THE MOTTET MEADOWS FIRE, WENAHA NATIONAL FOREST, 1919

By

Edith Y. Kuhns[1]

I returned from a brief weekend vacation to find the Forest office empty of Supervisor and Ranger, but conspicuous on my desk were three lists – "Supplies for 25 men," "for 50 men," "for 100 men." A brief explanatory note stated, "Bad fire at Mottet Meadows. When *we* phone you to hire men, buy grub according to these lists. Get tools wherever you can; we'll need plenty. Don't leave the phone." Those were my complete instructions for what followed during the next six weeks – and I had been Forest Clerk a brief three months.

It was the depletion of the country's manpower during World War I that had given me the opportunity to take the Forest Clerk examination in the first place. With an American Expeditionary Force in France the Civil Service Commission had let down the bars and permitted mere females to compete for the job heretofore restricted to men.

I had been employed several years in a Forest Service District Office, where the humdrum compilations of cattle and sheep grazed, timber cut and sold, fires, their acreage and causes, and the wildlife census, hadn't been especially exciting. And I was young and wanting thrills. It was out on the forests, I analyzed, that things happened. There one had direct contact with stock raising, with firefighting, and with timber cruising, and with the men engaged in these interesting out-of-door activities. I dreamed of open ranges, of timbered slopes and mountain lakes, and possibly there did flit through my mind thoughts of hard-riding cowboys, of stalwart, green-clad Forest Rangers, and of men battling victoriously against odds during that dreaded period of the year – the fire season.

So when women at last were considered eligible for forest office jobs I didn't hesitate.

As the result of a passing grade, I found myself one day behind a desk in a small upstairs office in the Federal Building in Walla Walla, Washington. Filed high before me were vouchers, property and improvement records, and what-not, that had nearly overwhelmed the Supervisor in the interim since the previous Forest Clerk's departure. The Supervisor's expressed delight upon my arrival, which I had thought was due in part at least to my own personal appearance, was, I concluded later, due only to his great relief at being given an office assistant.

I was amazed at the variety of jobs a Forest Clerk was supposed to handle, the knowledge one was expected to possess. The Civil Service exam hadn't even hinted that cowboy vocabulary might be essential in checking property. A deficit of two alforjas, a surplus of two latigos – it seemed quite reasonable to me that they might be one and the same. But there was something about the Supervisor's reaction to my question, amusement that he suppressed with great difficulty, that revealed how deep was my ignorance. And the improvement records and expense accounts! I studied the thick volume of regulations, determined to master it somehow, though I wondered why training in legal phraseology hadn't been specified as a requisite. "This is a man's job, after all," I thought to myself.

I began eagerly to anticipate my annual vacation, when, for a little time, I could put out of my mind all these perplexing problems. I was blissfully unaware, but not for long, that summer vacations were not for Forest Clerks, that the hotter the weather the closer I would be expected to

stay on the job. I could wangle only a brief weekend respite – and here I was, on my own, expected to handle the office end of a Class C fire that in six weeks covered some 10,000 acres along the summit of the Blue Mountains in the southwest corner of Wallowa County, Oregon.

The men were out on the fighting line, the enemy FIRE. All right, I'd fight it too, here in the office. At the thought that I was at last in the thick of things a wave of exultation swept over me. Upon my ability to carry on might depend the outcome of the battle, for men and supplies meant holding the line.

The temperature that had played around in the 90's skipped to new highs. The thermometer recorded 100 degrees, 105, then 110. I had never before lived where, in the heat of summer, doors and windows were closed tight during daylight hours to conserve the cool night air and to keep out the furnace-like blasts from reflecting pavements and brick walls. When it registered 115 degrees I felt I understood the term "All Hell's a-popping" that I had heard used by the men in discussing past fire experiences. And out on the fire line I knew it must be an inferno. The thought of what was happening up at Mottet Meadows, the agony of heat the firefighters were enduring, made me bear my own oven-like existence, though I found myself growing grim with the passing days.[2]

The injunction "Do not leave the phone" I took literally. Phone messages were relayed to me wherever I might be, even for brief periods of time. I turned down opportunities to go riding, though the thought of moon-drenched roadsides and evening breezes was like a vision of Heaven to a dweller in eternal fire. Phone calls came at all hours of the day or night, and sometimes, it seemed to me, at the most inopportune times. As surely as I planned to enjoy the luxury of a tepid bath there would be the familiar ring; and after one experience, when for several hours I fluttered from phone to tub, from tub to phone, without being able either to bathe or dress, I confined my ablutions to hurried showers, my clothes right at hand and in such order I could fling them on in no time flat.

I handled in routine manner the instructions from the fire line, contacting the employment agency for fallers and buckers, pick and shovel men, timekeepers. I phoned the shops for food supplies, rounded up tools as I could, saw that they were delivered at specified hours at designated places, to be picked up by the trucks. Then calls came through for personal purchases as well, and I shopped for such masculine articles as I could never have dreamed I would buy. Nothing in my past experience had fitted me to shop for loggers' boots, men's work shirts and pants, even undergarments, Copenhagen "snus" chewing tobacco. And every item thus purchased had to be charged to the right employee in order that proper deduction be made from paychecks. I was to learn later that such articles, when they reached the front, were sometimes diverted to the men most in need of replacements, to those who had lost their soles – shoe variety – in hot ashes, or whose shirts had been almost burned off their backs by sparks.

A phone call one evening requested that I arrange for a District Office man to be on hand the following day to pay off some men being sent out. The Supervisor had realized there was something wrong along the fire line. Instead of his usual route he had reversed his inspection tour. A well-organized alarm system, that had made it possible for those "in the know" to sleep when they were supposed to be fighting, failed to work in reverse. Five sheepish-looking individuals, who had been rather boastful about "putting it over" on the boss, presented themselves for their paychecks. I was grateful a man was present to give them what they deserved – talk of

a special variety. I wondered if, given time, I might not even master that for emergencies; after all they were Scriptural expressions.

The District Office representative informed me that, because this was an exceptionally bad fire year and an emergency existed, the usual bonded Fiscal Agent could not be sent to handle the paying-off of men; that, under ordinary circumstances, I would have been bonded to disburse federal funds. In this emergency, however, and because I was well known to the District Office, they would wire me, whenever I requested, $1,000 at a time, to be deposited in my name and to be paid out in personal checks to the firefighters. My own personal checking account had been of such meager proportions that just the thought of that $1,000 at a time in my keeping was overwhelming. It seemed to me that just being able to sign checks for the amount gave me an atmosphere of affluence, and I was quite certain I detected an attitude of deference toward me on the part of the bank tellers that wasn't due to my years.

I felt myself becoming a movie character – in my own mind at least – when word came one afternoon to be ready to contact the Sheriff's office, that trouble with the I.W.W.'s had developed and they might need outside help to handle the situation. I contacted that officer of the law; he stated he would be ready with men and guns at any time the need arose. Fortunately the expected race to the aid of the endangered didn't have to be run.[3]

Medical care for a 19-year-old firefighter had to be arranged for. His greatest activity had always been in response to the dinner bell, and it was while hurrying to the mess tent – not to work – that he had slipped off a log and fallen, plunging his arms down into hot ashes. Nevertheless, the youngster's predicament somehow appealed to my maternal instincts, though I was but a few years older. Questioning elicited the fact that the boy was without funds. I was on the verge of staking him for fare home to alleged parents when the Supervisor intervened. "Don't be soft with him; he'd lose it as he has his own, playing craps."

I knew it was good news when no further calls for firefighters came through. Then men began dribbling back from the hills. What a strange assortment they were. They had been picked up not only on the streets of the town (I recognized this variety – bronzed men just through working in the harvest fields) but from Seattle's notorious Skid Road and Front Street in Portland. And when the fire finally was brought under control and only a few needed, the others swarmed like bees. In the office, in the hall, down into the Post Office corridors below, awaiting their turn to receive in cold cash recompense for the hot hours endured at the fire.

An SOS had been sent to the District Office to have a man on hand to check returned bedrolls and to maintain order, while I handled time-slips, made deductions, etc. These hundreds of men must be paid as speedily as possible; they deserved quick returns on their investment of sweat and brawn.

But I wasn't too busy to listen in to the conversations around me. When someone in awed tones said "Here comes the Chief!" I glanced up to see the aquiline features of a native American, whose dignity and stoicism marked him as a descendant of some great redskin brave.

"Gee! You should-a seen him at the fire," the man I was paying said, with little-boy hero-worship evident. "There wasn't any place too hot or smoky for him. Gosh! He'd go right in where things was the worst, where none of the rest of us wanted to go. He sure could take it."

Not even the news item in the next day's paper, reporting the Chief's incarceration in the city jail for drunkenness, could erase my mental picture of him in the midst of flames and crashing trees.

A big, bulky, policeman-like individual sidled up to my desk. Somehow I wasn't surprised when, in low, confidential tones, he said "Better check the bedroll of the Snake Charmer. He's trying to get away with some government blankets. I been on the police force and I sort of suspicioned him and kept my eyes open."

But the dunnage bag of the Snake Charmer – a sallow youth, thin almost to emaciation, whose only qualification as assistant cook was probably his desire to be as close as possible to food – contained only his own threadbare, ragged bedding and personal belongings. Not so the bedroll of the self-appointed detective, who probably hoped to divert attention from his own by causing suspicion to fall on someone else.

I was having a terrible time getting the deductions right. Who got the size 11 loggers' boots, and who the size 42 underwear, and the $3.00 wool shirt, blue and green?

"I got some unnerwear, lady! Wanta see it?" "Happy" Green, fumbling with his shirt buttons as he came, staggered up to the desk, his "happy" grin in a way offsetting the awesome bashed-in nose that set him apart from his fellows. Questioned as to that physical deformity he would reply "Ne-er knew how it happened. When I woke up after a fight that's how I looked."

"Happy" became a familiar figure around the office thereafter. He seemed to feel in some vague way that, having once acquired here the wherewithal to keep him in drinks, he might still have money coming to him. A graduate of the University of Edinburgh, he had slipped far. When the local paper reported his sudden demise – the railroad tracks having proven an unwise bed for a night's repose – I found myself breathing a wordless prayer that "Happy" might have another chance in a new existence to attain what he might have been during his earthly career.

The deductions for tobacco and snuff were the most perplexing. Dire necessity had driven the men to taking even quarter plugs when the quantity brought in on the truck wouldn't go around. I felt my education had been much enhanced when I could estimate the number of chaws to the plug. When the final accounts were drawn up and I realized I would have to pay for some of the discrepancies I was amused at the thought that "the treat was on me" and "Who'd have thought I'd ever be buying snus for loggers."

The final report sort of staggered me. In six weeks $11,000 in cash for labor had passed through my hands. I had purchased groceries enough to stock a good-sized store, and, through purchase of personal garments and boots, added appreciably to the profits of the local merchants. I knew the local doctor and his office force better than my own good health would have permitted; and my prestige at the bank was almost good enough for a loan without collateral. Most surprising of all, whatever timidity I might have had at the beginning had completely vanished. I was now a fire-seasoned, full-fledged Forest Clerk.

Oh, yes! And I married the Forest Supervisor, John C. Kuhns, and the next Forest Clerk on the Wenaha Forest was a man.[4]

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[1] This account appeared in the June 1964 issue of *Timber-Lines*, a periodical featuring reminiscences from Forest Service retirees; it was scanned from the original Timber-Lines article. This same story is

included in a recent book entitled *We Had An Objective in Mind: the U.S. Forest Service in the Pacific Northwest, 1905 to 2005; a Centennial Anthology*. According to the book, Edith Kuhns went back to school after her husband, John C. Kuhns, retired and received a degree from Portland State College in 1966, when she was 73 years old.

[2] It is believed that Mottet Meadows occurred along Mottet Creek on the Walla Walla Ranger District. The meadows are now covered by Jubilee Lake.

[3] **Powell's note**: I believe that Edith's reference to "the I.W.W.'s" refers to the International Workers of the World, a labor organizing group active in much of the developed portion of the World during the era in which her account was written. In some instances, their labor agitation activities resulted in violence. We have other accessions in the history archives describing their involvement with fire fighting crews in 1910, and with cone collection crews in 1911.

[4] The Wenaha National Forest was located at the northern tip of the Blue Mountains in northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, extending from north of La Grande, Oregon to south of Pomeroy, Washington. It was created in May of 1905 using lands withdrawn from homestead entry in 1902 and 1903. The Forest was known as the Wenaha Forest Reserve between 1905 and 1907. The Supervisor's Office was located in Walla Walla, Washington. Originally, the 790,000-acre Forest had 8 Ranger Districts – 4 in Oregon (La Grande, Weston, Tollgate, and Troy), and 4 in Washington (Walla Walla, Tucannon, Peola, and Cloverland). The Wenaha National Forest was eventually combined with the Umatilla National Forest to the south in November of 1920. The current Umatilla National Forest Ranger Districts of Pomeroy and Walla Walla were originally contained in the Wenaha National Forest.