

(Taken from Vol. 77, No. 4 on July 10, 1953-The Willows Journal)

15 Die Fighting Mendocino Forest Blaze

'A Story of Death'

Journal Reporter Saw Flames Sweeping Toward Doomed Men

By CHARLES J. GLEESON

This story of the death of 15 men started last night at what appeared to be a routine assignment. "Ten Four," the story would have said, "ten four" being radio code for "Okay," "That's fine," "everything's going well." At 7 p.m. the phone rang. It was Supervisor Leon Thomas of the Mendocino National Forest. "We've got a fire," he said, "first one of the season. Though you might like to see it." Thomas briefed me as we rode along. There had been two suspicious fires yesterday. The first, along the hull road in the Chrome district, had started at 12:20 o'clock. Thomas, who had been attending a meeting in Upper Lake, had heard about it on the radio. But two hours later a second blaze broke out, also along the road and in the same general area. "We think we've it homed in on three sides," the supervisor dais, as he turned on the radio.

It Looked Good

Charles Lafferty of Stonyford was talking from the fire scene. "Ten Four," he said, as he got the wind information: 15 miles an hour and from the southeast. "Let'er blow. Just what we want." And things did look favorable as Thomas' car swung up the Alder Springs road. You could, in some places, rush out and grab a burning bush. Fire fighters were stationed along the highway watching for spot blazes which might jump the line. Others, equipped with railroad fuses, were setting backfires. Given any kind of a break, it seemed, and the blaze would be under control within an hour or two. About 12 pieces of equipment were on Powder House Point, together with a crew that included not only federal and state foresters but also logger employed by Glenco Forest Products, which had turned men and equipment over to Jack Ewing, fire boss, to help fight the battle. Several times loads of logs drove up. These were driven by employees of the Speckert and Dover Lumber Companies who apparently had decided the fire was none of the business. It was still light, and a bulldozer crew was silhouetted atop one ridge about a mile away. Flames were burning on three sides, but the to road was the fire line. As darkness fell the blaze took its full beauty in a dozen shades of rose, red and orange, crawling, reaching out long fingers to catch the tops of digger pines, boiling up in pools that changed colors with each new puff of wind. Black areas suddenly too on light that turned into acres of jewels. As these burned out they took on the appearance of a city dazzling with golden lights. It was in this sort of setting the 15 men died. "We should have'er licked pretty soon," said Lafferty over the radiophone. "Ten four." But it was far from "ten four."

Ready to Eat

About 10 o'clock the wind had died down. The New Mission Tribes group was sitting down to its meal of sandwiches and milk and the few spot blazes which had jumped the road were being controlled quickly. It's hard to tell in words the story of a forest fire; the clanking of the bulldozers, the dust and sparks high in the air, trucks rushing everywhere, fire within a few feet of you, and yet a feeling of safety. That's the way it was last night

about 10 o'clock. Suddenly there was a puff of wind, but not from the southeast, as it had been blowing all evening, but from the north. Supervisor Thomas, who had appeared confident, now began to get worried. Sparks jumped the road and set fire to brush at the head of the gulch. "I think we can get it there," said Thomas, but as he was speaking, the wind was picking up speed. In less than five minutes, everyone knew what was going to happen.

Blaze Exploded

"Ever hear a fire explode?" asked Thomas. "Well, watch this one." A crew which had been sent to put out the gulch fire was called back. A call went in for the bulldozer and the equipment on the point was scattered to cut down the danger should sparks set fire to a gasoline tank. "I've seen this kind of wind change in Southern California" said Thomas, "but never up here." Things were happening so fast no one though immediately of the group sent to put out a fire in a gully down the canyon. "My God!" said Thomas, "What has happened to them?" Lafferty ran along the road to shout a warning. There was no thought now of the fire; everyone was concerned only with the fate of those 24 men. Someone finally saw lights along the ridgetop, and there was a general movement in that direction. The nine survivors were coming down the road. Where were the other? "They took off along the ridge contour," said one. "I hope they made it." There was no chance now of controlling the fire immediately, and everyone tried to convince himself the others had reached safety. But by now the entire canyon was sparkling in the night winds, as you looked down from your secure spot along the point where you knew nothing would live more than a few moments in that inferno. The search started in that period halfway between darkness and dawn. At 4:45 o'clock, a shout announced the finding of the first body. The first searching group went just below the spot where the others lay, and where they were found sprawled about 5:20 o'clock. One of the searchers was a survivors, Homer Hitchcock. He and the other survivors stood by to help identify the remains.

Bodies Visible

Some of the bodies could be seen easily from the road about 300 yards across the canyon. But if you didn't have glasses, you might have taken them for small clumps of dark green brush surrounded by gray ashes. Here and there were a few untouched bushes, or a still green digger pine. Here, you felt, was utter desolation in the presence of death. Nothing, you said to yourself, was still alive here. And yet on the morning air came a requiem: The harsh domain from a treetop, and the soft sweet song of a lowly whippoorwill.