



Fire at Taylor Ranch

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— Jim Akenson, Taylor Ranch Manager

The Taylor Ranch Wilderness Field Station is the heart of the University of Idaho's Wilderness Research Center. It is tucked in the mountainous folds of the 2.35-million-acre Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, the largest in the lower 48 states.

Taylor Ranch lies along Big Creek, a major tributary to the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, and 37 miles from the end of the nearest road. Backcountry plane rides to the ranch's remote airstrip provide the most common means of transportation for researchers and visitors. Students who visit the ranch often hike into the ranch, a three-day trek, while others who prefer the saddle mount up for a two-day horseback ride.

The ranch was founded by "Cougar Dave" Lewis, a hunter of national repute who was credited by the New York Times in 1927 with 600 cougar kills. A Civil War veteran, Lewis arrived in the Big Creek country about 1879 and patented his claim to the ranch in 1924. Jess and Dorothy Taylor were the next owners after Jess struck up a friendship with Lewis.

The Taylors bought the ranch in 1934. They cared for Lewis until his death the following year at age 93. In 1964, Maurice Hornocker visited the ranch seeking a base to conduct his pioneering research on cougars. At Hornocker's suggestion, the university bought the ranch for \$100,000 in 1969.

In 1972, the Wilderness Research

Center was created. It continues to draw on the College of Natural Resources faculty and the ranch to conduct research on fish and wildlife, wilderness and the human dimensions of wilderness ecosystems.

Splendid in its isolation as a base for wilderness research, the ranch nearly succumbed this summer to the primal forces that draw scientists to it. Fire is an essential element in the dry forests of Idaho. It is also a force to be reckoned with.

On Aug. 10, a lightning strike ignited a tree five miles from the ranch. Three days later, fire descended on the ranch. The highlights of a diary kept by ranch caretakers Jim and Holly Akenson follow:

August 10: Arranged for an evacuation from here of a NOLS backpack group that encountered the Diamond Point fire in mid-Big Creek. Seventeen people and Chris McDaniel, our summer maintenance person, were flown out to Salmon.

August 11: We hosted the Root Ranch crew (four people, 23 horses and mules) as they were evacuating from Root Ranch to their base at the Flying B on the Middle Fork. The Flossie fire was only four miles from the Root.

August 12: Worked with the interns, Jeremy, Sam and Ken, getting hoses and sprinklers set up for fire fighting. We could see a large column of smoke coming off Big Creek Ridge just three miles upstream. Called to alert the university of fire danger around Taylor Ranch. Ray Arnold flew out Sam and Jeremy in the early afternoon, then in the late afternoon, when the smoke thinned, he flew out Ken. By evening we could see flames on a ridge upstream so we had Ray come in before dark and take out a plane load of personal valuables and ranch records. Steve Zettel and his crew took down their camp and evacuated from Cabin Creek, arriving here at 11:30 p.m. Holly fed them and they slept in the bunkhouse and cookhouse.

August 13: Saw Steve's crew off. We went to work cutting brush from around buildings and maximizing sprinkler set up. Very smoky this morning, could only see a quarter-of-a-mile until 2:30 p.m. when the wind started to blow. By 3, a large dark cloud loomed to the west. We could hear a dull roaring noise. We saddled stock rapidly (one horse, four mules), I called Pete Amell (USFS-fire) and informed him we were in imminent danger. He said a jumper plane was almost there, I told him we were likely headed out to the Middle Fork. Tried to call Arnold's, couldn't raise them. Finally reached Sharon at Yellowpine Bar and told her we were headed to the Flying B, 22 miles via trail. At 3:30, flames appeared above the airstrip, fire now sounded like a freight train, flames jumped to Horse Mountain then the Cliff Creek benches. We turned on the fire pump and set up the hose aimed at the Taylor Cabin. We only had time to load up two pannier bags with ranch valuables and some crackers. We took off and looked back at the inferno approaching the Taylor Cabin. We traveled at a fast mule walk, ready to trot or gallop if need be. At Duncce Creek, four miles downstream we heard helicopters arriving at the ranch. We were grateful, depressed, scared

Heat signatures (red) and dense smoke (light blue) are visible from fires burning in Alberta, British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Utah. This is a NOAA-12 image at 9:12 PM EDT.

CREDIT NOAA



This National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration photograph shows the extent of forest and range fires in Idaho on August 18, 2000.

all at once. On the Middle Fork we passed by (at 30 feet) a stubborn sow black bear that treed her cubs right off the trail, she finally yielded to us. At Wilson Creek, at 9 p.m., we encountered a float party, Rocky Mountain River Tours, that generously fed us dinner, loaned us sleeping bags and pads and compassionately listened to our story. 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: Rode to the Flying B by noon. Mike and Scott from the B met us at Jack Creek, three miles from the B. They said many on the radio were concerned about us. At that time the word was that six cabins had burned at Taylor Ranch. We were quite sad on this leg of the trip. Got settled in at the B, told the evacuation story, and called Arnold's to pass the word along of our safety.

August 15: Called Ranger Fred Dauber to let him know we were fine. He had good news that only three cabins had burned. Began clearing brush around the Flying B and helping Rick take fire protection measures against the Shellrock Fires and Short Creek Fire.

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Fire appeared on a ridge near Taylor Ranch on Aug. 13, forcing an evacuation of ranch personnel to the Flying B Ranch, a 22-mile trail ride away.

August 16-17: Continued fire prevention (more brush clearing), ate like kings, and watched huge smoke columns build in five directions. On the 17th we could see flames on a ridge three miles north of the B. Fire concern increased over previous days. Holly hiked up the opposite hill and could see fire in upper Brush Creek, west and above the Flying B. Several helicopter flights came and went bringing in fire supplies: hoses, water pumps, etc. We all sensed that something would happen in a few days.

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—3 still missing. Ominous mushroom clouds of smoke were developing to the north (Short Creek fire) and southwest (Shellrock fire). Holly and the Flying B crew began hosing down the buildings. Doug reported at 3:30 p.m. that the Middle Fork Peak Lookout said the Shellrock fire was six miles SW and coming our way...rapidly. We began the emergency plan. Holly drove Vickie, Hope and their four dogs to a green horse pasture where we had moved the 55 head of Flying B horses and mules. Chris and I prepared drip torches for back burning at Doug and Mike's advice. Rick, Mike, Scott, John manned the fire hose stations. Rick asked about our stock, and I recalled not cutting the fence, so I ran

like mad and cut the fence along the stream. Cricket saw me cut the fence then sprinted back to the others...where they disappeared into the darkness—at 4 p.m. I remember hearing the "freight train sound," louder than on Big Creek. Marian left the lodge and ran by me en route to the river. I saw Ron and Joanne 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 also. The wind was intense, debris was pelting the shop and it sounded like a hurricane. All we could do was stay put. 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 stationed, then the fires joined and roared up the east side of the Middle Fork. Holly saw a large orange glow from fire radiating from the Flying B. It did not look like anyone could have survived. About 10 minutes later it let up. 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—which he got going by clearing debris from the suction device. We began fighting the fires at or around most of the structures; this went on for 90 minutes or so. I saw Chris was swinging an arm and dragging a leg, but still trying to run a hose. Mike Helm (UI Forestry student), who was with Chris when the firestorm hit was cupping his hands over his ears, which were obviously burned and coated with sand. Chris said that they raced the fire front, jumped two fences and then were overtaken by wind and flames and blown into a

hawthorn tree and covered by debris. 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 yard and with some difficulty we communicated to Carol Arnold and Flying B General Manager Bill Guth. A helicopter came in and evacuated Mike for burn treatment.

After dark the place was lit up all night by the glow from the 3,600 bales of hay burning in the roofless barn and trees still burning on ridges in all directions. The cabin Holly and I had been staying in burned to the ground...including my wallet, our few clothes and borrowed clothes. We were all 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 at the Flying B and surrounding wilderness. What a mess! Trees fell on several buildings, one building collapsed, roofs blew off three buildings, three buildings burned.

The riparian, grassland, sagebrush and forests are 99 percent burned. The big suspension bridge over the Middle Fork had been twisted and broken in half by the firestorm. When the fire burned past the Flying B it went seven miles in 22 minutes!



The power of the firestorm twisted this suspension bridge over the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.



Jim and Holly Akenson were presented President's Medallions at UI's December Commencement for their heroism, dedication and leadership during last summer's forest fires.

August 21: Chris and I hit the trail. We had to ford the Middle Fork since the bridge is out. The going was better than expected. 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 that had been wrapped with fire proof foil. To our surprise, Daisy led the crew across the foil with only moderate difficulty. 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 to Cascade through the smoke. Mica had surgery on her hock. 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 tackshed still standing! The building loss was the cookhouse, bunkhouse, tent and frame, and two woodpiles. The 12 smokejumpers that saved this place did a great job! It is an amazing landscape...charred and black. When Holly flew in on Aug. 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 is burned. The "sagebrush flat" does not have a single shrub remaining. Thus begins a new chapter in our lives at Taylor Ranch...."post fire."

— Jim and Holly Akenson

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Taylor Ranch as a "post-fire" field station

The fires that surrounded Taylor Ranch Field Station this summer provide an unmatched chance to study the effects of major change in an area that is little influenced by people. "The scientific work that occurred before the fires is key to the field station's value for research now," said Ed Krumpe, the station's director and professor of resource recreation and tourism.

Maurice Hornocker's pioneering mountain lion studies, long-term bighorn sheep research, detailed work on elk use of winter range, and monitoring of the reintroduced wolves all provide important background for future research. The Big Creek and Salmon River's Middle Fork hold resident trout and migratory salmon and steelhead runs in pristine habitat, too. Water quality studies in the past also will provide a solid foundation for building a new,



post-fire research program.

"The fire may be an opportunity scientifically, but the aftermath will pose challenges for the station, too," Krumpe said. "In the short term, it will make life a little more difficult. We're sure we'll have muddier water, and there could be threats from flash flooding. Downed trees on trails will mean it also will be harder to get around. But I think long term, we have the opportunity to do research that you couldn't do anywhere else." ❶

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Smokejumper Gabriel Holquin, pictured at left, was one of dozens of UI students who fought forest fires in the West over the summer. Holquin, a senior majoring in forest resources, worked for the U.S. Forest Service and was stationed at Grandeville.

UI Student Firefighters Honored

More than 80 University of Idaho students have been honored for their part in quelling the August-September wildfires in Idaho and other western states in October. UI President Bob Hoover and Provost Brian Pritchett hosted the students at a lunch and presented certificates of appreciation for their help in fighting the fires.

While the majority of UI students were associated with the College of Natural Resources, other men and women from across campus also joined in. Some took off weekends throughout the summer; others served for a few weeks to help stem the emergencies.

"UI is proud to have the kind of students who work to balance community service with their need for an education," said Hoover.

After the summer's emergency call for action, the university worked with the students to accommodate late starts or intermittent absences.