
4000 ACRES ON FIRE NEAR CALE

Sixty-one years ago about this time of the year, Arkansas was in the midst of the worst siege of forest fires in the state's history. A total of 2,123 fires burned over 200,000 acres of land in Arkansas, with the southwest Arkansas counties of Nevada, Ouachita, Union, Columbia, and Lafayette being hit especially hard.

Nevada County had 8500 acres destroyed by fire in late October, 1952, including a 4,000 acre fire just east of Cale. I was nine years old at the time and remember several families living southwest of Bluff City packing up some of their belongings in case they had to quickly evacuate. A thick cloud of smoke could be observed in the direction of the fire. The fire jumped state highway 4 (now 278) driven by a stiff south wind into large areas of timber land with scattered homes headed in the direction of Cale, Ebenezer, and Rocky Hill.

There was a shortage of fire-fighting equipment for such a large fire. Backfires were used to stop the fire in places. Several members of the National Guard were called out to help and some local residents pitched in to help the forestry department personnel. I was told that the town of Cale was probably saved because a decision was made to set a backfire on the Reader Railroad in Caney Creek bottom. It was so dry that even the creek bottoms easily burned over although the fire was not as bad there as in the areas covered with pine timber.

A bulldozer had been parked at Mr. Horace Kirk's home on what is now County Road #47. He "walked" the dozer from his home down the county roads toward Cale and plowed firebreaks around several homes belonging to family members. The fire never got that far, but I'm sure it made them feel better having some plowed ground around their homes.

It was a scary time for people living near the fire. A forty acre fire is bad enough, but one covering 4,000 acres is especially frightening. We see the large fires in the western states and how hard they are to control. Large fires such as those are rare in Arkansas, but they can happen when the conditions are just right. It could have been even worse if the fire had occurred in the summer months when the temperatures reach 100 degrees or higher.

The Arkansas Forestry Commission had several fire towers where someone kept a lookout for forest fires in those days. There was a tower at Poison Springs (which still stands), one at Glenville in southern Nevada County (now gone), one near Sutton, and one at Iron Springs north of Prescott. Most of these towers were constructed in the 1930s and were a valuable tool in helping locate wildfires. These days most fires are spotted by airplanes which can pinpoint the location and direct fire fighters to the proper place. Planes are also used to drop fire retardant chemicals or water on fires to help

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bring them under control. The Commission also has fire plows which can plow fire lines around the fires. Firefighting is dangerous work even for the professionals, and they have to also be concerned about spectators or local residents who want to help. The person in charge needs to know who is in the fire area to avoid someone getting trapped by fire. It's always best to leave fire fighting to the professionals.

Not every fire you see is a wildfire. Some timber companies and the Arkansas Forestry Commission conduct controlled burns for various reasons. One reason is to reduce the clutter left from logging operations to prepare the land for replanting. Fire lines are plowed around the area to be burned and then the fire is set by workers with drip torches. Sometimes the debris is piled up in piles called

windrows. Sometimes a helicopter might be used to set the fire. Fire is dropped from a torch mounted on the helicopter as it flies overhead. A large number of acres can be burned this way very quickly although the fire can be much harder to control. This method is usually used in areas away from private land in case the fire jumps the plowed lines (what is called a break-over). Despite the best efforts, most fires of this type result in a few break-overs. Employees patrol the lines on ATV's or by walking looking for small break-overs. When one is found, the tractor is called to plow it out or water is sprayed on it from a tank mounted on the ATV. Some days are just not suited for controlled burns due to the weather conditions. This method of preparing land for planting is not used as much as it once was mainly due to complaints about the smoke.



Setting fire with a helicopter



Torch mounted left side of helicopter

Another reason for controlled burns is called "hazard reduction". That means allowing fire to burn over the forest destroying the smaller brush and pine straw. This reduces the chance of wildfire damage which might destroy the mature timber. This is usually done in the winter months and if done correctly will not harm the mature trees.

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I worked for years for a timber company and was involved in burning thousands of acres of land. It was not my favorite work activity, but was exciting at times. It required good organization, good planning, and experienced workers to get the job done safely. Fires are usually set by using a drip torch like the one is this picture. It is recommended that

people working around fires wear special clothing that will not easily catch fire. Any ragged clothing with loose threads could easily catch fire. Other recommended equipment includes gloves, a two-way radio, a hard hat, goggles or a face mask to help with the smoke, and a canteen of drinking water. A controlled burn usually lasts most of the day. The fire is set as soon as the dew is gone usually around 10:00 a. m. and lasts until it is completed and safe to leave. A typical size fire ranges from 40 to 200 acres for one day. Workers learn to eat at least part of their lunch before the fire is set because they may not get another chance to eat for several hours. When the fire is burning hot, it's all hands on deck until things calm down. A typical fire crew usually consists of a fire plow operator and three or four more people. While the others are setting the fire, one person must walk the fire line or ride an ATV around the fire line looking for break-overs. This person has to breathe a lot of smoke and employees usually take turns doing this job. The fire plow operator also has to breathe a lot of smoke if he has to plow out a break-over. Before the crew leaves the fire at the end of the day, someone rides or walks around the entire burned area to make sure it is safe to leave and usually early the next morning, an employee returns to the area and checks the lines again just to make sure everything is safe.

An inexperienced person with a drip torch can spell disaster. I remember one time when a summer student set the wrong side of a half-mile long fire line. Good communication is a necessity. Two-way radios solve many problems and help those in charge make sure everything is going as planned. ATV's save a lot of walking to patrol the lines and get water to employees, although employees must be trained in their use to avoid serious accidents. Riding a rough fire line through smoke is not like riding on a smooth road or trail.

All of our employees had to attend a fire simulator school conducted by the Arkansas Forestry Commission. A make believe wildfire was used to teach important lessons. Each employee had his or her turn as the person in charge and was in contact by radio with the plow operator and others in the field (played by Forestry Dept. personnel). Just about any situation you could imagine was introduced into the program and we were graded on the decisions we made. It was similar to the disaster drills sometimes used to teach emergency services how to respond to any situation which might arise. Even though it was all done in a classroom, it seemed very real to the students taking the course.

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The most serious situation I encountered was the day when one of our controlled burns jumped the lines and resulted in a fast-moving wildfire in a young pine plantation. The situation was made more difficult because there were oil wells, pipes, and power lines in the area which made plowing a line difficult or dangerous. A fire in a young pine plantation is almost impossible to control. We finally managed to get the fire under control after it had burned about 100 acres of young pine trees. At least nobody got hurt that day and the fire remained on company land.

I love looking at the beautiful leaves this time of the year. The colors usually reach their peak in our area in early November. We'll have to wait and see how the extremely dry weather this year affects the colors. I always hate the job of raking the leaves each year. I guess if I get too lazy, I can always hire a lawn service to do it.

As people get older, they begin to see things from a different perspective. The falling leaves can even teach us a lesson as evidenced by the poem below.

FALLING LEAVES

Written by a Prescott resident and published in the November 23, 1887 issue of The Nevada County Picayune. I couldn't read the author's name because the microfilm was too blurry.

Some weeks ago your leaves were
green
And decked the trees so fair,
And forest glade, as we have seen
Was a glorious picture rare.

The birds sang their song of praise
That the woods were green again.
The dove and rabbit hurried different
ways
And were sport for dogs and men.

But now the green has changed
As youth to mellow age,
And one by one 'tis arranged
As falls the leaves, we turn a page.

The leaves are falling one by one and
so are we
Falling our places to fill,
'Tis given us, as leaves to be
Obedient to His will.

Autumn's glorious dress reminds us
Life's fitful dream is appalling,
Today we sing, we dance, rejoice,
Tomorrow like the leaves, we are falling.

The leaves are falling but they did their
part
And in falling we will do the same.
We live and work and then depart
Yet even unknown to fame.

Let the falling leaves, the faded leaves
Be a subject we study with care,
For hourly and daily we steadily weave
The threads of our existence bare.



MYSTERY SOLVED

This picture was in the October, 2010 issue. A reader had found this picture in her mother's photo album, but it was not identified. She thought it was probably someone from Nevada County and wondered if anyone could identify this person. I recently received this email which solves the mystery.

The attractive young lady in the photo was my grandmother, Christine McMahan, before her marriage to my grandfather William "Bill"

McMahon. She was born in Laneburg May 22, 1904 to Charles and Lizzie Niemeyer (Charley worked for J. H. Bemis as a millwright at Ozan-Graysonia Lumber Company from the 1890's until around 1953). Christine graduated from Prescott High School and worked for Joe Boswell's Store as a buyer and sales clerk until moving to Greenville, MS in the late 1940's. She worked as a buyer for Nelms and Blum Department Store until her retirement in 1973. Christine then moved back to Prescott after retiring to live with her sisters until moving to Little Rock in 1983. Christine was a member of the First United Methodist Church in Prescott and sang in the choir.

Christine had two younger sisters; Jessie Spradlin (Jessie met her husband Herbert "Coy" at the Sterlings in Prescott...he was the store manager and later a district manager for Sterlings-Magic Mart) and her youngest sister Joyce Danner (Joyce married Gordon Danner who worked at DeLamar Chevrolet for over forty years).

Christine passed away in Little Rock, March 13, 2002 at the age of 97 leaving a daughter, Jacque (McMahon) Isaacs of Little Rock; three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren all of Little Rock.

I'm only 53, but I remember the old (1960's-1970's) Prescott vividly and have wonderful memories of Prescott, Gurdon, Arkadelphia, Hope, Reader, and surrounding areas. Thanks for the Sandyland Chronicles and I hope this solves the mystery photo.

Marty Isaacs
Little Rock, AR

RAINFALL RECORD

January—4.3; February—2.8; March—4.1; April—3.7; May—4.2; June—4.2; July—5.2; August—None; September—5.4; October—4.8 (so far). TOTAL—34.5 INCHES

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THE OLD MAID AND THE BURGLAR

A story I'll tell of a burglar bold
Who started to rob a house;
He opened the window and then crept in
As quiet as a mouse.

He looked around for a place to hide
"Til the folks were all asleep,
"And then," said he, "with all their money
I'll take a quiet sneak."

So under the bed the burglar crept;
He crept up close to the wall.
He didn't know 'twas an old maid's room
Or he wouldn't have had the gall.

He thought of the money he would steal
As under the bed he lay,
But at 9 o'clock he saw a sight
That made his hair turn gray.

At 9 o'clock the old maid came in;
"O, I'm so tired," she said.
She thought that all was well that night
So she didn't look under the bed.

She took out her teeth and her big glass eye
And the hair all off of her head.
The burglar he had forty fits
As he watched from under the bed.

From under the bed the burglar crept;
He was a total wreck.
The old maid wasn't asleep at all,
And she grabbed him around the neck.

She didn't holler, or shout, or call;
She was as cool as a clam.
She only said, "The saints be praised;
At last I've got a man."

From under the pillow a gun she drew
And to the burglar said,
"Young man, if you don't marry me,
I'll blow off the top of your head."

She held him firmly by the neck;
He hadn't a chance to shoot;
He looked at her teeth and her big glass eye,
And said, "Madam, for Pete's sake, shoot."

WHAT IS IT?



The object on the left was found when tearing down an old house in Prescott. It is made from aluminum and has holes all the way around. It has a threaded fitting on the bottom that can be screwed onto something. The quart oil can is shown for size comparison.

If you know what this is or would like to make a guess, send me your answer in the next few days.