

# Staff Ride

## Resources



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

## Mann Gulch Fire – Audio Transcript

### Voice of Bob Sallee, NPR The Story

[Dick] In the summer of 1949, Bob Sallee, was a smokejumper in Missoula, Montana. He'd just finished high school. The Forest Service thought he was 20 years old, he was just 17. Bob was with the smokejumpers, sent out to extinguish a fire in Mann Gulch. But when that fire turned on the crew and started thundering up the canyon, Bob and one other man ran up the ridge. Found a cleft in the rocks and slipped through to the other side.

[Bob] And so we just went into the rock slide and waited for the fire to come to us. We lay down so that we were close to where the air was. I had an old black felt hat, and I poured water from my canteen into it and put that over my face. Now it's burning downhill. It was burning a lot slower and it wasn't nearly as aggressive. We were not burned at all. The noise was all from the main fire on the other side.

[Dick] On that other side, 13 forest firefighters were either killed, or burned so badly, that they died later. Bob Sallee, was one of three who survived. He says it's up to him to remember the young men who didn't make it. I'm Dick Gordon, this is The Story.

- [Announcer] The Story is produce by North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. It's co-produced and distributed by American Public Media.

- [Dick] This summer's fire season is now well underway. With reports this week of fires in Washington, Oregon, California and Texas. It's a time of year when men and women are dropped into remote areas to fight those fires, something that's been going on for generations. When Bob Sallee got his first summer job, fighting fires with the Forest Service, he was making close to a dollar an hour. That was good money in the 1940s. When Bob heard about the smokejumpers, the people who parachute into remote fires, making a \$1.37 an hour, he signed up. He needed the money for college.

- [Bob] I'd actually only had one airplane ride in my life, before I made my first parachute jump. And you get up in the airplane, and you look down and you see all those little trees and little buildings down there. And you think, my gosh, I'm I really gonna do this? You're squatted down

in the door of the airplane, and looking down and then all of a sudden there's another fear that rears its ugly head and that is, what'll my buddies think if I don't jump. And that's a lot worse than being afraid, to jump. So when he slaps you on the leg, out you go. And then once you've done it. And the 'chute opens, and you land and everything is good. You have a magnificent feeling when you hit the ground.

- [Dick] I was gonna ask you if it was, in any way, exhilarating, or if you just sort of close your eyes and wait for the thing to end?

- [Bob] Oh, it's a wonderful ride down. But the feeling when you've done it, is unexplainable. Suddenly you become one of this elite group that have done this before. You're one of this wonderful organization. I don't know, I can't explain it. It's just a magnificent feeling once you've done it.

- [Dick] Bob Sallee's first jump onto a fire, was to be the one he'd never forget. It was 60 years ago, August 5th, 1949. Word had come into the station at Missoula, Montana, that there had been a lightning strike. In a place called Mann Gulch, in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area.

- [Bob] The ride from Missoula was extremely rough. And two or three of the guys were sick. One guy got so sick he couldn't jump and by the time I got there, I was thinking that boy, I want out of this plane, really bad.

- [Dick] Were these drafts from the fire itself?

- [Bob] No, this was just the rough air. It was a real hot day, and very unstable air. When we got to the fire, we looked down, and it looked like there was about 20 acres burning. Right on top of the ridge, between Mann Gulch and Meriwether. It looked like it was burning quietly, didn't look like a raging forest fire. It looked like it would be easy to get down and get a line around it. And so it wasn't an impressive fire at all, from the airplane.

- [Dick] And this was the kind of fire that you guys excelled at as smokejumpers, right? You could get a line around it, get it contained. That's what you were meant to do.

- [Bob] That's what we were supposed to do. There was no roads in there. The only way in there was by boat, or by airplane. Smokejumpers can get on a small fire, before it really gets started. Well they can save a lot of land and a lot of people, and a lot of money.

- [Dick] So when you line up to jump, is there a set order who goes when?

- [Bob] When you're in the plane, you're all suited up. You just go up and snap your static line. And the person that's most eager is the one that goes first. So actually the foreman jumps first. The second-in-command jumps second. I wasn't quick enough, so I ended up being the number five guy down on line.

- [Dick] How was the jump?

- [Bob] The jump was a piece of cake, for me. I managed to get my 'chute hooked up in a small pine tree. Landed so my feet just touching the ground, so I didn't have the impact. It was high altitude jump and a lot of the guys landed pretty hard.

- [Dick] At the point when you're all on the ground. How far from the fire are you then Bob?

- [Bob] Probably a half a mile from the fire. We're at a much lower elevation. And the fire's up above us, burning on the top of the ridge. We're down at the bottom of the gulch. And the foreman heard someone shouting up by the fire. So he told the squad leader to have us get something to eat. Because we're gonna be working all night. And that he'd go up and check the fire. So we started breaking out some rations, and then we started up to the fire. We got about 200 yards up the hill, and we met Wag Dodge, who was our foreman, coming back down the hill. When Dodge got down to where we were, he told our squad leader to take us down the canyon to the river. He said, I don't like this thick reproduction, it's a death trap.

- [Dick] The Mann Gulch fire is described in the book, "Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean. He wrote: "The grass in places was waist high. Since it was early August, with blistering heat, the worst of both fire worlds could occur. If a fire started in the deep timber of the southern side, and then jumped to the explosive grass and shrubs of the northern side, as this one might, and did. It could run so fast you couldn't escape it. And it could be so hot, it could burn out your lungs before it caught you". I'm Dick Gordon, you're listening to The Story. Early on, Bob Sallee had no idea he was any danger. He couldn't even see the fire.

- [Bob] We didn't have any signs at all. We knew it was up there, but we couldn't, there wasn't any smoke down where we were either. So anyhow, we went down into the draw, crossed over and started angling up the other side a little bit. And now you're into that part of Mann Gulch that's so steep. So you're kinda angling along the side of the hill.

- [Dick] And it's pretty easy going right? Because it's grass and rock and a few trees on this side?

- [Bob] Yeah, right, it's not hard going, if you weren't trying to go in a hurry. So we probably went a quarter of a mile, or 3/8 of a mile down the draw, and Wag Dodge caught up with us. And he had seen that the wind had come up. And that the fire was getting really active up on the ridge. And so he went to the head of the line. Now, while Rumsey and I were both carrying crosscut saws, everybody else had a fire pack, they had a backpack with a shovel and a Pulaski and--

- [Dick] Pulaski's that funny ax, with a point on one side and a kinda shovel on the other, right?

- [Bob] That's right, and the rules are, that the people carrying the saws, walk at the back of the line. Because they don't want you to make any quick turn or something and hitting somebody alongside the head with your crosscut.

- [Dick] These are the big crosscuts, the sort of six, seven footers that are a two-man saw, right?

- [Bob] That's right, that's right. This was before the time of chainsaws.

- [Dick] I used to use one of those crosscuts with my father.

- [Bob] Oh yeah? So you know what they are. And we went just a few more minutes, five more minutes, 10 minutes at the most, on down the gulch. And Dodge broke out over a little finger ridge, and he saw that the fire had somehow got started in the bottom of the gulch, and it was coming up the gulch towards us.

- [Dick] Coming up the north side that you were on?

- [Bob] It was actually coming up the whole bottom of the gulch, both sides. So he turned around, at that time, we could see smoke below us, but we couldn't see any fire. When he got to Rumsey and I, he said, you guys throw those things down before you hurt somebody. So we dropped the saws, he knew that we were in trouble. He didn't say anything, he just said, throw those things down. So Rumsey and I fell in line, more or less behind him. So we went from being in the back of the line, to being almost in the front of the line.

- [Dick] But Bob, you must have known something was up, if the foreman asked you to ditch the saws?

- [Bob] Yeah, we knew that we weren't fighting fire anymore, we were gonna go regroup some place. And so then we started angling up, up the hill and away from the fire at the same time. And this slope in Mann Gulch is so steep, that if you sit down, you have to dig your heels in, to

keep from sliding down the hill. So it's almost a cliff, but not quite. Probably went for five minutes. He sent word back down the line for everybody to throw their tools away. Now you know for sure that you're in trouble. 'Cause you're supposed to be out fighting fire, and you're throwing your tools away. You're not fire fighters anymore.

- [Dick] Did this mean the backpacks and everything were to go?

- [Bob] The backpacks and everything were to go. And everybody but Jim Harrison, did that. Jim Harrison was working for a tough old Ranger in Helena, and I guess he probably figured, if I throw my fire pack away, I'll be in a heap of trouble, so he kept his. But then we were climbing for another five minutes or so, and we broke out of where the scatter timber pretty well went away, and it was mostly a grassy slope. And Dodge stopped and took out a match and lit the grass on fire.

- [Dick] Where you guys were, right there?

- [Bob] Right there. And I was laying up against one of the few trees that was still there, looking at him and I'm wondering what in the heck is going on. I thought the boss had lost his mind, and that he was trying to burn us up. And you could look back down below, and here's this wall of flame, 60, 70 feet high. Sounded like a freight train coming up the hill. It's incredible, it's like standing on the runway when a jet airplane takes off. Sounded like a big blowtorch. It's just a huge roar. I could see the guys in the back of the line, outlined against the fire. And I knew that we had way more fire than we know what to do with. And here the boss stops and lights a fire. And he survived, by doing that.

- [Dick] With this wall of flame, basically sweeping past him, and not burning the one area that he cleared.

- [Bob] Right, it jumped over him.

- [Dick] How did he know to do that?

- [Bob] That wasn't a normal firefighting practice in those days. And when they asked him about it, he said he didn't know, it just seemed like a good idea.

- [Dick] Bob Sallee would learn later that his boss, Wag Dodge, soaked his handkerchief with water from his canteen, held it over his mouth, and lay down in the ashes. Wag Dodge, and Bob, and one other man, were the only ones of 16 firefighters who survived that fire. In just a

moment, I'll talk more with Bob Sallee about how he made it through, at Mann Gulch. I'm Dick Gordon, from American Public Media, this is The Story.

I'm Dick Gordon, this is The Story. 60 years ago, this summer a forest fire at Mann Gulch in Montana, killed 13 young men. Years later, the writer Norman Maclean, who'd also once worked for the Forest Service, tried to make sense of it. He wrote that, "far back in the impulses to find this story, is a storyteller's belief that, at times, life takes on the shape of art, and that the remembered remnants of these moments are largely what we come to mean by life. They become almost all of what we remember, of ourselves". A man named Bob Sallee survived that fire. He says that as the flames roared up the hill towards them, and as he and all the other men were running for their lives, he paused briefly to watch, as his foreman, Wag Dodge, did the most mystifying thing. Wag lit a match, bent over, and set the grass in front of him on fire.

- [Bob] It's kind of a strange thing, but when you have a fire burning, it draws air in from all directions. And the main fire was now drawing air back from where we were. And that fire was catching up with us. It was only a minute or two behind us. So even though the wind was blowing, probably 25, 30 miles an hour, up the gulch, the area where we were standing, was still, there wasn't any wind. I didn't go to church much when I was a kid, but I did pray a little. And when he lit his fire, it did the same thing as if you light the bottom of a piece of newspaper. It just burn right straight up. And Dodge said, "up this way", and I looked up alongside his fire, and there was the top of the ridge. And so he said, "up this way", and I thought, well, I guess maybe he lit that fire to be a buffer between us and the main fire. And so I took off for the ridge. Up alongside his fire.

- [Dick] You and all the other guys?

- [Bob] No, actually there were only three of us there at that time. So it was me and Rumsey and a fella named Eldon Diettert. And so we head for the top. And smoke settled back in, and I figured, well, I gotta keep going. And then it opened, the smoke lifted and there was a goat trail going up through a cleft in the rocks. And so I jumped in there and went through and up and got on top. Rumsey was about 10 feet to my right, and he came back and followed me up. Eldon Diettert was about 20 feet on the other side of Rumsey, and he chose not to do that. He went on up the gulch.

- [Dick] Can you hear anyone calling out? Can you hear the voices of any of the other men at this point?

- [Bob] No, I never heard any of the other men, at all. What I did do though, when I waited for Rumsey to come up, and I stopped and looked back while he was coming up. And I saw Dodge jump across the flames on his fire, and use his shovel to start scrapping the ashes away. And then I knew what he was gonna do. He was scrapping the ashes away so he could lay down. Inside the fire, in the burned off area. And I knew what he had intended for us to do. But I wasn't about to go back down there.

- [Dick] You've gone into this cleft in this ridge of rock near the top of the gulch, are you going through that to clear ground, are you hiding in the rock, what are you doing?

- [Bob] We got through the cleft of rocks, and got on top, and it was just grassy again. And from that point, we could see the Missouri River down below. But we could also see that the fire had gotten across that ridge, and was starting to burn down one of the finger ridges, towards the river, and was actually below us. So we didn't want to go that direction. So we more or less continued on a little bit of an easterly direction, but we went down. We got down about 200 yards, we found a big rockslide. And the rockslide was probably 30 or 40 yards long and 10 yards wide. And we decided that that would probably protect us. And so we just went into the rockslide and waited for the fire to come to us. It came down from the top first. When it came down to us, we got down to the bottom. We lay down that we were close to where the air was. I had an old black felt hat and I poured water from my canteen into it and put that over my face. We were not burned at all. When the fire came up from below, we moved to the top of the rockslide and same thing happened.

- [Dick] And the fire itself Bob, did it still have this freight train roar to it?

- [Bob] No, once it came over the top and now it's burning downhill, it was burning a lot slower and wasn't nearly as aggressive. The noise was all from the main fire on the other side.

- [Dick] You're listening to The Story, I'm Dick Gordon. After a little while, Bob Sallee and his friend, Walt Rumsey, realized that they'd survived.

- [Bob] We stood up, we said, well, what do you think? And we said well, we made it, and do we think the other guys are all right? Yeah, we made it, so they probably made it too. Then about that time, we heard Bill Hellman, calling for help, up above us. So he'd come up across the ridge, more or less in the same area we had, but he said that the fire hit him, just as he hit the top of the ridge. And it burned all the clothes off the back of his body. He was completely naked in the back. Terribly burned. We found a decent size rock there, and we got him over on the rock. So he wouldn't have to sit down in the ashes. And then it was pretty obvious we needed some first aid supplies, so I went back across the ridge and started down into Mann Gulch, to the jump spot, to see if any of our first aid supplies had survived. But I didn't get down over a 100 yards or so, and there was still enough fire in the trees and things that I didn't feel like I could go any further. Of course by that time I was pretty badly spooked anyhow. So I turned around and went back. And when I got back to where Walt and Bill Hellman was, then I heard Wag Dodge shout. And he had come up and crossed the ridge. More or less at the same place we did. He still had his shovel with him. When he told us all to throw our tools away, he kept his own shovel. He said that he had found one other fellow alive. That he was badly burned. And that he had put him on a big rock and taken his shoes off, because his shoes were badly burned. And we went down for help, and we went down to the river. We caught up with the back

edge of the fire. About a half a mile from our rockslide, and it was only burning two or three feet high in the grass, and it was nice and quiet. We jumped across and got on down to the river. There were a lot of people in boats that had come out to see the fire. And we flagged one of them down and they gave us a ride back to the Meriwether Guard Station. And when we got there, the Ranger from that district was there, and he and Dodge got together to figure out what to do. And I went up behind the Guard Station and lay down and went to sleep.

- [Dick] When did you find out what the extent of the casualties were, in that fire?

- [Bob] About 10:30 that night. They came and woke me up, and said, we have a rescue crew here now. You need to take these people back. So I took the doctors and Ranger Jansson, back up, and we met Rumsey, and they started doctoring Bill Hellman. Then Jansson took me with him, and we went across the ridge to the other side. And we found Joe Sylvia, he was a fella that was still alive. And Rumsey and the people that were with him, took Bill Hellman to the river. And Jansson and I and the people who were with us took Joe Sylvia down Mann Gulch, to the river. And we thought Joe Sylvia and Bill Hellman would be all right, because we'd gotten them to the hospital. They only lived till about 11:30 that morning, and then they died in the hospital. It was probably a day or two before we were told that all the rest of the people had died up there.

- [Dick] What was the hardest moment for you Bob?

- [Bob] Well, the hardest moment was reconciling the fact that somehow or the other, we had survived. And that they had all died.

- [Dick] I'm talking with Bob Sallee about his memories of the Mann Gulch fire that burned 4,500 acres in Montana. The fire was 60 years ago, this summer. Bob says he took some time to recover, back at headquarters. Then he and his friend Walt Rumsey were asked if they wanted to jump again.

- [Bob] We said, well, we're smokejumpers, we're willing to jump another fire. So they took the two of us up and jumped us on a very small little fire. About 20 miles out of Missoula, probably had planes flying over us every five minutes to make sure we were all right. I don't know, but anyhow, that kind of got us back in the groove.

- [Dick] Do you suppose they were thinking, Bob, we gotta get these two kids up on the horse again.

- [Bob] Yes, that's exactly what they were doing. It's either get them back on their feet, or get them outta here, one or the other. And so, fortunately they gave us a fire to jump on.

- [Dick] And you did it for one more year after that. Is that right?

- [Bob] Yeah, I jumped that fire, and one other one that year, and then I went back to the smokejumpers the next year, and they had a real cushy project for me.

- [Dick] Bob, I don't know what's true here, I only know what I read, but it's been 60 years since the Mann Gulch fire, and I read somewhere that there was a long period of time when you didn't talk about it.

- [Bob] You know, I didn't talk about it. My kids, I didn't even talk about it with my kids. They knew that I had been on a bad forest fire, and that some people had died, and I'd survived. And that was about the size of it. And I pretty well put it out of my mind. Until Maclean wrote his book.

- [Dick] This is Norman Maclean, with the book, "Young Men and Fire", right?

- [Bob] Right.

- [Dick] He persuaded you to go back to Mann Gulch with him, right?

- [Bob] Yes he did, he got Walt Rumsey and I together, and we went up there with him.

- [Dick] What was it like, being there? Did it look familiar?

- [Bob] Oh yeah, the Forest Service went up and marked the spots where they found the bodies. And somebody put a marker where they thought Wag Dodge had lit his fire. And that mark, mysteriously, was down the draw from all the bodies. But, Rumsey and I showed Maclean where Dodge lit his fire. And I picked one spot, Rumsey picked another spot. They were 20 feet apart. And they were not where the Forest Service had marked the fire. And that caused Maclean a whole lot of problems.

- [Dick] The fact is that Norman Maclean never finished his book. Someone else did that, after Maclean's death. In his retelling of the story, he wanted it to all make sense. But it doesn't. The back fire, set by the foreman, burned one way. And the main fire burned another. One of the parents accused the foreman of lighting the fire that killed his son. So there's still controversy over what really happened in those moments on the hillside. Bob Saltee says that when he went

back to Mann Gulch with Walt Rumsey and Norman Maclean. Some of the cement crosses were in the wrong places.

- [Bob] We said, this isn't where Bill Hellman's cross belongs. And we said, it wasn't here, it was over on that little ridge over there. So we walked up towards where we thought it was, we got up there and we found this big rock. And Rumsey said, this is the rock. I spent most of that night by this rock, and this is where Hellman was, and this where his cross should be. Rumsey said, you know, Dodge gave me a can of potatoes when he left. And Hellman was so desperate for water, I cut a hole in the top of that potato can with my knife and let him drink the water out of the potato can. If we could find that can, we could show these guys we know what we're talking about. And I looked down, there's a sage brush, and there was the can. I said, would that be it?

- [Dick] Wow. On a more personal level though. What's the one thing that stood out in your memory – being back in that place?

- [Bob] Well mostly just how lucky we were. I'm probably the luckiest man alive. When we jumped on that fire, I like to use crosscut saws, so I grabbed a crosscut, and that put me at the end of the line. When Dodge came up and said, throw them away. Now I'm making a very difficult climb, but instead of having a fire pack on my back, I've got nothing. That gave me that little advantage. When he said, up this way, I misunderstood him and went to the top of the ridge. And found a cleft in the rocks and got through it. And we went down the other side. And that rockslide is the only rockslide on that mountain. You gotta be very lucky to have all those things fall in place for you. When I went back, I just marveled at how lucky I'd been to have those things work for me.

- [Dick] The Mann Gulch fire is a piece of history. First and foremost for the 13 men that died, trying to fight it. But it also stands as a kind of a marker in US forest fire fighting history. What to do, what not to do. What does it mean to you?

- [Bob] Well, it's really a strange thing. I'm absolutely amazed when someone like you comes along and wants to talk about Mann Gulch after all of this time. I had a good career in the paper industry. I built the last new paper machine, that was built in North America. Designed the process and constructed the paper machine. I'd always thought I'd done really well in the paper industry, I should be known then for that. But I'm not, I'm known for Mann Gulch. I'm part of history, and those people that died up there deserve to be remembered. And I'm the one that has to remember 'em.

- [Dick] Forest firefighters developed a whole new set of rules after Mann Gulch. They used the lessons of that fire to change the equipment they carry, and the escape routes they planned. And they made sure that someone was always watching for shifts in the wind, or the fire. I'm Dick Gordon, you're listening to The Story. Firefighting remains a dangerous business. 14 men

died at the Storm King Mountain fire, in Colorado. And that was just 15 years ago, this week. One of the men who survived that fire, went to see Bob Sallee, to ask him how to cope.

- [Bob] And he couldn't understand how you could go on. And basically I told him that all you can do, is say that it happened and there isn't anything I can do about it, one or the other, and go on with your life. I haven't been much of a counselor, but that's what I advised him to do. And I understand that he took my advice.

- [Dick] So Bob, if you had a grandchild who was saying, I'm interested in doing some smoke jumping, would you say yes, no?

- [Bob] I would tell him, that's the most wonderful job in the world. If you wanna do it, do it. You get a feeling of being able to do anything you want to do, when you're a smokejumper. And actually, everything else you do, after you've jumped out of an airplane once, is pretty easy. And on top of that, where do you find a deal, where they fly you around in the most beautiful country in the world. Give you a free ride to the ground in a parachute. Pay you good wages to put out a fire. Let you hike up to a beautiful Ranger Station. Give you a ride back. It's just a wonderful way for a young man to grow up. ♪ August 49 North Montana ♪ ♪ The hottest day on record and the forest tinder dry ♪ ♪ Lightning strikes in the mountains ♪ ♪ I was crew chief at the jump base ♪ ♪ I prepared the boys to fly ♪ ♪ Pick the drop zone C47 comes in low ♪ ♪ Feel the tap upon your leg that tells you go ♪ ♪ See the circle of the fire down below ♪ ♪ Fifteen of us dropped above the cold Missouri waters ♪

- [Dick] Bob Sallee joined me from a studio in Spokane, Washington. I'm Dick Gordon, from American Public Media, this is The Story. ♪ So I ordered them to side hill we'd fight it from below ♪ ♪ We'd have our backs to the river ♪ ♪ We'd have it licked by morning even if we took it slow ♪ ♪ But the fire crowned jumped the valley just ahead ♪ ♪ There was no way down headed for the ridge instead ♪ ♪ Too big to fight it we'd have to fight that slope instead ♪ ♪ Flames one step behind above the cold Missouri waters ♪