



UNDER FIRE
THE WEST IS BURNING

From the Frying Pan Into the Fire

The following excerpts are taken from the Taylor Ranch journal of Jim and Holly Akenson.

If you have not heard anything, you are probably wondering what became of us. We experienced quite a bit of fire action in the Idaho's River of No Return Wilderness between August 10 and August 21, 2000.

✦ August 10:

We arranged for an evacuation from University of Idaho's Taylor Ranch Wilderness Field Station of a backpack group that encountered the Diamond Point fire, 18 miles up Big Creek from Taylor Ranch. Our closest trailhead, 32 miles up Big Creek to the west, is no longer accessible from the wilderness. Seventeen backpackers and Chris McDaniel, our summer maintenance person, were flown out to Salmon via Islander and twin engine Cessna 206 from our backcountry airstrip. In the evening, a dry lightning storm started the Point fire, a single tree on fire at Rush Point, five miles west of Taylor Ranch.

✦ August 11:

We hosted the Root Ranch crew — four people, 23 horses and mules — as they were evacuating from Root Ranch, 20 miles north-

west of Taylor Ranch to their base at the Flying B, 22 miles southeast of Taylor Ranch on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. The Flossie fire was only four miles from Root Ranch.

✦ August 12:

Worked with student interns getting the fire pump, hoses, and yard sprinklers set up for fire fighting. We could see a large column of smoke from the Point fire coming off Big Creek Ridge, just three miles upstream. Pilot Ray Arnold flew out two interns in the early afternoon, then he returned after the smoke thinned to collect the last intern. By evening we could see flames on a ridge upstream, so we had Ray come in a third time, just before dark to take out a planeload of personal valuables and ranch records. Outfitter Steve Zettel and his crew broke camp, evacuated from Cabin Creek and arrived here at 11:30 p.m. After dinner, they retired to the bunkhouse and cookhouse. As it turned out, this was the last use of these buildings.

✦ August 13:

At daybreak, Steve and crew departed. They decided to swing back up to Cabin Creek and

Story and Photos
By Jim and Holly Akenson

Opposite: Clouds of smoke billow from the Point fire as waters of the Salmon River flow lazily downstream.



then on up to Whiskey Springs to cut camp firewood. We went to work cutting brush from around buildings and maximizing sprinkler set up. So smoky this morning, I could only see a quarter-mile until 2:30 p.m. when the wind started to blow.

By 3:00 p.m. a large, dark cloud loomed to the west. We could hear a dull roaring noise off in the distance. We saddled a horse and four mules for our escape. I called Pete Amell of the Forest Service and informed him we were in imminent danger. He said the smokejumper plane had to turn back due to strong winds, so the smokejumpers could switch to helicopters to get to Taylor Ranch. I told him we were not going to wait for them. After several attempts, I reached Yellowpine Bar by radio and told them we were headed to the Flying B, 22 miles via trail.

At 3:30 p.m. flames danced wildly above the airstrip. The fire now sounded like a freight train. Flames jumped in half-mile leaps; to Horse Mountain, then to the Cliff Creek benches, then the airstrip. We turned on the gasoline powered fire pump and set up the hose with the nozzle aimed at the Taylor Cabin. We only had time to load up two packsaddle pannier bags with ranch valuables and some crackers. We rode from Taylor Ranch and looked back at the

orange inferno approaching the Taylor Cabin, our home in the wilderness. We traveled at a fast mule walk, ready to trot or gallop if need be.

At Dunce Creek, four miles downstream, we heard a helicopter over Taylor Ranch. We were grateful, depressed and scared all at once. We tried to contact the helicopter with our ground-to-air radio, but did not get a response. We sent e-mail messages to the University of Idaho and the District Ranger on our satellite e-mailer, but they did not get through.

On the Middle Fork we passed by a stubborn black bear sow that treed her cubs right off the trail. She finally yielded to us. At Wilson Creek, at 9 p.m. we encountered Rocky Mountain River Tours. They generously fed us dinner, loaned us sleeping bags and compassionately listened to our story. Ironically, former Governor Cecil Andrus was part of the float party. He was very concerned about Taylor Ranch, particularly since he had been instrumental in initiating the National Guard helicopter lift of the Lanham Lab cabin from Cabin Creek to Taylor Ranch, 10 years ago. We did not know that the smokejumpers were at Taylor Ranch, so we told the group we thought that most of the ranch had burned.

✿ August 14:

Smoke was thick in the Middle Fork canyon this morning. Rode to the Flying B by noon. Mike Knoshaug and Scott Ritchie from the Flying B met us at Jack Creek, three miles from the B. They said many of our friends in the back-country community expressed concern about us

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and had monitored their radios into the night in hopes that we would call. Mike and Scott had heard that six cabins had burned at Taylor Ranch. We were quite sad on this leg of the trip. We were certain that the historical log cabins, including our own home, had burned. We had lost the Taylor Ranch facility, lost our home and belongings, and essentially lost the purpose for our jobs as managers of the University of Idaho's Wilderness Research Station.

We got settled in at the B, told the evacuation story, and called Arnold Aviation on the backcountry radio to pass the word along of our safety. We were elated to learn that our least valuable buildings, the three cabins, had burned. The smokejumpers had arrived at Taylor Ranch an hour and a half after we left and were able to put out the fires burning around the other buildings.

✿ August 15:

Two large mushroom clouds from the Short Creek fire and the Shellrock fires billowed to the west and north of the Flying B Ranch. After experiencing how quickly the Point fire overtook Taylor Ranch, we were concerned about these fires with smoke clouds looming over the western sky. The Flying B management was also concerned and made arrangements to fly out their guests. We began clearing brush around the Flying B with its crew and helping Manager Rick Dorony take fire protection measures against the Shellrock fires and Short Creek fire.

✿ August 16-17:

We were anxious to return to Taylor Ranch. Active fire and wind around Taylor Ranch and thick smoke in the canyons prevented us from flying home. Twice we planned to leave with the mules in the early morning, but had to cancel the plan when we heard that one of the two fires between the Flying B and Taylor Ranch was burning along the trail. If we had wanted to take the stock out of the wilderness, our options were limited. We would have to ride the mules past the Camas Creek fire to the Meyers Cove trailhead, 20 miles east, or past the Pistol Creek fire to trailheads in the upper Middle Fork, 50 miles south. The Clear Creek fire closed the trail access through the Bighorn Crags.

Beyond the sight of the roiling orange color, the sound of a freight train came closer and closer.





Left: The fire storm blazed along the trail and prevented us from getting beyond it.

Opposite: As the wildfire continued to march forward, we saw flames on a ridge above the Flying B.

worked diligently at removing flammable vegetation from around the cabins, while keeping track of the smoke clouds erupting overhead. Holly hiked up the opposite hill and could see fire in upper Brush Creek, west and above the Flying B. We visited with Rick about an emergency fire plan. He then called a ranch meeting to explain the details of the plan. Holly, Rick, and Hope Wilkins did a practice fire drill to the hayfield. We had two Forest Service firefighters, Doug Graves and Mike Helm, stationed at the B for structure protection. Several helicopter flights came and went bringing in fire supplies, hoses and water pumps. We all sensed that something huge was about to happen.

✦ August 18:

The smoke cleared fairly early. I saddled our mules and packed Forest Service hoses, a water pump, fuel, and people from the Flying B to Bernard Guard Station. Rick left at 3 a.m. on horseback to find the 14 head of ranch stock missing up Brush Creek. He returned mid-morning with 11 head — three still missing. Rick rode with me to Bernard Airstrip to pick up groceries left there for the B, and to get Chris McDaniel, whom we had flown back in to help us clear trails as we traveled back to Taylor Ranch. Chris and I volunteered to pack floater gear on our mules from Bernard to the B when smoke closed in on the Bernard Airstrip. A twin engine Islander could evacuate 20 people from the float party.

Ominous mushroom clouds of smoke were developing to the north (Short Creek fire) and

So we continued with more brush clearing, ate like kings and watched huge smoke columns rise in five directions each afternoon. On Thursday, the 17th we could see flames on a ridge three miles north of the Flying B. Fire concern increased over previous days. We



southwest (Shellrock fires). My wife, Holly, and the Flying B crew began hosing down the buildings. Returned to the B and put the stock in a pasture by the hay barn. Doug reported at 3:30 p.m. that the Middle Fork Peak Lookout advised that the Shellrock fire was six miles southwest and coming our way rapidly, “a fire of Biblical proportions.” We began the emergency plan. Holly drove Vickie Thibault, Hope and their four dogs 3/4 mile to a green horse pasture where we had just moved the 55 head of Flying B horses and mules. On Doug and Mike’s advice, Chris and I prepared drip torches for back burning. Rick, Mike, Scott, and John Heinzelman manned the fire hose stations. George was returning from delivering people to

Bernard on the four-wheeler just before the fire arrived.

The sky to the west was dominated by boiling orange and black clouds. Rick asked about our stock. I recalled not cutting the fence — so I ran like mad and cut the fence along the stream. The “freight train sound” grew louder and louder. Rick sent the crew to the Middle Fork as planned. Marian Turner left the lodge and ran by me en route to the river. I saw Ron Swesey and Joanne Evans pass by, also headed for the river. I ran back to the shop to leash the dogs and try to get them to the river. I ran into Rick and Scott and we ducked into the shop. It took two of us to push the door open, since the fire-caused winds created a negative pressure



Hot wind lifted the suspension bridge and buckled the foot-wide beam supports.

inside the shop.

The wind was intense. Debris pelted the shop and it sounded like a hurricane. All we could do was stay put. Marian and Joanne were in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River under the bridge. They watched the wind lift the suspension bridge off its footings and slam it back into the edge of the piling, buckling the 12 inch beams. They drifted downstream to an island as the fire burned the riparian shrubs on the bank where they had been. Marian had burns on her eyelids from the intense heat, despite ducking

under the water. The Shellrock fire was burning all around the Flying B and the Short Creek fire was burning all around the pasture where Holly, Hope and Vickie were holed up.

In a blink of an eye, the fires joined together and became one giant hellstorm that roared up the east side of the Middle Fork. As the front of the firestorm passed over us at 4:30 p.m., the smoke cloud was so thick the sky was completely dark except for the flames on hillsides all around us. The sky radiated orange above the Flying B.

It did not look like anyone could survive. We decided to locate people. Rick and Scott went to the river and got a head count of eight. I found Doug at the water pump, trying desperately to make it work. Everyone returned from the river and the hayfield. We began fighting the fires around most of the structures. The air was so smoky that it was hard to breathe. I saw that Chris was still trying to run a hose, although his arm was dangling and his leg was dragging. Firefighter Mike, who was with Chris when the firestorm hit, was cupping his hands over his ears, which were obviously burned and coated with sand. Later, Chris said they raced from the fire, jumped two fences and were overtaken by wind and flames. They were blown into a hawthorn tree and covered by an uprooted mountain mahogany. They had the worst injuries. We all had very sore eyes and lungs from blowing sand and dense smoke.

Holly got a backcountry radio going in the front yard and with some difficulty, we communicated with Carol Arnold and Flying B General Manager Bill Guth. A helicopter came in and evacuated Mike for burn treatment. I checked on our stock and located them down by the airstrip. Our mule Penny was limping with many lacerations on her chest from blasting through a barbed wire fence. The other mules and Bo, the horse, were okay with lighter cuts. After dark, the place was lit up all night by the glow from the 3,600 bales of hay flaming in the roofless barn, and trees that were still blazing on ridges in all directions. The cabin Holly and I had been staying in burned to the ground, including my



Asphyxiated by smoke and burned by the blow up, wildlife became victims of Mother Nature's ire.

wallet, and all of our clothes. We were just thankful to be alive! We gathered in the lodge and talked late into the night.

✿ August 19-20:

Walked around looking at the aftermath of the firestorm at the Flying B and surrounding wilderness. What a mess! Trees fell on several buildings, one building collapsed, roofs blew off three buildings, another three buildings burned. The riparian, grassland, sagebrush, and forests were 99% burned. Bill Guth flew in and we photographed the destruction for the insurance adjuster. The big suspension bridge over the Middle Fork had been twisted and broken by the firestorm. We estimated the winds could have been 100 miles per hour. When the fire burned past the Flying B, it went seven miles in 22 minutes! The fires we fled from Taylor Ranch were now merged with these fires to become the 170,000-acre Diamond Point fire, only one drainage from the 175,000-acre Clear Creek fire. We found a lot of dead wildlife. I had to dispatch a cute little fawn deer with awful burns. Squirrel and bird remains were numerous. We

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were all struggling with depression from the scenes. We spent two long days cleaning up debris around the cabins. Our golden retriever Mica had hurt her leg while swimming and needed to see a veterinarian.

✿ August 21:

At first light, Chris and I hit the trail with the stock. We had to ford the Middle Fork since the bridge was out. The going was better than expected. We had to clear brush and rocks in burned areas but no big trees. We expected one of our bigger challenges would be getting the

mules to cross the Bighorn Bridge on lower Big Creek, which had been wrapped with fireproof foil. To our surprise, Daisy led the string across the bridge of foil with only token hesitation. Riding up Big Creek was ghostly, with many trees and stumps burning and smoldering on the south side of the stream. We made the 22 miles in seven hours. Ray Arnold flew Holly and Mica through the smoke to Cascade for surgery and doctoring. Chris and I were greeted at the ranch by firefighters Mike, Ryan, and Edward. They had the place in good shape, considering. We were happy to see the tack shed still standing!

A charred structure was all that was left of the bunk house.





Voracious flames had consumed the cookhouse, bunkhouse, wall tent and frame, woodshed and two woodpiles. The 12 smokejumpers who saved this place did a miraculous job! It was an amazing landscape of charred and blackened forests, grasslands and cliffs. The fire burned very hot around Taylor Ranch, although the 60-acre ranch area remained an unburned, green oasis. When Holly flew in on August 24, she saw that most of the Big Creek Canyon had burned on both sides, from Beaver Creek to below Taylor Ranch. A majority of winter range also burned. The “sagebrush flat” does not have a single shrub remaining. The new millennium not only brought to a close an old century, it

also marked a new beginning, and a fresh chapter in our lives at Taylor Ranch — post fire.



Jim and Holly Akenson are year-round residents of Taylor Ranch. The husband-wife team are Field Station Managers/Research Biologists. They are employed in the summer by the University of Idaho and in the winter months by the Hornecker Wildlife Institute of Bozeman, MT. The Akensons teach a variety of field classes from wildlife biology to working with pack mules and horses.

Taylor Ranch Aftermath

The buildings lost in the fire will be replaced next spring and summer. There has been a renewed interest in Taylor Ranch from a scientific standpoint, to look at the post-fire environment and measure the effects of fire on wildlife, forest and plant communities, stream aquatic life and surface geology. On a more practical side, we are also preparing the ranch for high water on Big Creek and its tributaries at the field station, now much more likely after the fire.



