

THE BLACKWATER FIRE

A shattered alpine fir tree stands on the side of a hill perhaps 30 or 40 yards above Blackwater Creek on the Shoshone National Forest. There is good reason to believe that this tree was struck during a thunder storm on August 18 and that smouldering fire, creeping out from the base of this tree, was fanned into flame on the dry, hot afternoon of August 20 and, taking to the treetops, resulted in the tragic Blackwater fire which on Saturday, August 21, caused the death of 15 fire fighters and the injury of 36 others, and burned over approximately 1700 acres of Forest land. Smoke was first reported from Pahaska Tepee at 3:35 p.m. on Friday, August 20, to District Ranger Fifield at the Wapiti Ranger Station. Checking with other cooperators on the North Fork, the Ranger finally determined that the location of the fire was on Blackwater Creek. By 4 o'clock he had started men from the nearby CCC camp and was on his way.

About the same time the smoke was seen by Assistant Forest Supervisor Krueger who had taken to the air with Pilot Bill Monday of Cody to scout a fire which had been reported in the upper Sunlight Basin. At the time the smoke from the Blackwater fire was seen by Krueger, the column was moving straight up with little wind, and the fire appeared to have burned over only a couple of acres.

By the time Ranger Fifield reached the fire the wind had whipped it up and it was covering acreage swiftly. The CCC crews from the Wapiti Camp F-24 arrived, additional men and gasoline fire pumps were sent for, and a fire line was started around the lower side of the fire and out on each flank. The fire was headed toward Coxcomb Peak in an almost pure stand of Douglas fir, and it was especially desired to prevent it from branching off to the westward into a heavily-timbered basin, one of the branches of Blackwater, and also from burning back down the creek to the northward. Forest Supervisor Sieker arrived at the fire, after an 86-mile trip from Sunlight, about 8 o'clock that evening, having learned from Krueger's airplane reconnaissance that the fire on the Blackwater promised to be far more serious than the one in the upper Sunlight Basin. After consulting with Ranger Fifield, Supervisor Sieker laid plans for getting additional men and equipment to the fire that night to make a 150-man attack on it in the early morning. He estimated that the fire would then amount to about 200 acres, that it would not spread much during the night, and that there would be about 400 to 450 chains of fire line to be constructed. On the fire that night were between 60 and 70 men from the Wapiti CCC Camp and a few volunteers. Action was taken during the night to call men from the Tensleep CCC Camp F-35, the Yellowstone National Park CCC Camp YNP-3, and from other sources. Superintendent Rogers of the Yellowstone had a 50-man crew from the Park, fully equipped even to beds and rations, at the fire by 2:30 a.m. on August 21, so that by daybreak there were 120 men actually working on the fire. These men continued to push the line up the drainage toward the divide on either flank of the fire. The pumps were used at the creek near the origin of the fire to wet down and extinguish hot spots which might result in a flare-up and the spreading of the fire.

The Forest Service office at Cody was kept open all night and the Supervisor was in communication with it by telephone from Blackwater Lodge or the Wapiti CCC Camp, arranging for men and supplies. Supervisor Conner of the Bighorn Forest got word to the Tensleep CCC Camp by sending a messenger from the Worland CCC Camp after it was found impossible to reach the Tensleep outfit by telephone owing to the lateness of the hour. He also got word to Ranger Urban J. Post, who was at the time at a road camp on the Bighorn, by telephone and messenger. Post, starting shortly after midnight, reached Cody at 4:30 in the morning and made preparations to take out the Tensleep crews as soon as they arrived. This crew started promptly upon receipt of the call, but owing to the long distance to be traveled did not arrive at the fire camp on the Blackwater until about 11 a.m. About the same time another crew of 50 men arrived from the Deaver CCC Camp BR-7. In the meantime, the Bureau of Public Roads maintenance crew and engineering party of 9 men arrived at the fire and went to work extending the line up a rocky ridge on the north and east side of the fire and down into a basin northeast of the branch of Blackwater in which the fire had burned the afternoon before. Unfortunately, the fire had spread with unexpected rapidity during the night and covered a greater area by Saturday forenoon than had been anticipated. It had broken over this rocky ridge, which has been given the name of Trail Ridge, and was creeping slowly downhill. In addition to the largest body of fire to the northeast of the ridge, there were two, possibly more, spot fires down in the basin around which it was necessary to build lines.

On the afternoon of Friday, August 20, about the time the fire began to spread from its point of origin, the humidity reading at a fire weather station recently established at the Wapiti CCC Camp, which is about three miles airline from the point of origin of the fire, was 16 percent and the temperature 85°. Evidently the humidity remained low that night and there was enough wind to keep the fire crowning and spreading all through the night.

At noon on Saturday Assistant Supervisor Krueger made an airplane reconnaissance of the fire, returned to the Cody office at 1:30 and then proceeded to the fire with the intention of relieving Ranger Fifield. Ranger Alfred G. Clayton, of the South Fork district of the Shoshone National Forest, had arrived at the fire camp about noon, when it was planned by the Supervisor to turn the fire over to Clayton and Krueger to permit himself and Fifield to secure some rest. At the time Krueger made his air reconnaissance the fire was quite hot on the steep, Douglas fir covered slope above the line which was being constructed northeastward from the Trail Ridge and had spotted over into the headwaters of Blind Creek on the Elk Fork drainage. The fire was not, however, making much progress at the time and the wind was quiet.

About 1:30 p.m. the 50 fresh men from the Deaver CCC Camp under Foreman Sanzenbacher were sent up the west flank of the fire to advance the line, leaving Foreman Stanton and his 25 men of the National Park CCC crew, who had been on the fire for some hours, to hold the line already built on that side. Ranger Post with the 51 men from the Tensleep CCC Camp, assisted by Foremen Saban and Tyrrell, were sent up Trail Ridge with instructions to relieve the men of the Wapiti CCC Camp, who had been working all night under Foreman Glenn Hill, and send them back to camp for rest, and to leave the 25 men of the National Park crew, under Project Superintendent Wolcott, to hold the line already constructed on this side and mop up the fire inside of it. Post's crew was to go on beyond the Bureau of Public Roads men, advancing the

line on the downhill side of the main fire and taking care of any spot fires that might start up. Ranger Clayton was put in charge of this entire advance sector extending east and north from Trail Ridge, leaving Ranger Fifield in charge of the rest of the constructed fire line all the way around to the point of origin and up the west side. This line had already been pretty well mopped up and it was just a case of holding it. Clayton and Post were picked for the advance work because of their long fire fighting experience, Clayton having handled fires both small and large during his many years of service on the neighboring Washakie National Forest and Post, in addition to his experience on other Forests, having assisted in the fighting of the 14,000-acre Crandall Creek fire which occurred on the Shoshone in 1935. Post took his crew up the steep Trail Ridge and into the line, going ahead with Foreman Tyrrell and leaving Foreman Saban (a former Forest Ranger with much experience in fire fighting) to bring up the rear with a group of enrollees carrying back pack hand pumps. On the way in on the new fire line they passed Earl Davis' Bureau of Public Roads crew, which was working under the guidance of Bert Sullivan, a designated fire cooperater of the Forest Service who had had experience in fighting fires over a long period of years. Post found that this crew had built some excellent line close to the fire, which was creeping slowly down the hill, and he went on ahead and strung his crew of Tensleep CCC's along the edge of the fire to continue the line.

Post's men actually got to work on the line about 3:15 p.m. At this time Ranger Clayton, who had come up behind the crew looking over the line, was in a rather open park in the timber along the constructed fire line, discussing the situation with Foreman Saban and Junior Assistant to Technician Hale of the Wapiti CCC Camp, who had been sent up to help out with the Tensleep crew. A number of the Tensleep enrollees had been left behind with Hale to help on the mop-up to the west of this park and along the Trail Ridge. With Clayton, Saban, and Hale were 5 or 6 enrollees. Clayton was interested in a smoke which had begun to show below the constructed fire line and he evidently felt that this spot fire might spread if the wind should arise and go over or around Post's crew, which was ahead of him. He and Saban prepared a note which Clayton wrote and sent forward to Post by Assistant Leader David Thompson of the Tensleep company. This note informed Post that Clayton and the men with him were going to attack this spot fire in the "hole" and requested that additional men be sent back to help since "there are only 8 of us here." Thompson, bearing the note, proceeded along the fire line, but by the time he had reached Ranger Post and delivered the message, Post, who had been out on an open point, had evidently seen the same spot fire that gave Clayton concern and had planned to attack it himself.

Suddenly the wind came up, shortly reaching gale proportions, and changing direction frequently. Post immediately began calling out the crews and starting them toward a rocky ridge up in the direction of timber line. This radical change in the situation came with extreme suddenness, since it is known to have occurred within 20 or 30 minutes after Clayton had dispatched his note to Post. At that time Clayton evidently was not concerned about danger but solely interested in attacking the fire. Both he and Post had had the entire basin under observation during the trip up the Trail Ridge and apparently had seen nothing to interfere with their plan of attack on the fire. To Post, as he went into the timber to advance the fire line, it appeared that he had a short and relatively easy job ahead to take the fire line out to the rocky ridge northeast and keep the fire out of the next draw

to the eastward and from spreading into June Creek. Ranger Clayton, after the messenger left, presumably went downhill to scout the fire which he was planning to attack, and the enrollees with him, who were equipped with back pack hand pumps, went into a gulch through which flowed a very small stream of water to complete the filling of their back packs; possibly they had already emptied them and had come back for additional water. At any rate, 7 men, Ranger Clayton, Foreman Saban, Junior Assistant to Technician Hale, and Enrollees Gerdes, Griffith, Mayabb, and Rodgers of the Tensleep Camp, were trapped, presumably about 3:45, in this gulch. An additional enrollee, Bevens, was trapped and burned so that he died later in the hospital at a point 50 feet or so from the gulch. The gulch where this tragedy occurred was only about 1200 feet from the open Trail Ridge. Since the fire this distance has been covered in 7 minutes' walk, and no doubt could have been covered much more quickly by men trying to escape a fire. This is additional evidence of the suddenness and unexpectedness of the catastrophe.

Ranger Post, with Foreman Tyrrell, Bert Sullivan, and the other Bureau of Public Roads men, gathered in the CCC enrollees and pressed up the slope to get as far as possible toward timber line before the advancing fire. They reached a point which appeared to be relatively safe, but the fire soon swept over it, coming first from one side and then the other. All of the men, 45 in number, received burns of varying severity. It was difficult to keep them lying down since the rocks themselves became very hot and the natural tendency was to get up and run in a panic. The efforts of the foremen were directed toward keeping the men herded together in the safest possible place and down flat under the shelter of rocks and on the ground. The heat was so intense that exposed flesh turned red and burned deeply without actual contact with flame. Clothing caught fire repeatedly and some was burned off, leaving men's skin exposed. Five men, Lea and Enrollees Allen, Scelke, Sherry, and Patzke, left the crew, preferring to take a chance on running through the fire and back into the burn. Of these 5 only one, Patzke, survived, and he was very badly burned. Of the 40 who remained with the Ranger, 3, Foreman Tyrrell and Enrollees Whitlock and Garza, were so badly injured that they died later in the hospital. Thus there was a 92 percent survival of those who stayed together, as against a 20 percent survival of those who broke away.

During these tragic events, Supervisor Sieker, going down the trail to the fire camp, met Assistant Supervisor Krueger coming in to relieve Ranger Fifield. Sieker saw the increasing smoke, which indicated that the fire had blown up, and hastened down to the telephone at Blackwater Lodge to call for 150 more men. Krueger hurried to the fire and Sieker went back. As the situation appeared to get more and more serious, Fifield stayed on the line also. Men along the Trail Ridge sector were called out to safe places on the open ridge and attempts were made by shouting to contact Clayton and Post. It was assumed that they had seen the blow-up, however, in time to retire into the burned-over area. Doctor R. R. Davis, contract surgeon with the Wapiti CCC Camp, had established a first aid station during the afternoon at the fire line. This preparedness made it possible to render important first aid to the men who were injured.

The first definite knowledge of serious injury, with the possibility that human life had been lost, came through the finding of Billy Lea of the Bureau of Public Roads crew, who had run down by himself through the fire and was immediately taken to Doctor Davis' first aid station. Another man,

Patzke, of the Tensleep crew, was found shortly after 6 o'clock and helped out of the burn. Searchers then went into the burn. Post, believing that it would be possible to cross through the burn by that time, started out from a rocky point about 6:30 or 6:45. Bevans was found alive and pointed out to Krueger the 7 who had been burned in the nearby gulch. The crew which had stayed with Post on the rocks came into the first aid station with the rescue party about 10 o'clock, and were put to bed in camp beds as soon as their burns could be dressed.

Shortly after the first word of possible disaster was received at the fire camp between 6 and 7 p.m., a National Park Service portable radio, which was at the camp, was put into service to get news out to call for help via the Yellowstone National Park headquarters at Mammoth. This resulted in immediate action on the part of doctors, nurses, and others from the outside. The CCC organization of the Army, which operates the CCC camps, was already on the job and the utmost was done to take care of those injured. Searching parties were out most of Saturday night, and on Sunday there were 112 men in searching parties, 154 working on the line, and 100 men in camp ready for the night shift. Additional Forest officers had arrived from the Regional Office and the Black Hills and Harney Forests. Search of the burned area was continued until it was certain that no casualty had been overlooked, and this was confirmed by a check of the rolls. Everyone was finally accounted for and efforts were again concentrated on controlling the fire, which was successfully accomplished by Tuesday noon, August 24.

The main army of fire fighters to whom the greatest credit is due for the control of the fire consisted of about 475 enrollees, with their foreman overhead, from the following CCC camps:

F-35 Tensleep
F-24 Wapiti
YNP-3 Yellowstone
BR-7 Deaver
DG-52 Worland
DG-25 Basin

In addition, the crew of 9 men of the Bureau of Public Roads rendered splendid service, together with a number of local volunteers who brought the total fire fighting force up to something like 515 or 520. There was a supervisory and facilitating overhead force of 49, making an unusually strong organization. This organization was made possible largely through the immediate availability of CCC crews with their Army supply and medical service and equipment. Of the 49 foremen and others listed as supervisory and facilitating personnel, 10 were regular officers of the Forest Service, all of whom had had experience in fire fighting. At no time were untrained men sent against the fire without competent supervision.

Attached is a list of the men who gave their lives in the performance of public duty and also of those who were seriously injured.

ALLEN S. PECK
Regional Forester.

Enclosure.