CLEARWATER FOREST

The Clearwater Forest at that time included the present Clearwater and most of the Lochsa and Selway River drainages, with headquarters at Kooskia under Major F. A. Fenn. It was mostly virgin wilderness country, with few trails. Lightning fires were spotted all over the Forest, and the widely scattered rangers were doing the best they could with small crews of five to twenty men to a fire. Many fires were never reached at all.

When the big blow came August 20 and 21, the whole head of the Clearwater burned, from Weistas Creek up through Kelly Creek and across the Bitterroot Range 10 to 15 miles down on the Montana side. On the Selway River, the fire ranged through Moose Creek and much of the Upper Selway River.

Moose Creek Crew

Since the upper Selway River is more accessible from the Montana side than from Idaho, the District Office in Missoula arranged for a firefighting crew to go in by the Lost Horse Trail from the Bitterroot to handle some of the fires on Moose Creek. Deputy Supervisor Ed Thenon took in one such crew. After a long journey they made camp on Moose Creek in a big cedar flat, eight miles above the Three Forks Ranger Station. At four o’clock it became pitch dark, but strangely enough Thenon did not seem to realize the cause of such untimely darkness. Thenon has written his own story, and it is such a vivid description of the experience of one crew in weathering the big fire it is quoted.

“There were 30 men at this camp. Soon after supper the men began to retire all but myself. Being one of those persons who used the bed extensively as a place where lots of time can be spent thinking over one’s troubles, I bedded down at 10 o’clock but did not go to sleep. A short time there-after I heard something dropping on the tent and believing it to be rain drops I jumped up and went outside to see. I turned up my face but not feeling anything I spread out my hands but still could feel no rain. I re-entered the tent and lay down again and soon heard what I thought was a shower of rain. On going outside the tent again I discovered that there was a strong wind blowing through the tree tops and needles and refuse from the tree tops were dropping on the tent. I said: “Damn, why couldn’t it just as well be rain,” and went in and lay down again.

“Not long after this I heard someone outside my tent calling, ‘Ed.’ I recognized the voice as Louie Fitting’s. I said: ‘Hello, what’s the matter?’ He said: ‘Come out here, I just saw a start fall on the hillside across the creek and it has started a fire.’ I was outside at once and sure enough he pointed out a small fire starting well up on the hill across the creek from our camp. I knew it was out of reason to think a star could have set this fire, and in looking around to the west, the direction the gale of the wind
was coming from, I saw the sky aglow with pink color spread across a width of several miles. I knew at once all about Fitting’s start and where it came from.

“The fire was coming at a high rate of speed. Already it was beginning to throw shadows in our camp and we were right in the middle of its path.

“I aroused the men at once and ran out a few steps to the creek to see what the chances were for us there. I found the creek to be six or eight inches deep and about eight fee across with a strip of sand six feet wide which had been strewn along its edge by a sharp turn in the creek. A drift pile eight feet high and twelve fret long was at the upper point of this strip of sand.

“I ran back to the men who were all up by this time upon seeing what was about to happen, some of them were beginning to cry and take on pretty bad, while others were as cool and calm as if this was an everyday occurrence, and these were the men who were to be so valuable to me that night and who followed out my every order throughout the night.

“I ordered the men to move everything out on the strip of sand and pile it up in one pile. Some of them were so excited they could do nothing and wanted to try to make their getaway ahead of the fire. I knew this was an impossible thing to do. I got up on a log and called all the men’s attention to me long enough to advise them not to leave this spot, to stay together, and not to make an effort to save themselves by leaving the creek, that this could not be done. I said; ‘If we all lie down in the creek during the crisis, no one will be hurt and we will pull through all right.’

“The cooler heads got busy moving our outfit to the sand strip while I was sizing up that drift pile trying to determine whether to set it on fire and try to burn it up before the crown fire reached us or leave it and try to keep it from burning until the overhead fire had passed over us. I did not want this drift and the crown fire over our heads at the same time as it would make our position much worse. I got a water bucket and decided to keep the drift from burning until the overhead fire had passed on. The men were busy piling up our camp outfit not far from the drift pile. The fire was close by the drift had already caught fire several times and had been put out with buckets of water. At this time someone reported that all the camp had been moved and I ordered them to wet all the canvas and throw it over the grub pile. By this time pieces of burning bark and cinders were coming down all about us. I was very busy with my drift pile. It was catching fire in places faster than I could put it out. I stopped long enough to tell the men to take all the blankets and soak them in the creek.

“Charley and Fitting had the two horses covered, heads as well as their bodies with wet blankets. By this time the heat from the crown fire was plainly felt as it was only a few rods away and the wet canvas thrown over the grub pile had already caught fire.

“I was throwing a bucket of water on the grub pile when I heard a commotion among the men and left my work to see what it was about. We had rolled in the creek several times before this to keep our clothes soaked. I found that two of the men had completely lost their minds. One of them had become violently insane and three men were trying to hold him and to him down in the creek. The other one was dancing around and singing a lullaby.
“Right here was the time when those cool-headed men were of the inestimable value to me as several other men became frantic at this time and wanted to rush off to, I don’t know where. I ordered every man to get into the creek, lie down and put a wet blanket over his head. I set the lullaby boy down in the deepest water and told him to stay there and threw a wet blanket over his head. He would not lie down. The three men with the other fellow (he was our cook) had gotten him to lie down in the creek which had quieted him some. The others who became wild were also taken care of by the cooler-headed men and were lying down in the creek by this time. There were two or more blankets for each man so we were not short on these.

“I looked down the strip of sand and saw that all men except Charley and Fitting were in the creek. These two were dashing water on the blankets covering the horses.

“I turned to the grub and drift piles and found them both blazing. I grabbed up my bucket and dashed a bucket of water on the canvas and at this very moment the crown fire was directly over me and some sudden shift in the wind brought the heat right down upon me. The heat was so intense that it took my breath away. I swayed around a step or two with the empty bucket still in my hand and dropped to my knees. This was the critical moment, the crisis, and the only moment during this ordeal that I felt sure my time had come and that it was the end. On falling to my knees and for no particular reason I struck my head into the bucket. This proved a blessing as I was able to draw a breath instantly and was relieved of the terrible strain. I got to my feet and with two or three steps I was in the creek where I lay down with the bucket still over my head. Having no blanket with me, I kept the bucket over my head for it had certainly saved my life.

“In perhaps five minutes the wind changed and this relieved us somewhat of the intense heat. The lullaby boy (I did not know his name) was still singing and now and then calling for someone to throw another bucket of water on him. I raised my bucket enough to look around some but saw no one moving except Charley who was throwing a bucket of water on the horses’ blankets, then lying down again in the creek. Later he said that the blankets had dried out to such an extent in those few minutes as to catch fire from the cinders falling about us. The cook had quieted down considerably.

“The overhead fire had passed on and the heat was gradually moderating. Now we had the ground fire only to contend with, and soon we began getting out of the water to huddle around the heap of coals left by the burned drift pile to dry out our clothing. The snags and blazing old dead trees across the creek gave us plenty of light to see. The grub pile and canvas were a heap of ashes. Three men and I were suffering great pain in our eyes. They were smarting and burning so badly that it was almost impossible for us to open them enough to find our way around.

“To make sure that everyone was there and safe I had the roll called and found two missing. We could not come to any conclusion but that they had tried to outrace the fire and lost their lives in the attempt. Some of the men who knew their names began calling out to them. Soon we heard an answer from down the creek and the two deserters came wading up the creek to us. I scolded them some for leaving camp, and asked them why they did it. One of them remarked that they could not see how anyone could survive in this place so they went down the creek to see if they could find a place they thought might be safer. They found a large old cedar tree across the creek with the stump part high enough from the water to enable them to crawl under and they stayed there. After the fire had passed on they were much
surprised to hear someone calling as they thought they were the only ones who had come through the critical time alive.

“Now there was considerable danger from falling timber. There were several standing dead trees near us that were burning and one had already fallen almost into our camp as a warning. A little later John wanted to use a bucket and walked down the sand strip to where one was, and just as he bent over and reached for it, a tree struck it and smashed it flat. If the bucket had been a foot further away the tree would have killed John instantly.

“The horses remained very quiet during all this excitement. This may seem very strange, and it is, but the fact that they had wet blankets over their heads and could see nothing that was going on around them accounted for it.

“The cook’s condition had improved so much that he had no further need of attention from us. However, he did not get back to a normal state while here, but I was informed some weeks later that he had entirely recovered, the ‘lullaby boy’ was taken to an asylum.

“By this time it was getting daylight. Breakfast, and how to get it was now our problem. We sized up the ash heap under which were our supplies. One of the men got a chip and commenced to carefully scrape the ashes off the pile. The four of us whose eyes were affected were sitting down trying to nurse our eyes that were paining us so much. I had been snow-blind some years before and the pain in both cases seemed to me to be identical. One of the men said he knew of a remedy that would relieve our pain. He went over to the grub pile and commenced digging around and soon came back with a half a cup of table salt and told us to dash some into our eyes. We did this and I thought it was more ashes than salt for while, but it surely helped us and by using it often several times, our eyes improved nicely.

“The men now had the ashes pretty well scrapped off the grub pile. One had a pot and was filling it with half baked beans. One had a pan and was carefully dipping up flour, while another pulled out a slab of bacon, fried on one side only, and breakfast was soon on the way. One was still digging around in the heap for coffee and sugar but found none. All sacks and wrappers were burned off the stuff, making a sweet mess of it. One took a large coffee pot and filled it from the creek and put it on the fire with the remark that it would look like we were having coffee anyway. ‘Yes,’ another one said; ‘it ought to be good and stout too, from the ashes in that water.’ We had some kind of a breakfast.’

While this was going on, Ray Fitting now Supervisor of the St. Joe Forest, was scouting the fire situation in the North Fork of Moose Creek, alone. He was caught in the sweep of the fire and took refuge in the creek under an overhanging ledge. The fire swept over him, burning the timber to the water’s edge, but by keeping under water with his coat over his head he managed to survive the terrifying experience. He said he was really scared when the dead fish began to drift down past him. If the water was hot enough to kill the fish, he had visions of being boiled alive.