

Home & Heart



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While I was experiencing my first brush with wildfire and all its ensuing drama, Bob-O was having fire-related adventures of his own. He had taken his brushing crew for a week's work at Happy Camp. Happy Camp is a small mountain town on the Klamath River, about 20 miles away as the hawk flies, but more than two hours by truck.

Wake-Up Call

Bob-O and his crew of seven local men had been driving to the job when the lightning storm passed over them. By the time they pulled into a large turnout on Elk Creek to set up camp, it had turned into a quiet, mild evening. They went to bed early, thinking they would get up early, hit the woods, and get to work.

Before dawn, a Forest Service rig pulled into their camp. The brushing inspector told Bob-O that the woods were closed because of fires caused by the lightning the afternoon before. They would not be able to work.

A brushing crew works for a logging company to clean up after a logging operation. It is their job to clear streambeds of debris, clear the ground of large debris, and pile it for burning in the winter. It is also their job to dig fire lines around the perimeter of the timber sale acreage. They prepare the area for the tree planters to replant with seedling trees. Their main tools for this kind of work are chain saws, McLeods (a wide hoe combined with a wide-tined rake), shovels, and their backs.

All Dressed Up...

Bob-O and the men drove down the hill into Happy Camp. Bob-O called his boss at the logging company and told him they couldn't work because of the fires. His boss was angry. "Do you want this job or not?" he asked.

Bob-O told him, "The woods are shut down Dwayne. There's nothing I can do about that."

Hearing about the down strikes in town, the crew decided they could help fight the fires rather than do nothing till the woods opened up again. They went to the Forest Service station and volunteered their services. They were sent up Slater Butte outside of town to work a fire there.

They worked all day under Forest Service supervision, digging fire lines. Fire line digging means "three feet wide, bare dirt." It is backbreaking work under any circumstances.

Later that afternoon, Bob-O went to the crummy (crew truck) to take a break and eat his lunch. As he sat in the truck, he turned on the CB to listen to any chatter going on. It was tuned to channel 18, the Forks road and contact channel. He was totally surprised to hear Nancy at Eddy Gulch Lookout, back on the Salmon River, talking about fires there.

Apparently, since Bob-O was on Slater Butte at an elevation of approximately 4,000 feet (1,200 m) and Nancy was at Eddy Gulch lookout at about 5,000 feet (1,500 m), with no mountain peaks between, she was coming in loud and clear. Bob-O picked up the mike and keyed it. "Nancy, this is Bob-O. Can you hear me? I'm on Slater Butte."

"I hear you clear, Bob-O."

"What the heck's going on over there, Nancy?"

Nancy filled him in on the fires happening on the Salmon. Sitting in our radio shack, I could hear Nancy, but not Bob-O. I could tell from Nancy's end of the conversation that Bob-O was coming home. My relief was huge.

We're Outta Here

Bob-O went to the Forest Service guy and told him, "Our families need us—we're leaving." He then rounded up all the men and told them what he knew of the down strikes on the Salmon. They jumped in the crummy and drove down off of Slater Butte. Shortly after that, the fires had spread so far as to block any exit off the butte. No one was hurt, but no one was able to leave Slater Butte for the next 24 hours. Bob-O and his crew were the last people to get out.

It was already dark that evening when I heard Bob-O calling the mile markers coming up the river from Forks. He was dropping the crew off as he came, so it took a very long time to make the eight miles from town. As he drove, he could see the glow of several fires on the mountainsides. He was glad to be coming back to Starveout.

The last person he dropped off was Philbo at Woody and Carol's house, where the Godfrey Ranch road and the river road meet. Philbo could not go home since the firestorm earlier in the day had left the road blocked by debris that was still burning. He didn't know if he had a home to go to yet.

Back Home

The next morning, Bob-O went up the mountain behind our cabin and checked on the down strike fire there. I had not returned after my first venture. (See my column in *HP91*.) I figured if the fire came down the mountain, I would walk across our swinging bridge, get in the truck, and drive away. End of story—no heroics for me.

It turned out that the fire had gone out, just as the Forest Service crew, sent that first evening, had told me would happen. So Bob-O went down to the Forest Service compound at Forks to see if he could volunteer to fight fire.

He found the fire coordinator and told him he had a crew of locals who wanted to sign on. The guy said that before he could sign them on, they would have to drive out to Yreka, a couple hours away to apply for work. Bob-O demurred. The guy gave Bob-O a phone number to call to get some sort of answer. Bob-O pulled his two meter handheld radio off his belt. He punched in star-2 to open our radio phone line and punched in the number he had been given. The Forest Service guy watched dumbfounded. "It's busy," Bob-O said, hanging up by punching star-2 again.

"You have a phone?" The Forest Service guy was incredulous, "We don't even have phones yet. Who the hell are you?"

Bob-O explained again that he was a local with a crew of men who were familiar with the country, worked in the woods for a living, and had worked the Hog Fire years earlier. "We can't use you," was the only answer he got.

Fire Camp

Bob-O went to find his crew in the fire camp. The Forks school had shut down, and because it's so close to the Forest Service compound, it was natural to use its large, open sports field for the fire camp. The fire camp was growing rapidly. Fire crews were being sent in from all over the country. The people and equipment to support the crews—kitchens, laundry, showers, etc.—were all being coordinated at the same time.

The whole population of the Forks of Salmon area, including Forks, Sawyers Bar, and Cecilville, numbered probably several hundred at best. At the peak of the fires of 1987, the fire camp population was more than four thousand. There were fire crews from every state in

the union. We even had an all-female Navaho crew, for which I had great admiration.

Because he hadn't eaten since the day before when he was on Slater Butte, Philbo had gone to the fire camp kitchen so he could fuel up before going to fight more fires. He was getting his plate filled by Nancy, a local woman working in the kitchen tent, when Bob-O found him. A Forest Service employee came up to Philbo and asked if he was on a crew. Philbo answered, "Not yet."

The Forest Service guy grabbed the pork chop off Philbo's plate and threw it in the trash. "You're not eating here then," he fumed. "Get outta camp."

Word of what became known as the "Pork Chop Incident" spread faster than the wildfires in the mountains around us. Coupled with their refusal of local help, the Forest Service's rudeness had insulted and pissed off the very people who knew the territory better than any of them ever would. It was not a good way to interact with the locals.

Bob-O found his crew, and they set off to clear defense lines and fall dead snags around local cabins on their own. They knew that even if the Forest Service wouldn't use their willing talents, their community could.

Post Script: It was very odd to write about the 1987 fires, while we were surrounded by smoke from this year's Florence and Sour Biscuit fires in the Illinois Valley of southern Oregon. At times, the smoke was so thick, we could not see across our nearby creek. Eventually, the two fires merged and became the largest wildfire in Oregon history.

Access

Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze is hoping for rain with no lightning at her home in Northernmost California. c/o *Home Power* magazine, PO Box 520, Ashland, OR 97520 • kathleen.jarschke-schultze@homepower.com



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