

PETE KING FIRE

1934

By H.D. Weaver

Lochsa Ranger Station, Selway National Forest, August 18---Death, by some odd turn of fate, tossed aside it's sinister role for a few brief hours yesterday and 240 men struggled to safety in these rock jugged canyon walls.

Rivalling the most devastating holocausts of 1910, a forest fire of unknown proportions gutted the Lochsa river, leaving in it's wake a smouldering and blackened forest and a ragged and grimy troop of humans, thankful that a miracle had ushered them thru the jaws of death and left them exhausted but unharmed.

As I write this by the aid of lantern in midday, I am amazed at the spectacle. Scattered about over the blackened ground huddle sleeping men and boys. They lie like dead men after a night of terror during which some struggled against great odds with calm and deliberate action while others had the fear of eternity in their eyes and prayers for deliverance from the red demon on their lips.

First intimation that something was ready to break loose came at 3:00 P.M., along the Fish Butte fire line where 125 CCC boys and woodsmen were battling the flames. The wind switched suddenly and whisked the fire out of control. Simultaneously a deafening roar developed higher up the mountain. Word came up the line to the head end that the fire had crossed the trail behind us.

Sensing the danger, we called all the foremen into consultation and immediately ordered a retreat. Careful check was made to determine that not a single man was left behind. The CCC boys were sent ahead with the foresters and woodsmen bringing up the rear in a desperate three mile dash down a narrow mountain trail. As the party progressed, the wind continued to increase into a gale and the dull red glow of the crown fire lit the horizon behind us, approaching at terrific speed. The noise became deafening. Huge chunks of limbs, tree tops and burning brands hurtled through the air overhead.

The wind soon assumed cyclonic proportions. Trees that had withstood the furry of the elements for a century snapped off like jackstraws and crashed to the ground. The firefighters, wearied from a week of dogged fighting, found a new reserve of energy. Obstacles which ordinarily would delay progress became trifles. Men hurtled through the air over logs and rocks and the flash of flames continued to eat up the short distance as we raced downward.

Spot fires were starting in all directions, breaking into spasms of leaping flames with almost explosive violence. The air was filled with ashes and fire, giving the tinder-dry forest the appearance of a muddy darkness. Tense voiced men exhorted those in the lead to greater exertion. Lungs burned with a dull ache and dry tongues licked ash caked lips. It was a race with death.

Near panic gripped the hearts of every last man when the vanguard brought up sharp against a wall of flame. A hurried consultation was held and a route around the spot fire was selected which led down a treacherous creek bottom. The main fire was close upon us. Those who still carried tools cast them to the wind. Every second--every pound counted.

Traveling in the dense growth along the creek slowed us up. Impatience bred of desperation brought muttered curses and stacatto like orders from the leaders. Timber was falling in all directions. Twice just ahead of me falling trees left the line, missing boys by inches. Undaunted, they leaped over the fallen trunks as if they were matches. The most dramatic incident occurred just as we were emerging onto Fish Creek and the only trail leading to the river and safety. A giant cedar tree crashed down along the line, with only the warning shouts of those coming behind to tell of impending danger. The boys pressed into the brush on either side of the trail. No sooner had the trunk landed in the trail than fleeing feet stampeded over it.

We reached Fish Creek just in the nick of time. The spot fire we had circled had become the main fire. It was practically licking our shoe leather. Just across the creek a new fire was hedging us with lightning like reapidty from the opposite side of the canyon. We now had two fires to race. The crossing of the creek on a high footlog was perilous. The wind was coming up stream with hurrican velocity. Men were forced to crawl on hands and knees to progress. One boy, Van Zandt, was blown bodily off the log into the churning water. Other CCC's snatched him to safety. Several boys were badly bruised by limbs and chuncks which sailed through the air.

Once the main trail was reached, there remained but one half mile between us and safety. With unhampered going the cavalcade raced headlong with wild abandon while the sullen roar of the oncoming inferno sent a quaking fear to the depths of every man's soul.

Victory was in sight, with precious seconds marking time between safety and destruction. Sighs of relief and offerings of silent thanks were written on every face when the party broke out of the canyon into view of the rushing waters of the Lochsa River.

No time was lost in making the men secure. A human chain was formed, those who could swim holding a nonswimmer between them as they negotiated the sullen torrent to the opposite side from the fire. Many said prayers, others crossed themselves, while the more stoic mountain men nodded satisfaction to each other with stained grins.

The men were held in the edge of the stream in case it became necessary to submerge for protection. Messengers were dispatched to camp two miles upstream to determine the fate of those who were in camp. Apprehension grew as the sky reddened and the roar of the flames headed upriver with increasing speed. We feared every man in camp was doomed.

Great concern was also felt for the safety of two men in our crew who were listed as missing, John Steiger and H. Longfellow.

First word of conditions at camp came from Merrill Thornber, fire scout, who came to us through the smouldering ashes. He told us a grim tale of a see-saw battle which was being waged at the Ranger Station. He was hopeful but doubtful. We decided to try and make camp to aid in the fight. Picking our way carefully along the shore of the river, we reached a point within one mile of our goal, where another river crossing was made. Forces were marshalled for a quick dash over a steep hill to gain the trail to camp. But the rush of the oncoming fire headed us off and drove us back to the river on the run.

We brought up in a pocket like niche in the canyon where we decided to make our stand. Fire was 'drawing down upon us from all sides. The din was terrific, while the crash of falling snags caused everyone to jump and scan the smoke laden darkness with bloodshot eyes.

Our little rock strewn haven of retreat on the brink of the river proved a popular place. A coyote, fleeing from the fire, trotted through the midst of our group. Weasels, squirrels, chipmonks and other small animals hovered along the edge of the water. Even grasshoppers, bugs and small insects were in profusion.

The crises was near. Backfires were set close to the rivers edge to form a barrier against the wall of approaching flame. The men, exhausted from the ordeal of a week of ceaseless toil and hardships, climaxed by the past few hours of superhuman exertion, fell exhausted in the sand. They were too weary and tired to care what happened. In a few moments nearly every man was asleep. Only the Forest Service men kept a restless vigil.

Further news of the battle to save the camp came when Damon Swisher, CCC leader walked in from upriver. They reported that the Ranger Station and fire camp were completely surrounded by fire and destruction of the buildings seemed inevitable. Our fears were alleviated somewhat when we heard shouting of men down river on the opposite side. Out of the pal of smoke and cinders strode Steiger and Longfellow. Hearty shouts greeted their approach. Our men were now all accounted for and with the exception of Charley Welsh, who had torn a severe hole in his leg, were in good condition.

More good news came a few moments later when Dick Valentine, veteran Forest Service fire foreman, emerged from the smoke bringing news that every man in camp was accounted for and that the Ranger Station had been saved after a valiant struggle on the part of foresters, NIRA camp men and CCC's. He counseled that it was too dangerous to attempt to bring the men to camp through the fire before daybreak.

The men gathered in small groups to huddle about tiny fires as the heat of the inferno abated. Many slept fitfully, awakening with a start as some lone snag crashed to earth on the mountain side.

Dawn brought a picture of desolation. As soon as visibility permitted the men were lined out in single file and started out through the burn to camp. It was a motely and sorely tried aggregation that wended its way among the embers and windfalls to steaming hot coffee for all hands.

There followed hearty felicitations and rapid fire conversations as the two groups intermingled and exchanged tales of wierd and miraculous experiences during the exciting hours of the night. We were even more impressed by the fact that our comrades in camp were safe than the fact that we ourselves had eluded destruction.

The sight of the camp ground along the river was unbelievable. Boys with pants rolled high, were fishing food, beds and clothing out of the water where they were thrown when the fire was at its fiercest. Canned goods, butter, ham, coffee and dozens of kitchen articles were being snaked to shore by the aid of long ropes. Bedding and tents, which were anchored in the current with ropes, were snaked ashore. Sleeping bags, blankets and tents were burned down to the water level. Many of the survivors were half clothed or were wearing parts of garments which had been consumed by the flames.

The camp ground where we had slept was shrouded in black embers. Stumps and logs still smoldered, while every spear of grass and vegetation had turned to inky ashes. The only remaining piece of ground which the flames had not raked was the half acre on which the Ranger Station and other buildings stood, a silent monument to the courage and stout heartedness of 115 men who would not take defeat for an answer.

I immediately sought out I. V. Anderson, Associate Forester of the Rocky Mountain National Forest Experiment Station at Missoula, who was in charge of the fire. He related a stirring and chronological story of the on-rush of the fire and the ensuing battle to save lives and property.

Anderson's diary, written in short paragraphs during the strife and excitement, tells an hourly history of the valiant tussle. The text follows:

August 17. 4:30 p.m. at Lochsa Ranger Station. All same as twilight because of smoke. Lights in kitchen and office. Large embers falling around station. Started pump to wet down buildings and station grounds. Sent foreman downriver to check on safety of Weaver's men.

5:30 p.m. All men accounted for. Men who came in from Fish Creek report Weaver called men off line at 3 p.m. and has taken them down to main Lochsa.

6:20 p.m. Valentine reports a recheck that all men from Fish Creek line are safe.

7:30 p.m. Big blow comes at station. Hundreds of burning embers falling on flat below station and fires starting up simultaneously with all hands fighting with buckets, sacks and blankets.

7:30 p.m. Food, tents and bedding put in river.

7:45 p.m. Station encircled by fire. All hands fighting to save station and selves. Wind velocity unrecorded but blowing by gusts from downriver direction with a speed that causes men to buckle up to face it. All men's faces covered with wet handkerchiefs, blankets and towels.

7:50 p.m. Hose line burned out.

8:10 p.m. Fire at climax. Blazing inferno on all sides.

8:15 p.m. Crest of fire has passed. We are reasonable certain that buildings are safe.

8:20 p.m. We know we have won.

Ranger Roy Lewis, who with Anderson, stood their ground without a thought of backing up an inch, related a thrilling account of his experiences.

"The air currents were blustery and there was no telling what would happen", said Lewis. "There was no chance to lag a campaign. Anything could happen and I have nothing but praise for the boys who stood by when it looked sure death."

"Not only small sparks but chunks of fire six and eight inches long sprayed

the grounds. Everything was wet down with the pump when the wind whipped up."

"We knew the spot above the station on the north was going to be hot because of a heavy stand of timber. Spot fires on the south side of the river soon burned together bringing a wall of flame at us on a 45-mile wind. The wind guage was kicking at 72 revolutions, or 16 miles an hour when the blow started. When the full gale was on, it looked like a blur."

"Tools were of no use. Buckets and blankets were our only useful weapons. Men were placed on all buildings with buckets and water bags. The office was on fire twice. Bedding stored on the dwelling porch caught fire from embers. A dozen men stamped it out."

"We knew Weaver's gang were safe in the river at Fish Creek. Men and boys around the station could be seen kneeling in prayer as the smoke and gas increased."

Dick Valentine, who never ceased in the one-sided conflict with the inferno, made humorous notes of incidents which occurred in the press of the excitement. He kidded Unit Supervisor, Andy O'Brien, for looking for spot fires with a lantern.

"Pots and pans sailed through the air", said Valentine. Fire fighting tools were queer indeed. A few dishpans full of water extinguished a fire in the bunkhouse. When the hose burned in two we squeezed the end together to form a nozzle and did the best we could. The pump finally ran out of gas and we didn't dare to open another can. The pump crew was backed up into the river by the flames."

"The horses were taken out of the barn while their corral and feed burned. We will have to feed them oatmeal out of the kitchen until we can get them out of here. There's no grass left for them to graze upon."

"I am more proud of the way the CCC boys stood up in the face of the fire. They proved themselves loyal to the last inch. It was a close scrape and a real scare for us old timers--but the boys from Illinois were in the thick of it all the time."

Camp Boss, O'Brien, chided the cooks for throwing two boilers of coffee on the flames when the kitchen burst into flames, but counceled it was a good investment in view of the fact that coffee was expendable and kitchens were not. His clothes burned at the water's edge. His personal belongings went up in smoke but he never relaxed in his jolly repartee of rebuilding a shattered moral as the embers cooled.

After the rush of events had abated, men began to relax. They slept soundly on whatever bedding they could beg, borrow or steal. Many were too tired to hunt for a bed and slumped down wherever they happened to be. Aside from a few small details which were sent about the grounds to collect tools, the entire crew was at rest.

Sunday began the tedious routine of establishing communication with the outside world. Telephone lines were restrung, trails were cut open, and the grounds were policed and repaired.

Monday saw a general exodus of weary firefighters from the charred pit which was once the beautiful Lochsa, up through nine miles of ashes and ruin to the lofty heights of Sherman Peak and the trucks. Goodbys, with a tinge of sincerity and understanding seldom attained on the frontier were exchanged. They would never be together again, but they had skirted a tryst with death and it had moved them beyond the common.