



Siuslaw National Forest Fun Facts

June 17, 2008

As I Remember It: Life of an Early Forest Ranger

Note: C. P. Cronk came to the Siuslaw National Forest in the summer of 1910, serving first as a forest guard on the Hebo Ranger District, and later promoted to an Assistant Forest Ranger after successfully passing the Forest Ranger examination. In this excerpt from his memoirs, Cronk describes his primary summer duty, controlling forest fires. While some fires were naturally caused, the majority of burns resulted from the prevalent early practices of homesteaders attempting to clear their land of the dense coastal brush. Often the landscape was set afire and allowed to burn until fall rains set in.



In mid-August of 1910 Ranger Russell and I counted 16 fires burning at one time. During the worst 6 weeks, I have a recollection of not sleeping in my bed more than once or twice. Most of the time we had less than a dozen men and could only peck away where the danger seemed greatest.

At the last blow-up we were working on a fire on top of Mt. Hebo in the old burn. We got that corralled -- or thought so. When we saw smoke near Dolph, heading toward Cloverdale, we started for that. When we had gone only a few miles we saw the Hebo fire breaking out again. Russell sent me back with my blanket, tarp, shovel, mattock and ax to get some men from Hebo for a new attack. Failing to corral any volunteers, I started back with 60 pounds of grub thinking that I alone at night might be able to hold the fire. I did manage to hold quite a length of fire line, but in the morning the wind rose and I found myself with a nice fire line, but with fire going by me on both sides. I should probably have headed for a small pond, but I was thinking more of making the ridge trail. Fortunately I did know the country. With increased wind velocity the fire was advancing more intensely through the tops of the snags than on the ground. I figured I had a chance to make the trail before the fire crossed it. My one thought was to beat the fire down the mountain.

Though thoroughly mad at the apathy of the natives, nevertheless I warned the people at Hebo of the proximity of the fire. I again approached the road crew that had practically laughed at me before, told them to pick up their tools and get up the mountain. Strange to behold, they did it, though I doubt if, at that time, we forest officers had the authority to commandeer fire-fighters.

At night people would wet down the roofs of their houses until the blessed rains came, when our troubles were over. The following spring, however, there was a wisp of smoke coming from one of the snags along the road to Cloverdale.

As I look back from the vantage point of the present, with its many refinements in the detection and fighting of fires, and the change in public attitude, I wonder at the naïve inexperienced attack in 1910 on the Hebo complexity of fires. Not knowing where to turn next, with woefully inadequate and untrained crews, in the face of an unsympathetic, even antagonistic public, it was frustrating and futile.



