

AND FAMILY
THINGS TO DO AT WORK

THE FIRST TEN YEARS WERE THE TOUGHEST

By Ralph L. Hand
(Retired 1955)

If in order to qualify as an oldtimer in the Northern Rocky Mountain Region, it is necessary to have toughed it out through the critical fire seasons of 1910 and 1919, I'm afraid I can't make the grade.

I believe it was during the former year that, as a schoolboy in southwestern New York State, I first got smoke in my eyes and ashes in my hair from hardwood slash fires. I remember too that for a time we were pretty badly smoked up from the big Michigan and Minnesota fires and I expect it was just about then that I first began to think of the Forest Service as a possible career.

This was before the Weeks Law had been passed and there wasn't an acre of national forest land within many miles of my home, so the idea was still rather vague when, in 1915, I attended a summer forestry camp in the Adirondacks. This camp was in conjunction with the regular summer camp that was attended by all second-year students of the New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse University, but it was open to practically anyone who was interested in forestry.

Henry H. (Hal) Tryon, whom the students often referred to as "The Harvard-educated lumberjack," was in charge of our group. Others whom I remember well include Dean Hugh Potter Baker; his brother, J. Fred Baker, who taught Silviculture; Dr. Chas. C. Adams, who later directed the Roosevelt Wildlife Experiment Station for many years; Wm. L. Bray, the ecologist; and a professor of botany named Harry Brown.

That summer at Cranberry Lake convinced me that I was on the right track, but after many talks with students and instructors. I was equally convinced that there was little chance in that part of the country for the kind of employment I was looking for.

For the next couple of years I worked at various jobs including tree surgery on Long Island, cutting saw logs and chemical wood at a Pennsylvania lumber camp, ice harvesting on Chautauqua Lake and all sorts of furniture factory work from the lumber yard to the finishing floor. Then came World War One and a hitch in the Army with a little more than a year overseas, and so just about the time that the 1919 fire season was well under way, I was a footloose "G.I." with an Army discharge and what was left of a \$60 bonus in my pocket - looking for a job. It was not until the fall of 1920, having in the meantime wangled a \$150 scholarship at the University of Idaho and a one-cent-per-mile land-looker's ticket on the Canadian Pacific Railroad, that I headed for the Northwest.

At the time I entered, in late October, the Forest School staff at Moscow consisted of Dean Francis G. Miller, Henry H. (Heinie) Schmitz, and C. Edward (Eddie) Behre. In addition to the regular instructors we had special lecturers from the Forest Service. One of the first and best-remembered was Howard Flint, at that time an inspector in the District (Regional) Office at Missoula. Then there was a quartet of Supervisors, Joe Fitzwater from the Kaniksu, C.K. (Mac) McHarg from

in the wilderness without benefit of feminine companionship - not even a long-range view of one of the fair sex - were about all that he could take with equanimity. Come fall and the first letup from the shackles of a North Idaho fire season, and George was ready to invent almost any kind of excuse to get out of the woods even for a day.

On this particular occasion George had been forced to leave his saddle horse up Boulder Creek, having encountered a heavy blowdown from a recent windstorm. I had an assignment for him in upper Fish Creek - a long trip, impractical as a hiking chance - so I loaned him the use of Mike. I heard the story later, partly from George and partly from another employee whom he met at the Fish Creek Camp.

The camp was in a large, treeless meadow and as George rode up to the tent, a band of sheep entered the opposite end of the clearing. Perhaps it was the sudden appearance of the blatting woolies, or it might have been the herder's dog that startled Mike. Anyhow, he unlimbered that long body of his and George went up in the air and came down head first on the only obstacle in the entire meadow - a large log that had been dragged in for firewood. Furthermore, George swears that there was only one knot in the log and his head came in contact with that knot.

Now, the rest of the story comes from the second source, but George never denied nor did he confirm it. According to the witness, George slowly raised up on one elbow, wiped the blood from his face, felt the lump on his head and soliloquized thus: "Let's see," he said, groggily, "This is Friday. I can make it to Pete King by nightfall; catch the morning stage downriver, get Doc to patch up my head and take in the Saturday night dance at Kamiah!" Then he slumped over and lay in a half stupefied condition while his companion administered first aid, assisted by the shepherd.

I don't suppose I'll ever know how much of this story is valid and how much fiction, but I do know that George's activities during the next few days were closely in line with the schedule that he supposedly planned in that brief period of semi-consciousness. Furthermore, he was back at the Ranger Station Monday morning, his head swathed in bandages, but ready and "rarin' to go."

Mike didn't seem to be any the worse for his part in the escapade, but I sure would liked to have heard his version. I wish I knew whether George put him up to it or not. I got Mike when he was four years old, kept him until he was fourteen, and in all that time never once did he buck with me nor with anyone else, so far as I know, except on that one occasion.

1927

Before I start talking about the 1927 field season, I want to mention a few things that are a little out of line with the rest of the narrative, but inseparable in my memories from the other events of the year. Major Fenn died that year - I don't recall the date, but I do remember him as a friend and advisor during those early years on the Selway. One of my first winter details to the Supervisor's Office was to write a series of short articles on fire prevention for the local newspaper of which Major Fenn was publisher and editor. It was my first attempt

at that kind of job and I wasn't too sure of myself, but later my confidence got a real boost when one of my contributions showed up on the editorial page, with some favorable comments by the Major himself.

I remember two events during those early winters in Kooskia which are closely connected with Major Fenn. I mention them here because they involve a couple of the real oldtimers of Region One. First, was a party in honor of S.I. (Rene) MacPherson, a ranger who retired about the time that I came to the Selway. The other was a reunion between Major Fenn and Bob Snyder, an oldtime Clearwater Ranger who had served with him in the Philippines. Bob came up to Kooskia from Orofino, with some of the other Clearwater Rangers and as I remember the occasion, it was sort of an impromptu affair, organized on the spur of the moment.

Major Fenn's wife, whom everybody called "Grandma Fenn," was equally active in the social affairs of the community during those years. As a sixteen-year-old girl, she had come to Mount Idaho from Portland to visit an uncle, just in time to get caught in the Nezperce Indian War. It was said that at the battle for Mount Idaho she moulded bullets for the defenders - a detachment of the Idaho Militia in which Major Fenn was then a first lieutenant. They were married about a year later. Grandma Fenn outlived her husband by nearly thirty years and died at the home of a daughter at Walla Walla, a few years ago, at the age of ninety-five.

The 1927 fire season was just the reverse of the previous year. Regionally, it was one of the easiest seasons on record and it wasn't really bad on the Selway. However, instead of getting the breaks, our luck seemed to have run out. Ray Ferguson who had taken over the Middlefork District when Parsell resigned to take up ranching, joined me in the doubtful honor of producing the region's biggest fire that year. I don't remember whether it started on his district or mine, but we both took action and it was eventually stopped at less than a thousand acres.

That was the year too, that we started and completed the trail through the Black Canyon of the Lochsa. Hitherto, we had packed in over the high trail via Deadman Hill and Middle Butte - a two-day trip; now the distance was reduced to 16 miles and virtually a water grade.

Now, a word about some of those winter details. One of the commonest and one that I rarely escaped, was to travel around giving talks and showing slide pictures at the various schools of the community. The only vehicle the Selway owned was an old Reo truck and we used it occasionally; but more often we traveled by saddle horse, sending the projector and slides ahead by a local stage.

I remember one time when Fergy, George Case and I used the truck for a winter trip to the town of Nezperce. After getting stuck a couple of times, we borrowed some planks at a ranch house, bridged the ditch and took off across country. Eventually we got back to the road but then we got stuck again. Finally, we hired a rancher and his team to go along with us and pull us out whenever we got stuck; I think he charged us \$5.00.

Another time Supervisor K. Wolfe went along with Fergy and me on a trip to one of the ridge schools. We were carrying a portable generator to provide lights (rural electrification was still quite a few years in the future). It had worked fine up to then, but on the first pull of the string something happened. There were springs, cogs, pieces of wire, and I don't remember what else scattered all over the floor. There were plenty of suggestions but nobody was able to do anything and neither did anybody appear much concerned. Supervisor Wolfe made a short speech and a few of the local people contributed to the impromptu program, but I don't believe that anyone felt cheated, and I am sure that the prestige of the Forest Service remained as secure as it had been before.

Sometimes when I think of those early years on the Lochsa, it's hard to realize how isolated we were from outside contacts. I had now rounded out five years on that district, with an average of six to seven months in the field, plus an occasional winter trip, and in all that time I had had just two visits from the supervisor. As for District (Regional) Office men, they were scarcer than grizzly bears or wolverines. Howard Flint did make one short trip with the supervisor and they spent a couple of nights at my station, but so far as I can remember there were only two other Forest Service men, not attached to the Selway, who partook of Lochsa Station overnight hospitality during that five-year period. One was Bob Marshall who stopped over while on an unofficial hiking trip from Priest River to Missoula, and the other was Earl Sandvig. I believe Sandy had been looking over some sheep range in the general vicinity and dropped in to spend the night. I met Harry Gisborne for the first time during that period too; he was installing some weather instruments at Pete King.

There were a few others who managed to get as far from civilization as the Supervisor's Office at Kooskia. R. B. Adams put on a three- or four-day telephone school which we all attended, and C. E. (Skip) Knouf was there for a short time. Shelley Schoonover spent at least a week in connection with some kind of an audit, but I remember him best as a saxophone player. And that just about finishes the list. But there is an incident connected with Schoonover's visit that I want to relate.

It was on a Sunday and the weather was fine, so Supervisor Frank Jefferson decided to take Shelley for a ride up to Number One Ranger Station on the Middlefork. Jeff invited me to go along and another guest was a young schoolteacher who was staying at the Jefferson's home at the time. He was a Russian with a long, almost unpronounceable name which we had shortened to "Sary." Now Jeff had just purchased a new car - I don't remember the make; Sary had a new suit and I was wearing a new hat. While it was a beautiful day, the road, as always except in mid-summer, was full of ruts, pitch holes and mud puddles. Jeff's method of driving was to hit those puddles so hard that most of the muddy water went over the top of the car instead of against the windshield. Shelley was in front with Jeff, while Sary and I shared the back seat. When Jeff slammed into one of those pitch holes he bit his cigarette in two and the live end flew over the back of the seat. We couldn't find it right away, but in about a minute we began to smell something burning. Between Jeff's concern for the cushions of his new car and Sary's for his new suit, I had forgotten all about my hat until I began to feel a peculiar, warm sensation near the top of my head. Sure enough, the

cigarette had lodged in the crease of my hat and by the time we had discovered it, the hat was well ventilated and my hair had started to singe.

One of the last events of the 1927 field season was the driving of the "golden spike" at the completion of the new trail through the Black Canyon. Just a few days earlier some of the boys from my crew had pulled off a midnight raid on Fergy's crew that was working at the lower end of the project. Since our crew had been supplied via the long trail over the top, we were still subsisting on canned goods while the lower crew had fresh meat, vegetables and fruit in season. Our boys got away with a watermelon and a whole case of cantaloupes. The Lochsa had at last become a civilized district!

1928

I started out the new year with a winter detail at O'Hara Ranger Station to help "Red" Crocker build a two-story log commissary building. The third member of the crew was Fred Shaner, and later Roy Lewis joined us for a time.

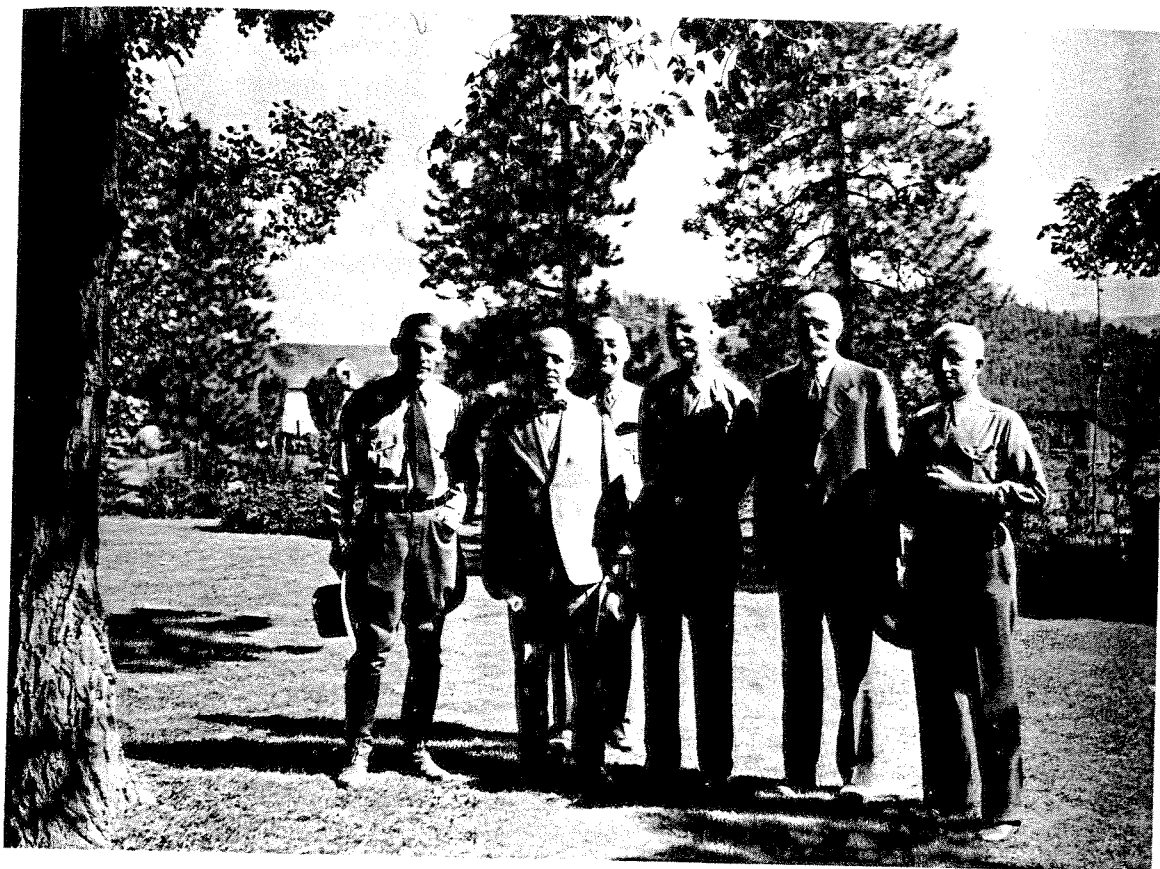
It began as a training project; Clyde Blake came up from the Nezperce to spend a few days showing us the mysteries of the Swede cabin scribe. Afterward we served as instructors to the rest of the Selway and most of the Clearwater Rangers. They came in groups of two or more and usually remained just long enough to make at least one blunder. I'll bet Crocker could look at that building today - if it's still standing - and point out each ill-fitting corner or other evidence of poor workmanship, including the dovetail that I put in backwards. Furthermore, I believe he could name the person responsible for each bungle.

That summer was much drier than the previous year but this time old Lady Luck had the Lochsa under her wing. Not having my usual quota of smokechaser trips, I didn't get on a fire until early September and that was to help Stanley McKenzie, Fergy's alternate, put the finishing touches on a hundred-acre fire on the Middlefork District. There were about 75 men on that little smudge, at least half of them smokechasers who had been pulled off from their back-country stations following an early snowstorm. With a crew like that, firefighting can be almost a pleasure.

An incident that happened later that fall calls to mind the Boulder Creek Canyon, a little mouse-colored mule named Useless, and one of the worst scares I ever got in my life.

There I was, hanging out over an almost perpendicular granite cliff, my left hand frozen to the half-inch swing rope while I groped with the other in an attempt to find something that I could grasp; even a fingerhold would have been encouraging. The other end of the rope was wrapped once around a cargoed pack and fastened securely to the saddle fork. The saddle was cinched to that little mule that we called Useless because she was both mean and unpredictable.

She was prancing around at the outer edge of the trail, kicking dust into my eyes and threatening at any moment to join me in a plunge over that precipice. I took a fresh hold on the rope with my right hand,



A visit to the Remount Depot - 1937. Left to right: Elens Koch, Henry S. Graves, Meyer H. Wolff, H.A. Smith, Gifford Pinchot, Evan W. Kelley.