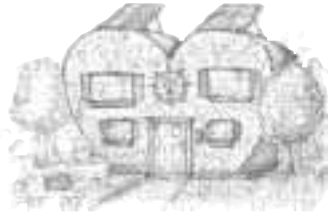


Home & Heart



Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze

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It's hard to know what else to tell you about the forest fires, beyond the tales related in my previous columns. It was, at times, a beautiful tragedy. I saw whole mountainsides on fire at night and it brought to mind lighted Christmas trees, the branches of each tree outlined in flames. I can tell you that I learned a hell of a lot about forest fires—more than I really wanted to know.

Once More into the Breach

For a third time that summer in 1987, our home was threatened. The "Hotelling" fire was approaching our cabin from the downriver side. The Forest Service sent the fire crew from the Flathead Fire District in Montana. They arrived out on the road, on the far side of our swinging bridge, delivered by a big yellow school bus.

The Forest Service had commandeered school buses and drivers from Oakland, California. They transported fire crews to and from the many fires burning in our forest. The buses would get the crews and their equipment as close as the roads would allow.

The Flathead crew numbered twenty. They slung on their packs, shouldered their shovels and MacLeods, and crossed the bridge. Our dog, Amelia Airedale, was very excited to see so many people. The crew boss asked me where the fire was and where the available water was. The steepness of the mountain and the density of the forest kept the location of the fire hidden from our view. It had been scouted by plane. I pointed behind the cabin and told him, "Just start up the mountain on that trail. The dog will take off in front of you. Follow her to the end of the water ditch."

Dog Days

Because we had to clean our water ditch of fallen debris regularly to keep it running, Amelia always thought that

was our destination when climbing the mountain behind our place. The crew took off up the trail, and Amelia took off ahead of them. They spent the day scouting the fire and digging a small reservoir. Amelia spent the whole day with them. During their lunch break, the women on the crew fed her "ham grenades," the fire camp slang for the incredibly dry white bread and ham sandwiches, supplied in the regulation brown bag lunches.

Amelia had never had so many playmates. When the crew came down the trail and crossed our bridge to wait for their bus, I expected Amelia to come home. She didn't. I went across the bridge to see if the crew had seen her. There she was, sleeping on the ground with a dozing firefighter using her as a pillow. I woke her up and took her home.

Every morning, around 8 AM for the next three days, the Flathead crew would arrive by school bus. With Amelia leading the way, they spent their days making a rock dam, lining the reservoir with black plastic, and packing in a small, gas-powered pump and canvas fire hose. That was the extent of what they accomplished before they had to move on to fight other fires. The first morning that they didn't show up, Amelia was heartbroken. She waited on our end of the swinging bridge all day, perking up only when a school bus drove by.

The evening before, on their last trip across the bridge, a tired crewmember lost his footing. He regained his balance, but dropped his shovel into the river. The water was deep under the bridge, about fifteen feet. The crew boss looked down at the shovel through the cold, clear water. "Leave it," he said.

A couple of weeks later, my friend Harry came by. I've known Harry since I was seven years old. He lived upriver at the Lucky Strike mines. Harry brought a big magnet and a light rope. We spent about an hour fishing for that shovel. And, you know, we caught it. I still have that shovel.

Hosed

Bob-O had been working as a tree faller on a fire crew and was mostly gone. As the danger neared, he stayed home. The Flathead crew had given us the tools to fight the Hotelling fire, but had to move on to other fires, leaving us on our own. With more fire line to be dug and more hose to be laid along the ditch, our friends came to help. Once the fire swept down the mountain to reach us, it would be spread out in a long line against our defenses.

Philbo and Dick Haley from the mining claim a few miles downriver spent all day setting up the pump at the flume reservoir and laying fire hose from there to the dry reservoir by the mine on the other side of our claim. Dick

Haley, who was a veteran of Iwo Jima, had his 70th birthday that day.

Every fifty feet along the main hose was a brass, T-fitting. The Forest Service had left us several shorter lengths (each probably 25 feet) of hose with high-pressure nozzles that would attach to these fittings. The people working the line would carry one of the shorter lengths with a nozzle and attach that to the larger hose closest to a hot spot. After dousing the hot spot, they would unhook their length of hose and continue patrolling the line.

We were as ready as we could be as the fire approached us. During the night, friends took care of the hose lines on the mountain while Bob-O and I tried to sleep. Bob-O had wired a radio speaker into our bedroom so we could hear if they called, needing more help on the hose line.

That evening, he was assuring a friend of ours on the CB that we were all set for when the fire reached us. Another friend, Jeff, came on and told him, "Just remember, if you need us tonight, there are a lot of ears out here listening, and we'll be here for you." So Bob-O said, "Alright all you ears, good night." We heard a woman's voice say, "Good night," then a man's, "Good night," and a man's baritone singing out, "Good night." Altogether, about eight people answered Bob-O's good night with their own.

I felt just about as secure as I could with the fire coming at us. Then that night, someone stole Bob-O's truck from our parking place across the river. (Certainly another story for another time.) Amelia barked in the night to warn us, but with so much fire traffic on the river road, we had quit paying attention.

Under Attack

We were busy the next few days on the mountain behind us, keeping the fire from crossing our lines. I was sitting in the radio shack relaying messages, while Bob-O and some friends were working the pump and fire line behind us. I heard Bob-O gasping for air on the 2-meter radio, which I knew was attached to his belt. I mean, he was really laboring. I was sure he was having an asthma attack.

I tried to call him back, but he wouldn't answer me—then I heard him again. It sounded worse, like he was in acute asthmatic distress. I tried to call his swamper, the guy who carries the faller's gas can and other tools, on the radio because I knew he had a handheld. No dice. I couldn't get anyone on the mountain to answer. I was scrambling for Bob-O's Norepinephrine and hypodermic syringe to take to him, even though I didn't know where on the 1,500 feet of line he was. Then he

called me on his handheld. Calm as you please, "Hi, what's going on?"

Well, it turned out he had been using the hose on a hot spot, and it had so much water pressure that it knocked him down the hill. He had tripped his mike button a couple of times while climbing back up and was breathing hard, fighting his way with the hose. He hadn't heard me call over the noise of the water.

Wild Night Life

My friend Jaycin was sitting outside her house all one night, watching bits of burning trees and brush fall down the steep mountain towards her cabin. If any burning debris got too close, she would shovel dirt on it. The steepness of the Salmon Mountains had hampered the firefighting efforts from the beginning. One firefighter from a southern state was heard to say, "Ya'll got some real pretty country here, but it's a shame somebody has laid it on its side."

Anyway, there she was sitting on a camp chair, wrapped in a sleeping bag, when she heard a noise on the other side of the cabin. So she got up to investigate. As she turned the corner, she came face-to-face with a black bear. They both stopped short, each with a surprised intake of breath, till she uttered a timid, "Hi, there," at which the bear turned to the side and ran off. She stayed and guarded her house from the burning debris for the rest of the night.

Ebb Tide's dog got eaten in her front yard by a mountain lion while she watched, or at least heard—she couldn't look. She was alone there at a cabin on the South Fork with her new little baby son. Her home on the ridge had been burned down in the first days of the fires that summer. Her husband, Rip Tide, like all the local men, was out fighting the fires where he could.

One night, I came across an owl, lost in the smoke. It was still alive, but dazed. I called Bob-O on the radio and he asked, "What do you want to do?" and I said, "Save it." Just about then, a truck came up behind me and a guy jumped out and asked if I needed help. We went to see if we could wrap the owl in a shirt to take it to the fire camp, when it shook its head and flew away. I was mighty relieved.

Miner Skirmish

At one point, the fire boss decided to back burn a huge area of forest, which angered the locals. Don't get me wrong. Back burning can be a valuable tool in fighting wildfires. A back burn is an intentionally set fire that uses up all the fuel in a wildfire's path to create a firebreak. But the whole reason this one was to be so big was because the firefighting personnel didn't know the land in question; so they believed bigger was better.

Local folks protested that this burn was too large and a waste of pristine, unburned forest.

Malfuncheon Junction, of the Stickel Mines, volunteered to lead the fire crew's Caterpillars through a different route so the back burn could be much, much smaller. I was out on an errand and saw him clinging to the side of a diesel Cat with one hand, cup of coffee clutched in the other. They were just reaching the river road about a half-mile above Matthews Creek. Once again a local fellow had proved his value.

Containment

One by one, the fires were contained and burned out. It took more than two months for all the fires to end. The rain is what finally ended the fires on the Salmon River. After my work in the radio shack wasn't needed, I went to work at Snipe's Resort (turned into a fire camp) in Cecilville as a "bag lady." I was on a crew of local women who made bag lunches for the fire crews still on the job. I found out why the "ham grenades" were so dry. We could not, by Forest Service regulation, put mayonnaise or mustard on the sandwiches.

I acquired the habit of drinking coffee (I had been a tea drinker). Not only that, but I would mix a package of hot chocolate mix into the coffee for an extra kick of energy (and flavor). It was a trick Philbo taught us. It makes even a lowly cup of fire camp coffee drinkable. I have to admit I still do it at times.

Everyone we knew was either threatened by or outright burned out by a fire that autumn of 1987. I learned a hell of a lot about forest fires that year. But I also learned a lot about the people in the community where I lived. And that knowledge comforted me.

Access

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