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PERSONNEL--Helena  
Harrison, James O.

Canyon Ferry Ranger Station  
Helena, Montana  
August 25, 1949

Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Harrison  
316 South Avenue West  
Missoula, Montana

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Harrison:

Please accept my deepest sympathy in your sorrow.

It has been a black period for everyone. I shall always regret not arriving on the fire sooner since upon arrival I did not have a chance to get into Mann Gulch before the men were dropped on the fire. In fact I never knew for sure they had jumped until I got back to Meriwether and got on the radio. As it was the fire cut me off after I started up Mann Gulch and I had to turn and run for it.

When Wag Dodge reported in to me that night I still thought Hersey had found Jim on the fire line and had him with his crew. When Hersey came off the fire the first thing he told me was he had been unable to find Jim. We then learned from Dodge that Jim had joined his men.

That morning I had talked to Jim over the radio. He reported heavy lightning the day before so we decided to set up a patrol. This was set for 11 a.m. and Jim was to radio back to us at 3:30 p.m. This of course would necessitate his returning to Meriwether.

Harvey Jensen informs me that when he brought a boat load of tourists down river at 11:45. He stopped at the Cabin at 12:15 and met Jim running down the trail wringing wet with sweat. Jim tried to radio Canyon Ferry or Missoula and could reach neither although another radio picked up Jim but was transmitting on a different frequency so they never were able to get together. (This was the Nine Mile Ranger Station Radio) Jim asked Harvey to telephone the fire in to us when he got up river. At the time I was patrolling the district by plane but was on the other end of the district and observed no smoke until 12:25. Jim also told Harvey he was going back to the fire but would be back down at 3:30 for sure since he had been instructed to radio in at that time. He then left a note on his cabin door stating he had gone to the fire and then hurried back up to the fire.

From the evidence on the ground after the fire we have deduced that Jim went up to the fire proceeded to attack the fire on the

the southeast edge - which was the proper place to attack the fire and was a perfectly safe point to work at the time. Jim then started to build a line around the fire on the Mann Gulch side heading the fire towards the river which was excellent judgement.

Jim must have fought like a tiger since his line held through the blow-up which came later. His line held until late that evening when a crew of 20 men couldn't hold it any longer.

Jim displayed great courage in tackling this monster of a fire all by himself. He apparently felt he was holding the line on his end thereby making the decision which cost him his life - to not abandon the line but to hold it instead of returning to Meriwether to radio. With conditions what they were at that time this was the proper decision and it bespeaks highly for Jim that he made this decision instead of the easy way out of returning to his radio.

Unkown to Jim who continued to hold his line after the jumpers arrived a spot fire developed some distance away from the main fire. The fire was now large enough so that no one person in anyone place could accurately judge what was going on. Men made decisions on the facts as they could determine them from their location. When Dodge discovered there was a potentially dangerous spot fire he decided it was not safe for Jim to be where he was. From Dodges location and knowledge of the fire I believe his decision in calling Jim down with him was correct.

Events happened so rapidly after that that no one person can hope to piece together all the facts and get a true picture of what happened. When fires blow-up it is like an atomic bomb explosion. I was approaching the boys from below but had no idea they were still in the area or that anyone had jumped. I knew I'd have to very careful of my timing because I could see the fire was getting ready to blow. When the blow-up came I ran down hill through cooler parts of the fire and got out before my escape avenue was closed. This avenue closed before the boys coming down hill reached it and that is why they swung back uphill.

The survivors all told me Jim was worn-out from his magnificent fight on the line but at that of those who died instantly he was the highest up the hill. Jim had used up his strength doing his duty to the bitter end. No more can be said of any man. If he hadn't given his all on the line he might of had strength enough to have outdistanced the fire. Here again Jim's head was working because he was the only one headed towards a gap in the rock cliffs ahead. The blast overtook him. I was the first one to reach Jim afterwards when we sent out the rescue party. Jim died instantly and never knew what overtook him. There was no suffering and no sign of panic or fear.

From the position that I found the rest of the bodies I am convinced that none of the men were panic-stricken. They probably felt that Dodge's escape fire was too small or that the fire was too hot for so small a patch to protect the crew.

The fact that Dodge escaped in this manner may or may not be evidence that all would have escaped if they had stayed with Dodge. Dodge may have been lucky and been in a cool spot of air. Another man beside Dodge might have been caught in a hot blast. My experience in going through the lower part of the fire indicated that there were cool streaks of air occurring in the wall of superheated air and gases. After all two men saved themselves by out running the fire so that was possible too.

Conditions being what they were at the time of the blow-up I don't feel anyone is in a position to say that what anyone did in the face of that fire was right or wrong. I think each man depended on his own judgement. The fact that some escaped and some did not was an act of God and not of man.

At the time I led the rescue party through the fire that night after we finally were able to determine that a tragedy had occurred, we all felt good that we reached Bill Hellman and Joe Sylvia and were able to ease their suffering that night. Finding these two raised our hopes that we would find additional survivors.

At 4:30 a.m. of Saturday morning in the first streaks of daylight I made the grievous discovery of what had happened to Jim. With the locating of Jim I knew with a sickening certainty that there would be no other survivors. I have never lost any men on the job before nor have I had any of my men seriously hurt. I felt completely crushed.

We carried the two injured men out to the river after finding two more of the dead. I spent about 2 hours giving orders concerning control of the fire and organizing further rescue operations in case there should by chance be any other survivors. I then left Meriwether and return to the disaster scene by helicopter and proceeded to search for the others. I located a total of nine bodies before being joined by additional help. I returned to the base camp about 6 p.m. and was met with the news that the two boys we had carried out had passed away.

I hope you will forgive me for going into all these details but at present I am unable to visit with you. I do want you to know the facts directly from me as I was the first man on the ground in every case. There have been so many unfounded and vicious rumors that I have wanted to assure you of the facts. Jim was doing his job; he died a hero doing what he figured was his duty. All of the gang here at Canyon Ferry will always be proud to have known and worked with Jim.

Many of the boat club members through the summer and after the fire have spoken highly of Jim. He was very popular with the visitors at the Gates of the Mountains. They found him courteous

helpful and good company. On the job we found him to be a hard and faithful worker who took his job seriously. He was the best Guard we have ever had at Meriwether. His passing a real loss to us all.

The following is quoted from a letter received from the Helena Trail Riders:

"We would like to say a very special word for Jimmie Harrison who has since given his life trying to preserve this beautiful area. He was such a fine young man, helping our party with everything, hauling bed rolls, groceries, personal belongings, for which most of us that we should be responsible only to find Jimmie coming along with a big roll on his shoulder and another under his arm, he even helped in the kitchen and when some of our party had to stay over when they lost their horses he opened his quarters to them to make coffee and to share in whatever he had for lunch. There have been tears shed for Jimmie and the other young men who were lost in this tragedy."

Well dear people I hope we may visit with you soon. You must be wonderful folks since you had such a fine son. If there is ever anything we can do to be of service to you please let us know. I will be glad to answer any questions or do anything you might desire.

If you wish we can arrange to take you up Mann Gulch to the cross that has been erected at the place Jim was found. We certainly would be glad to take you to Meriwether and see the beautiful Gates area whenever you feel you are able to make the trip.

Please accept my sincere regrets and sympathy.

Very sincerely yours,

J. ROBERT JANSSON  
District Forest Ranger

P. S. Enclosed is Jim's Forest Service key which Gary said you would like to have. This was a positive means of identification. He was not wearing his badge that day it is still among some other equipment. As soon as we locate it we will send it to you.