

**Memories of Rager (1961-66)**  
**By**  
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In June of 1961 my wife Lois, one year old son Jonathan, and I left Newport, Rhode Island in a 1953 Chevrolet towing a small U-Haul trailer containing all of our earthly possessions and headed for Rager Ranger Station.

Six days later we arrived with the temperature at 108 degrees F. That winter the temperature dropped to 34 degrees below 0 F., we never experienced those extreme temperatures again during our years at Rager.

In hindsight I do not believe I had a firm commitment of a job but here we were. Fortunately there was a small house available in camp that was known as the goat shed. Apparently a former employee at Rager had a child who could only drink goats' milk and the goats were kept in what was now our first home in Oregon. That fall we moved into a house trailer and the goat shed was burned several days later which I now suspect was so no one else could move into it.

Since we lacked any furniture many of the people in camp pitched in and gave us what we needed to set up housekeeping. The Headquarters Fireman position was also vacant so now I had a job.

I had previously worked on the Ochoco while a Forestry student at the University on Massachusetts (Stockbridge School of Agriculture) as lookout on Round Mountain on the Big Summit ranger district during the summer of 1959. It was there that I first met Jim Overbay. Fortunately for me Jim was now the Assistant Ranger at Rager and running the show as the former ranger Jefferies had left and the new Ranger, Don Campbell had not yet arrived.

As Headquarters Fireman I worked under the direction of Bill Barnaby, the district fire control officer. The work consisted primarily of supplying our four lookouts and guard station. I also reconditioned fire tools, tested fire pumps and did various odd jobs around the Ranger Station, and was available for initial attack on reported fires.

During June I attended Fireman's Training Camp, a five day event held at Big Summit Ranger Station along with all the new employees both permanent and temporary. The purpose of the school, which was held at the old C.C.C. camp, was to teach basic forest fire fighting skills to new employees.

That summer was rather uneventful until mid-August. At that time a series of lightning storms hit central Oregon and continued on and off for several weeks. Every person on the district was engaged in some phase of fire fighting activities for the next three weeks.

During that time, like most others, I would go for three or four days without changing clothes or shaving, eating WWII C-rations and sleeping for an hour or two on the fire line.

Thankfully, most of the fires were either Class A or B. Nevertheless, at one point, with all district personnel engaged in firefighting, there were 54 unmanned fires burning on the district.

We threw out that part of the textbook that said we should stay with a fire for so many hours after the last smoke. Instead, we would get a line around a fire, knock it down until no fire was showing then ribbon a trail back to the road and call in, if possible, for directions to the next fire.

With multiple fires burning on all districts radio communications were impossible at times. All districts were on the same frequency but because of distance and location two or three radio transmissions were possible at the same time. Gordon Johns, the forest radio technician recorded ten or twenty minutes of this constant jabber and played it at a meeting I attended at the S.O. the following winter. It was unbelievable.

In hindsight I feel the experience of not being able to rely on radio communications had a strong influence on me when I became F.C.O. the following year. At the first sign of lightning activity, usually near Snow Mountain, I would immediately start dispatching crews, when they checked in, to the nearest telephone. This would be to one of our four lookouts, Derr Guard Station or Six Corners. I loved Six Corners. It was somewhat centrally located, had a telephone, and was the hub of a network of roads that led everywhere.

During these weeks of constant firefighting I was driving my assigned vehicle which was a four wheel drive Dodge Powerwagon. There was a 150 gallon slip on unit in the bed with 150 feet of charged 1½" CJRL hose on a reel and a Pacific Marine pump.

Some nights on a fire when I felt I couldn't go on without a couple of hours of sleep I would take the keys out of the ignition so nobody would drive over me, crawl under "Old Herc," so I wouldn't be run over by a cat, wrap myself up in the canvas pump cover and grabbed a couple of hours of sleep.

The original airstrip for the district was located near Hardscrabble lookout; however, due to tricky crosswinds take offs and landings were always a thrill. With F.F.F. funds flowing freely at this time it was decided to construct another strip nearer the station in a location with more favorable wind conditions so the Powell Butte area was selected. As a point of interest during the 1960's there was a firefinder located on Powell Butte to get a cross shot on any smokes as needed.

As the two or three weeks of almost continual fire fighting started to wind down time was available to pick up some loose ends. One of those came to be known as the South Prong Fire. The initial attack on the fire was made by a Borate drop that was so accurate that any smoke from the fire was not visible to lookouts or aerial observers. Nobody could find it. Some days later the fire became active again and three smokejumpers were dropped on it. I took a crew in to help

them out and by midnight we had a line around the fire. As it was a long time since any of us had eaten I told everyone to take a break before starting mop-up. I had just put my Vienna sausage and instant coffee on a couple of burning logs when a 20 man Redmond Hotshot crew showed up. While I was walking the fireline with the crew leader his men went to work. By the time I got back to what was to be my first meal since who-knows-when the burning logs were no longer burning. My Vienna sausage and coffee were scattered all over the place. Some over zealous kid on the Hot Shot crew had destroyed my dinner.

All was forgiven early the next morning when a plane appeared overhead and three parachuted popped open bringing us what, to this day, was one of the best meals I have ever had in my life. Those people at Redmond know how to take care of their own.

Later in the day I was told to take all district personnel off the fire. While walking back down the South Prong Trail we passed our relief crew and to my surprise there was Bob Martin. Bob and I had been classmates in Forestry School at the University of Massachusetts and the last time I saw him was on graduation day.

The only diversion we had at Rager was television, which was nonexistent when Bill Barnaby and his family arrived in 1957. Bill and Keith (Nye) brought TV to Rager. The signal from Portland was picked up at Grizzly Mountain and sent on to the Maury Mountains where it was boosted and sent out to the various ranches who had built receivers and transmitters.

Bill and Keith visited several people who were knowledgeable of what was necessary to receive television signals, then they set about to make it happen. They purchased boosters and other electronic equipment as well as ladder line. The site they selected was near the water tank. Then they appropriated an outhouse from one of the campgrounds to house the equipment. Only one thing left...they ran an electric line to it.

They attached a TV antenna to a 25 foot 1½" steel pipe, which could only be raised or lowered using the Dodge Powerwagon, and set it next to the outhouse. The direction of the antenna was fine tuned using a pipe wrench. Copper ladder line with plastic spacers to carry the signal was then run from the outhouse to all the homes in camp. The only problem was that a wet heavy snow would separate the line ending the TV signal. More than one night I stepped out to join the others with numerous flashlight beams searching upwards through the snowflakes seeking the broken wire.

Going to a meeting at the S.O. was always a treat. The whole family got to stay at a motel in Prineville and watch TV at night only now we could actually read the print on the same blurry advertisements we saw at Rager. The first night my wife's mother visited us, we turned on the TV and she asked what was wrong with it. We thought it was pretty good picture.

I believe our District Ranger, Don Campbell, thought that TV was good for camp morale and was determined to find a stronger signal. So on a very cold weekend Don, Bill Barnaby and I

carried a generator, TV, and an antenna all over Bear Butte as well as several other locations looking for that stronger signal. We didn't find it.

In April 1962 Lois, who was nine months pregnant, began labor pains so we left for Prineville around seven in the morning. About 10 o'clock our first daughter, Katherine, was still-born. Minutes after the doctor told me, Bev Campbell, the ranger's wife showed up in the waiting room. I later found out she had lost a baby some years before so she knew what needed to be done. Lois, who had been moved from the maternity ward to a medical wing, was ready to return home in several days.

When we arrived Bev, my mother-in-law Eva, and some of the other wives had removed everything from what was to be the nursery and restored our home to what it looked like before the pregnancy. Eva brought the baby's remains back to Rhode Island and the baby now rests in our family plot not far from my home.

Social life at Rager consisted of parties held at someone's home. Progressive dinners, going from house to house for different courses of the meal, were also popular. In early summer, after the college kids arrived, volleyball games were held in the open area near the oil house. Almost everyone in camp attended, either to play or to watch until darkness ended the game. On occasion we would turn the garage into a movie theatre. We moved the vehicles out, set up folding chairs, and using the station's 16mm projector would show full length feature films. Even if the movie wasn't very good it was always entertaining to watch the audience dodge the swooping bats that were drawn to the occasion.

Speaking of bats; one morning I found one near my desk and knowing that Marilyn Opfer, the district clerk would be checking my diary to make out payrolls, I placed the bat in the desk drawer next to the diary. I was in the field that day but from what I heard it had the desired results.

At some point during my first year at Rager, Erwin Kaul and I were sent out to the Battle Mountain, 760 area, to do some routine trail maintenance work. We were dropped off with tools, sleeping bags, and c-rations and were to be picked up the following day. Late that afternoon Erwin became violently ill, throwing up and barely able to walk. When we got back to where we had left our gear I tried to contact Wolf Mountain or Spanish Peak with the "handi-talkie" but they were off the air for the day. Erwin seemed to be getting worse so I could either start walking or wait an hour or two and hope that Wolf Mountain signed on for "lookout hour," which was actually a half hour between 7 and 7:30 pm when the F.C.C. permitted the lookouts to use their radios as a party line telephone due to their isolated locations. When "lookout hour" began that day, thankfully Wolf Mountain elected to join in. However, my transmissions were overridden by the stronger lookout radios. A fellow by the name of Doug Graham on Spanish Peak must have been vaccinated with a

phonograph needle as he wouldn't stop talking. Finally, in desperation, I keyed the mike and kept it keyed repeatedly saying 10-33 for at least a minute with an occasional 'May Day' thrown in. Finally Wolf Mountain heard one of my 10-33's but the only way he could shut Graham up was to call him by telephone and tell him to get off the air. I then told Wolf Mountain of our problem and several long hours later a panel truck with a mattress on the floor showed up.

Looking back I can see I made some stupid decisions while at Rager but the worst by far was that Friday when I decided to burn some slash piles on a timber sale near Hardscrabble Lookout. Lois and I had plans to attend a Christmas Tree Growers Conference in Portland that weekend and intended to leave that night after work. I told the person in charge of the crew to burn the piles along one road in the sale. When they returned that evening he told me they had burned the entire sale. Since there were no funds available to put anyone on overtime to patrol the area during the weekend I should have cancelled the trip to Portland. Instead we went. As we returned to Rager late Sunday afternoon I could see a low flying aircraft dropping Bentonite near Hardscrabble. That scene haunts me to this day.

A few days before Christmas in 1964, with several feet of snow on the ground the weather turned spring like. I thought it was great and if anyone knew what was coming they didn't tell me. We awoke the next morning to find that Rager Creek was out of its bed a couple of hundred feet above the bridge and was now flowing through camp. It soon became apparent that we were isolated with all the culverts between Rager and Paulina washed out. If that wasn't bad enough, Lois was pregnant and a week overdue. Later this same day I was standing on the road in camp with several other fellows looking down at Rager Creek in its new location. I then saw the Ranger's 12 year old boy walking down the road toward us wearing a pair of rubber knee boots. Thinking the road was still under the water this boy kept walking until, without warning, he was suddenly swimming. One of the fellows jumped in and pulled him to safety. The next problem was that the ranger station then lost electric power.

Lois, who had several years of nurse training, gave me an accelerated course in mid-wifery and we set up the bedroom with several Coleman lamps, wax thread, scissors, and whatever else she thought necessary for a birth. Feeling that this was a little too much for me to handle by myself I went looking for help. Not one person volunteered.

Early the next day, Christmas, John Lundgren and Jim Overbay decided it would be better for everyone if they got this pregnant woman out of camp. Somehow they contacted George Boyson, the District Ranger on the Prineville District, who arranged for a Cessna 160 from Rimrock Aviation to land on the hardtop road near Paulina. Due to the mud and snow this was the nearest they could get to Rager. Our problem was to get to Paulina. With Jim behind the wheel, Lois, Jonathan, and I got in the Dodge Powerwagon. John followed in another four-wheel drive rig that carried our luggage along with many feet of towing chain in the event that one of us

needed help. After forging every creek between Rager and Paulina we arrived at the small concrete bridge outside Paulina. We weren't sure it was safe so we got out and walked across. Then Jim and John crossed with their vehicles.

With the plane circling overhead we now had two more problems. The first was that the pilot wouldn't land until he knew the wind direction and the second was that the road was covered with cattle. Since the road was the only high spot around, the ranchers had been spreading hay on it to feed their cattle. The first problem was solved when Alvin Johnson gave us several old tires and a can of gas which we lit off next to the road.

Thankfully there were a number of ranch hands and stranded highway maintenance workers in Johnson's bar room who volunteered to chase the cattle off the road and keep them off while the plane landed, which it did. After a short discussion regarding a power line that crossed the road near Paulina, it was decided that we would have to leave much of our luggage behind so the plane could clear the wire during takeoff. Upon landing in Prineville we were met by George Boyson, who took us to his home where we were treated to a wonderful Christmas dinner. He then drove us to the Carolina Motel.

Several days later at the Pioneer Memorial Hospital Lois gave birth to a healthy 9lb2oz girl whom we named Cory. All was peachy until several weeks later when I read in the Regional Newsletter that other forests in Region 6 had been using helicopters to fly people with special use permits in to check for damage to their investments. I suppose I should have had the attitude that "all's well that ends well" but I found it incomprehensible that while other forests were flying non-Forest Service people around, the Ochoco couldn't be bothered to help one of their own. As far as I know the flight to get us near a hospital was organized and carried out at the district level with no help at all from the S.O. In fact, upon landing in Prineville I paid the pilot. Much to my surprise, however, several weeks later we received a savings bond from the pilot for our newborn daughter equal to the amount I had given him.

As I grow older images from Rager still flood my mind as clearly as if they had happened yesterday. Don Campbell hiding in the bushes near the office so he could jump out and check vehicle occupants for seat belt compliance. Nick, before a safety meeting, scuffling along mumbling "Safety first –work when you can" and Jim Overbay protesting the fact that we had to leave our wooden desks in the old office building when we moved over to the new office that had steel desks. "A Forest Service office should have wooden desks," he said and I agree. Special memories also include: Christmas Eve when the Campbell's, the Offer's, and we were the only people left in camp; when we and the Offer's stood under the Campbell's window in the darkness singing Christmas carols until they heard us and invited us in. With these and numerous other memories, Rager will always be an unforgettable part of my life.

