameter was passed and we stopped to caution the leader in charge of the men there to get up and do a little work on that spot fire rather than sit and watch it because there were a good many burning stumps in the area. This spot fire was directly opposite the almost dead burn of the day before.

After passing Mr. Wolcott's crew, we proceeded for some distance and were able at various times to observe almost the entire Basin into which we were going. Particular attention was paid to the evidence of spot fires

below the line for future reference after the crew had started to work. At that time no spot fires were seen below the fire line and beyond that portion of the line patrolled by the Park Service men. The fire in general was very quiet and gave every indication that the job of control would be very simple and could be accomplished within a short time. Proceeding on along the fire line, we contacted men of the BPR crew. These men had constructed a remarkably good piece of work, good wide clearing, a very clean trench and were working very rapidly. I stopped a minute with them and told them my plans and that I would come back and contact them later.

We started dropping CCC men for line construction a short distance beyond the BPR crew. I would say not over 200 feet from the beginning of our line construction, we crossed a rocky draw with a small trickle of water. This draw was running northwest. One man was detailed to remain in this draw and build a dam 2 feet high to impound water for back pack pumps and he was to follow up the line as soon as he completed the job. From this point ascending the bank on the opposite slope, we were able to go in a southeasterly direction very near the top of a small ridge through very scattered timber free of duff and down logs. There was very little brush. In fact, fire line construction was very simple at this point. The main fire was only a few feet away to our right. This opening was followed until we reached fires which made it necessary for us to go almost at right angles to that line. Dropping down and crossing another draw which afforded the same conditions on the opposite bank as the first draw. Water was also noted in this second draw, a few feet below where our line crossed it and under a small ridge. I remember calling Tyrrell's attention to this water and remarking how fortunate we were to have water available that far from any pack horses.

This second draw was getting close to timber line and had evidence of either heavy run-off or cloud bursts or water spouts running down. It was within an average of 4 or 5 feet deep and 6 feet wide, and was absolutely swept clean of all inflammable material. This was running in a northwest and southeast direction. I called Tyrrell's attention to the condition of this draw and told him that part of our fire line was already built, that we would use this draw up the country until we had to leave it to corral any fire to the left of it. It was only a few feet to the left of where the fire was burning. At this point the fire was still in the condition that we first noted, no top fires, very little smoke and activity, although there were a number of large spots of trees still unburned, within the main fire. The fire was barely creeping down hill. Our fire line was mostly within a few feet of the blaze. However, we were taking advantage of natural fire breaks in order to complete our line as quickly as possible.

Spot fires to the northeast of the burned over ground made it necessary for the construction of fire trench almost at right angles to the line of the draw, proceeding toward the timber line. Up until this time no wind was in evidence. Almost like a shot out of a gun, there was a heavy wind. It swept through the area in as near as I can determine a northeasterly direction, this carried sparks over the constructed line and below us. I heard a fire roar to the northwest and it appeared to be a considerable distance away. I called to Tyrrell and told him that something was going wrong and that I was going to investigate.

I ran for some distance to the northwest and climbed a rocky point and saw below me a spot fire of considerable size burning to the northeast and around a ridge to the north of us. My impression was that this fire should be immediately taken care of and possibly abandon work on our line in order to do it.

I turned to summon help for this job when there was a decided change in the wind again and the spot fire was swept into the southwest directly into the line of men on line construction. In a few seconds numerous fires appeared below the line at the point where the BPR crew in charge of Bert Sullivan were working and where the water mentioned above was noted. Almost at once it was clearly evident that further attempts at line construction in that area was out of the question. I sent out a call for all men to abandon their work and proceed to the ridge to the northeast. This was approximately three o'clock, P.M.

I then ran down toward the men, found Tyrrell, told him to pass the word both ways, up and down the line, for the men to come onto the ridge. At this time a messenger, David B. Thompson, assistant leader, Tensleep Company, arrived with the following note: "Post, We are on the ridge in back of you and I am going down to the spot in the 'hole.' It looks like it can carry on over the ridge east and north of you. If you can send any men, please do so, since there are only eight of us. Clayton."

Since we were trying to retreat with the whole company, and it was in my judgment certain death for a man to return to the west, this request was not complied with. It was very evident that at the time Clayton wrote this note the wind had not risen and that if he had started to the spot fire mentioned, he would have been down in the canyon, out of sight of the fire and could not have known the exact conditions that followed.

After sending Tyrrell to warn the men, I climbed the ridge to the northeast to where I could observe the spot fire more closely. It seemed to take a long time for the men to straggle up the hill out of the canyon. My recol-

lection is that the BPR party was among the first to reach the bare ridge and in the discussion with Mr. Sullivan, we agreed that provided the crew got out in the next few minutes to where we were, that it would be an easy matter for us to retreat down the ridge to the northwest and just north of the spot fire that was doing the damage and get beyond all fire without any question.

We walked the ridge and called and tried to impress upon the boys the seriousness of the situation and their need for haste. By the time Mr. Tyrrell reported all the men out of the hole that he was able to get any trace of or notify, the wind had changed several times. Spot fires were in evidence north of the ridge we were on. The main fire was traveling in a northeasterly direction toward timber line. All possible chance of escape was cut off to the north and west. The area in the vicinity of the water hole was all ablaze, and consulting Mr. Tyrrell, BPR leader, and Bert Sullivan, we agreed that our only possible chance of escape lay in the direction of the timber line. We immediately ordered all men to drop all heavy tools, back pack pumps, and carry only lanterns, the light lady shovels, and Pulaski tools, and make all possible speed up the ridge in a southeasterly direction to the timberline.

When we reached the last park, almost at timber line, the fire had entered the short neck of timber between us and timber line. In traveling up the ridge toward timber line, Mr. Sullivan and the men of the BPR took the lead. Mr. Tyrrell and myself were in the rear of the column, urging the boys on. Sullivan was requested to size up the situation as he went and try by all means to get above timber line. When we reached the park below timber line and found we were cut off, the men were nearly exhausted from the climb out of the canyon. At this time the canyon to the north was still open to us but there was an abrupt drop from the top of the ridge for a distance that could not be determined on account of the cover. We could see a large open rock slide to our northeast and a possible exit above timberline through a gap but after an examination of the crew, it was decided against taking a chance on going into that hole on the assumption that a spot fire might show up and that we had no means of knowing about and possibly make a trap.

We were able to gain a few minutes' rest on this rock ridge, or open park, before the timber to the south crowned. By climbing down the steep north slope of the ridge we were afforded fairly good protection from this crown fire from the south with the exception of sparks dropping and setting fire to our clothes. The boys showed considerable restlessness at this time and we were continually warning them to lie still, not disturb any

rocks that would roll on anyone and make him lose his footing, and to watch each other's clothes for fire.

This blast produced spot fires in the canyon just mentioned, to the north of us, which showed us that our judgment was right in staying out of that trap. Sullivan and Tyrrell and myself crawled to the top of the ridge and all agreed that that crown fire was possibly the thing that was going to save us because if the wind held in its present direction and didn't sweep around in the canyon to the north that that first burn would be cool enough for us to retreat into when the other would let go. As soon as we were convinced that the smoke from this fire was not dense enough to cause trouble with breathing, we moved the men from the north side of the ridge over the south side, explaining to them what was likely to happen and what they should do when it did happen. We cautioned them and we told them that we might have a pretty tough time but if we stood a chance anywhere in the country it was there and regardless of what happened they were to stand hitched and lie flat on the ground. It was emphasized that they would have no hope of reaching safety through the burn and apparently they agreed. But a very few minutes elapsed between our move and the crowning of timber to the northwest, down to the ridge and in the canyon to the north. The park was swept by a sheet of flame and I have no way of estimating its duration. Nearly all the boys grew panicky and instead of lying down as instructed, a good many of them stood up and ran to the edge of the park, turned and came back. Some of the boys did not listen to any orders, instructions or cautioning and were insistent upon standing up and saying their prayers.

BPR men, especially Bert Sullivan, were of great value in aiding with the managing of these men and keeping them controlled as much as they did. After the first blast of flame swept the park I do not believe there were over one more short interval that we endured flames. For a considerable period the smoke was so dense that it was very doubtful if some of the men would survive and by this time though, we had convinced them that their only chance was to keep their noses to the ground. The wind was shifting so often that we were soon able to get fresh air at regular intervals and the danger was somewhat lessened. In perhaps an hour the smoke had lifted until we were quite safe from that source and in taking stock of our injuries and conditions generally it was noted that at least one BPR man was missing and one CCC crew leader. There was no way of knowing which way they had gone and it was folly to my mind to search for them in the blaze. We kept this information to ourselves because we thought if the boys learned of it they might grow more unmanageable.

For perhaps an hour after we received our burns the big job was to hold the crew in this park. They were assured that all possible help would be forthcoming as soon as the burn-over cooled, that they could be sure that as soon as we could get through the burn in reasonable safety, some of us would go for help.

Mr. Tyrrell was so badly burned that he was no longer of any help. He was told to lie still and stay on the ground. At sundown, I took Mr. Sullivan and one or two of the BPR men who did not seem to be burned badly and we proceeded slowly down to the fire to try to determine if it was possible to make the trip. After getting into the burn a short distance we found that the ground was quite cool at that point due to its not having any great amount of duff to burn.

We could hear someone calling off in the direction of the fire line we had attempted to construct. We could not get any intelligent answer so concluded that someone must be in danger and that if he was in a condition to enable him to call that surely the smoke was not bad enough but what we could manage. I then sent Mr. Sullivan back with instructions to hold these men on the ridge, light the lanterns when dark came and answer any call that he might hear. The other man, whose name I did not learn, proceeded with me in the direction of the call in the fire burn. We were very near the line when we found a boy lying on his back, badly burned, calling for help and wanting water. We knew that we were within a short distance of the water that we had passed on the way in and the BPR man had a water bag with him so he was left to get some water and do what he could for this boy. I showed him the general direction that I intended to take through the burn and told him that I was going for help. I went only a short distance when I met Assistant Supervisor Kreuger on his way in. I briefly outlined the condition of the men and what was needed to get them out and he replied that he would go back with me through the burn and get help.

After meeting Kreuger we had traveled only a short distance to the west when we observed a pile of bodies in a small draw. We stopped for a brief pause and thought we could count 7. There were back pack pumps with these men. (This is presumed to be the water course where the dam was built on the way into the fire.) Kreuger and I ran through the burn west to the open ridge along side the burn of Friday and went down the trail leading into Blackwater Creek. About a quarter of a mile before reaching Blackwater Creek we met Supervisor Sieker with a party of boys, carrying bedding and lunches on the way in. Supervisor Sieker was clearly relieved when he learned that there were forty or so men on the peak.

I briefly told him the condition of the men and that I thought possibly all except three or four could walk out. I was sure that Foreman Tyrrell and one or two others would have to be brought out on stretchers. Supervisor Sieker told me that they had arranged for doctors, medicine and medical help to be sent in and from the looks of this party and their equipment I would say that he had done a very excellent job of preparing for an emergency that he was not even informed of. He instructed me to continue on to Blackwater Creek where an Army Doctor was available to treat my burns.

To the best of my recollection, one BPR man and one CCC crew leader ran out through the fire from the park. The leader I saw in the F-24 hospital in the ward on Sunday morning. This boy told me that he was the one who broke and ran when the fire hit us.

U. J. Post,
District Forest Ranger.

August 27, 1937.