

TRIAL BY FIRE

Early Forest Service Rangers' Fire Stories

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In the first three decades of the Forest Service, fire stories were an integral part of the unofficial occupational lives of the "saddle-horse" rangers, "not overcrowded with book learning," who made up a majority of the the service's work force. Through fire stories these "rough-neck" rangers articulated and consolidated their group attitudes, conceptions, and values as a group. Fire stories served as lightning rods for "old-time, commonsense" rangers' views toward fire, fire policy, heroic fire-suppression efforts, and the division of responsibilities among men in the woods.¹

Perhaps the best-known occupational legend was about Pulaski's heroics during the 1910 Great Burn in northern Idaho and western Montana.

Ranger Pulaski was caught with a large crew between two fires on the rugged St. Joe watershed. But he was an old miner on his home ground. He crowded his men into an abandoned mining tunnel and held them there by sheer physical strength when the roar and smoke of the fire threw panic into the crowd. There was a trickle of water in the old tunnel, enough to soak a blanket. Pulaski stood at the mouth and knocked down a couple

of men who tried to bolt. With bare hands he held wet blankets over the opening to keep out smoke and fumes. When a blanket caught fire, he grabbed another one. When the fury swept past them, Pulaski was badly burned around his arms and head and most of his men were "out" [unconscious] but only one life was lost in that crew of fifty men.²

In some versions of this legend, one of Pulaski's men is said to have remarked while stepping over the still-unconscious body of Pulaski, "Too damn bad, the ranger is dead." To this, Pulaski replies, "Like hell he is."³

Like the fire hero Pulaski, early rangers were westerners at heart and proud of how well they knew their home ground. These rangers shared many values of range culture and society, including independence, self-reliance, and the symbolic importance of "raw nature."⁴ Hating paperwork, they delighted in going on horseback "to the secluded spots where we found nature in complete control."⁵ Early rangers felt at home in an unofficial occupational culture; they were less comfortable in a corporate, governmental

atmosphere. Few aspired to advance to Washington and leave the social and environmental climate of the West.

To the bosses of the early rangers, the upper-echelon Forest Service men, commonsense rangers were a necessary evil: a compromise between western livestock interests and the need for on-site stewardship of forest resources. In such an atmosphere, the rangers frequently found themselves arbitrating between local ranchers and the largely eastern, urbane, conservationist ideals of the Forest Service, particularly in the control and allocation of timber and range resources.⁶ For the most part, the early rangers knew more about cows than trees.

Thus there arose among the rangers an informal folk culture that was sometimes at odds with official, really elite, policy. This discrepancy arose from more than a difference in the attitudes between the commonsense rangers and their bosses. Group interaction among the rangers created a subculture,

with a logic, perspective, and oral literature—including fire stories—of its own.

Early fire fighters' ability to control fire stemmed much more from folk knowledge and hard-won experience than from any formal training. Because "there was literally nothing to work with—no knowledge of fire behavior; no training in the techniques of fire fighting," rangers resorted to the cumulative knowledge they had gained on the fire line.⁷ In a *de facto* apprentice system, junior rangers followed in the footsteps of fire-wise veterans. Fire stories taught the apprentices both fire-fighting techniques and fire etiquette. Early fire-suppression techniques proved successful in the front country, but larger territories, poor access, and meager administrative abilities generally hampered the quick suppression of backcountry fires.⁸

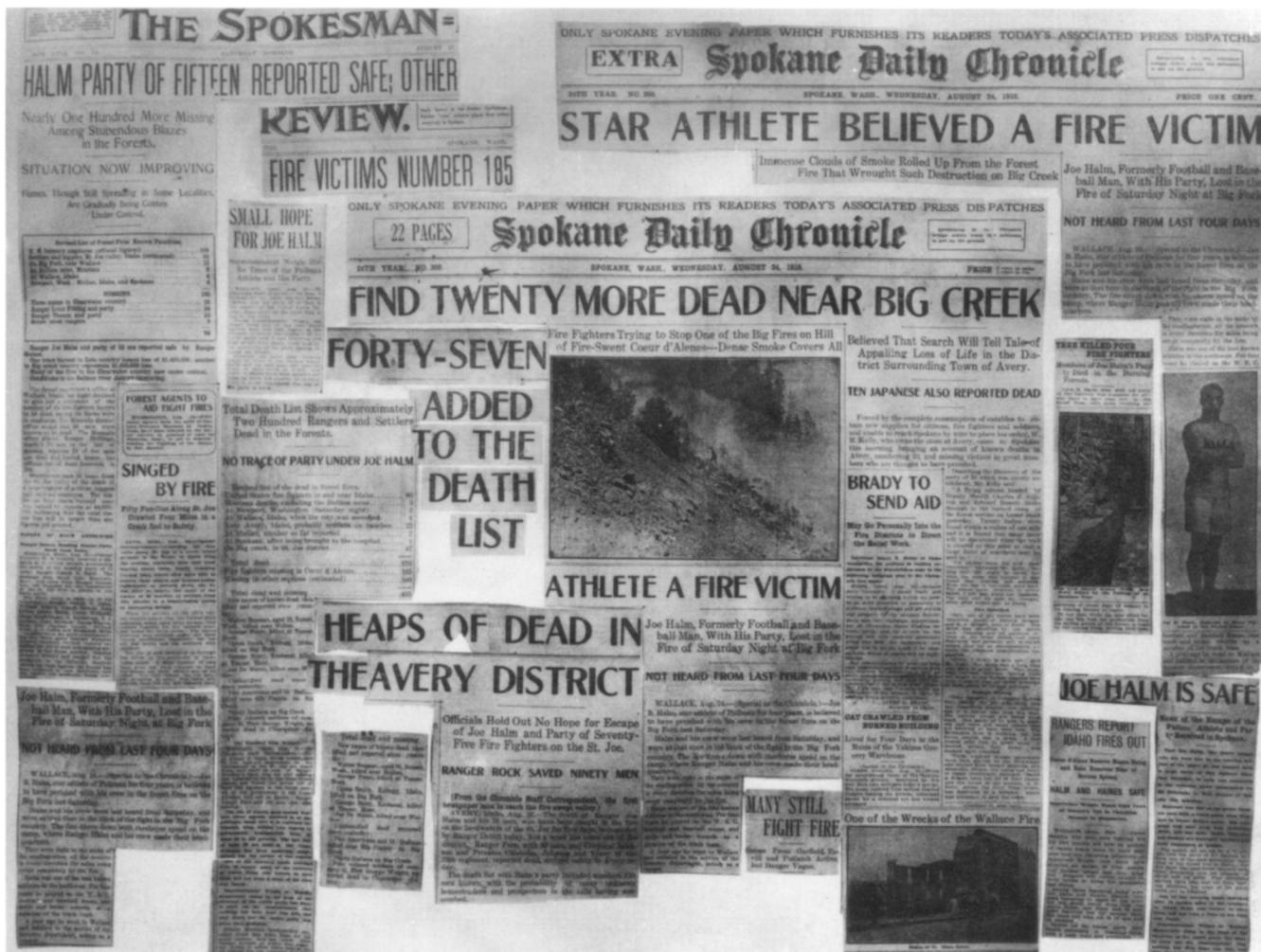
Ironically, most fire stories do not discuss the actual suppression of fire.⁹ Nor do they overtly express a concern for saving natural resources. Rather

they focus on unexpected, threatening fire behavior from which crews narrowly escape. A recurrent theme of early rangers' stories is that man cannot always control fire. Dangerous and atypical fires stimulated the most stories, rumors, and other folklife forms.¹⁰

Stories of the 1910 Great Burn underscore with dramatic flair the importance of following authority: Rangers Pulaski and Joe Halm pull out hand guns to force frightened crew members to obey them and stay in the tunnel.¹¹ Had the fire fighters disobeyed, they would have killed themselves by running into the fire. The emphasis on the importance of organization and authority is unique in fire stories, contrasting markedly with contemporary narratives from other occupational groups.¹² It contrasts as well with the stories told by contemporary foresters, for example, which highlight the illogical, egotistical, and eccentric behavior of bosses.



A pack train carries supplies to fire fighters. Photo courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.



Copies of newspaper stories about the 1910 fires with particular attention to the fate of Joe Halm and his party. Photo courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.

The Nature of Fire Stories

The fire line was and remains particularly fertile ground for the creation and re-creation of folklore. The unusual and isolated environment—of fear, hard work, dirt—the expectation of good wages, and the communal nature of the work encourage camaraderie, conversation, and the emergence of new customs. Yet for all the sense of camaraderie, the fire is an individual experience for each fire fighter; you are never sure what the whole picture is, or will be, while a large fire is blazing.

The fire story is an ongoing creation. It changes with each retelling and ironically is usually not perfected until long after the fire is extinguished. Often fire stories are told in the context of a conversation about fires and their suppression. However, the stories can be distinguished from general fire talk or

fire-line rumors by their artistry. General fire talk is descriptive, pointedly informative, and usually not meant to be entertaining. Fire-line rumors are ephemeral and wedded to the stressful, exciting, or threatening atmosphere of actively fighting forest fires. Fire stories on the other hand have a dramatic structure: they employ symbols, plots (with buildup, climax, and conclusion), measured timing, opening and closing “formulas,” and other hallmarks of story telling.¹³

Because most stories recount specific events that occur on the fire line, each story is unique. However, some stories do employ “migratory motifs,” plot segments that migrate from one story to another. Such recurring narrative themes include fire fighters stumbling across a still while fighting fire; panic-

stricken men and animals rushing into the fire rather than to safety; and impromptu, warm relations shared by fire fighters and bears during the heat of the fire:

Down on the Clearwater [National Forest] two fire-fighting gangs got to the river in the nick of time. The boss of one of them made each man duck into the water under a blanket or coat, coming up under this dripping hood to breathe when he had to. Rising for a breath himself, the foreman brushed against a sturdy body, took a peek under his blanket and discovered that his neighbor was a black bear!¹⁴

Other such themes in fire stories include crews nearly being trapped by fire; narrow escapes thanks to the quick thinking of the fire boss; and most memorable of all for dramatic effect, the total consumption of a fire camp by an out-of-control fire.

These migratory motifs appear to have developed independently during a few decades as Forest Service personnel used them over and over. These themes have no discernible connection to motifs in other folk narratives and therefore demonstrate the dynamism and creativity of the genre. The repetitive motifs of fire stories also confirm that early rangers had their own well-articulated view of the world, with shared perceptions, attitudes, and values.

Nature-Human Relations in Fire Stories

A common theme in fire stories is that nature is more powerful than man. The stunning eruption of nature's power in fire undermines normal order and puts human-nature relationships in flux. As ranger Joe Halm put it, "All nature seemed tense, unnatural and ominous" during the 1910 fire.¹⁵

The power of fire is often dramatized by a common story-telling convention: reverse symbolism. For example, fire fighters lose their self-control and run *into* the fire instead of away from it. Night and day are often reversed: during a fire, daylight is masked by smoke, haze, and ash; but nighttime is lit by firelight. Water is no longer a cooling, nourishing, and healthful resource: snowmelt streams are tepid, springs boil, and water sources become undrinkable because of ash content. During the aftermath of the Great Burn, the water supply for the town of Wallace, Idaho, was so polluted with ash that townspeople, including children, drank beer.

Another dramatic means of illustrating fire's supremacy over fire fighters is recounting freakish occurrences in nature. For example, commonsense rangers often noted spectacular displays of fire and lightning, and some recounted strange phenomena they experienced in the high country during electrical storms:

On another occasion while riding on the Line Creek Plateau, on the eastern part of the [Custer National] Forest I was caught in an electrical storm. And ah . . . the lightning played all around us. It was so strong that when the horses got wet, there was a blue flame about three inches around that run almost continually off the ends of their ears.

I remember we hardly broke off from the plateau down onto the flat, down toward the Line Creek Ranger Station. And as we arrived at the fence surrounding the station, the ranger jumped off to open the gate and I hollered at him to stay away from the fence. He jumped back and said, "Well, how are we going to get in?" And I said, "Take a club and knock the wire off from the top of that wire gate. Throw it out of the way with the use of the club, but don't touch the wires."

Not more than two minutes after that, a terrific bolt of lightning struck the fence and . . . [it] was so hot it melted the top wire on that fence for about a hundred yards and [it] dropped off in little chunks.¹⁶

The stories also frequently emphasize the awe-inspiring or inexplicable aspects of fires. The following brief exchange between two veteran fire fighters illustrates their sense of wonder.

J. A. [End of one fire story] Well, we caught that [Goat Creek] fire but we didn't have much left when we got things under control because it was just too hot and dry.

A. S. I remember if a spot [fire] would light as much as fifty or one hundred yards across the fire line, you could hardly get in fast enough to catch it.

J. A. I'll go one better than that. We were eating lunch, and we very seldom all stopped to eat lunch, but this particular day we did. That fire blew right at our feet, and I would say there were ten or fifteen men on that thing and it just swept right out from us just like we hadn't touched it at all.¹⁷

Fire stories further illustrate the power of nature over man by acknowledging the importance of luck in the "fire game."¹⁸ Luck is most frequently mentioned as a factor in the timing of a fire blowup, when a fire crowns into treetops and is most dangerous. The fire fighters' attribution of their successes to luck reflects their respect for their unpredictable and awe-inspiring natural opponent.

Although fire frequently threatened the early rangers with injury or death, most fire narratives reflect an attitude of respect and awe, not of animosity. Fire is clearly undesirable, but it does not become an enemy. Personification, such as calling fire "old Nick," is rare.¹⁹ Similarly, fire is rarely associated with hell, although hellish conditions are sometimes noted.

Social Relations in Fire Stories

Fire stories are multi-faceted, as apt to address Forest Service social structure as the natural world or humankind's relationship to nature.²⁰ The stories describe trying events, atypical among the routine duties of a district ranger. Such tales instruct both newcomers and veterans in the informal, yet crucial, subtleties of fire-suppression efforts.²¹ They also affirm the importance of the hierarchy among fire-fighting personnel. The following example affirms the importance of obeying a leader:

We had a come down there on a little creek [of Jakey's Fork]. I went down there the first half of the day with . . . a couple of kids from Indiana or someplace. And I got them down there, and we had ten-gallon tanks on our backs putting out spot fires.

And I said, "If it goes to crowning when it's over here, why, you run out there in the burn, where it's already burned there. You see that old log that ain't burning there, well, run out there on that log in that burn because that [crown fire] will burn you from the top if you stay." Well, sure enough, it started there in a little while and crowned and went on.

And one of them weighed about 190 or 200 pounds. And he said, "You must think I'm crazy, to run out on one of those logs or something by the fire."

And I said, "No, I was just telling you what to do."

And sure enough, it got to climbing right over us. And I and this other kid—anything I said went with him, he was a hell of a good boy—we just bucked our tanks off, and God and run in that burn. And this other boy started looking up, and those sparks began to hit him in the face and junk. And God, here he come fighting his clothes [because they were on fire]. He run out there and this other kid started teasing him because he had his clothes on fire in places.

And I said, "Jump right down into that little old spring." There was a spring there and little running water. So he did.²²

Fire stories focus on the crew boss's responsibility for his men. A boss must anticipate and plan for unforeseen events, and he is responsible for his men no matter what the situation. Even if one boss "inherits" ominous fire conditions from another, the "fresh" fire boss is responsible for the crew. Pulaski during the Great Burn and Urban Post on

the tragic Blackwater Creek Fire of 1937 took their obligations as leaders to the point of self-sacrifice.²³ The stories of their exploits in the line of fire salute their “forest smarts”—a mixture of courage, experience, and knowing how to guide men.

When legends about the deeds of such men as Pulaski and Post move from personal to communal ownership, the men become folk heroes, serving as a focus of occupational identity, honor, and inspiration. The commonsense rangers, who believed that “field men” from the lower ranks of Forest Service personnel were the “real heroes” of the service, particularly admired Pulaski and Post, both field men themselves. But hero status brought with it a few rules: self-aggrandizing claims, for example, were strictly prohibited.²⁴ As taciturn westerners, fire-wise rangers downplayed the fire “threat.”

The self-sacrifice of rangers in many fire stories is based on a paternalistic attitude toward the men.²⁵ The following fire story illustrates this sense of selfless leadership:

Kneeling there under the red-tinged blanket of smoke, I endured the greatest agony—a feeling of blame for the death of human beings. Though I was yelling at the top of my lungs, straining burning

eyes to pierce that haze of hell for a glimpse of even one of the fifty men for whose safety I was responsible, I received no reply, nor did I catch a single glimpse of a human being.

Then, due to some whim of the elements, the roar almost died away and for a few seconds there was deathlike silence. And in this brief moment, my agonies died, for out of that haze of heat that overhung the lake I heard voices.²⁶

In short the fire bosses subscribed to a code of chivalry about protecting their crews.²⁷ And since the ranger was fire-wise, a crew’s best chance was to follow his directions. Fire stories pair the crew’s belief in and reliance on the ranger’s directions with the ranger’s heightened sense of responsibility toward his men. Together these messages show rangers and fire fighters alike how best to organize their collective efforts.

In many stories alcohol stands for the risk of disorder on the fire line. Stories recount how fire fighters discover backcountry stills and tricks the ranger uses to keep his crew drinking water. Of course, every commonsense ranger knew that alcohol threatened both fire-line order and the Forest Service’s image of high propriety. In all rangers’ stories, fire fighters were kept from alcohol.²⁸

If fire stories are about anything, they are about fear. Ironically, however, most fire stories actually *mention* fear only obliquely, if at all. The ranger-storyteller rarely admits to fear, even during close calls. And even those stories that do mention fear handle it in a formal, self-conscious manner that prevents the audience from judging the narrator negatively.²⁹ The story-telling canon of the commonsense ranger, like that of western cowboys, allowed no overt or personal discussion of fear.³⁰

However, fire stories do illustrate the potentially disastrous consequences of giving in to fear. Crew members in the stories who are overcome by fear or the searing heat commit foolish acts and often die as a consequence. Interestingly, the escape attempts of panicked fire fighters often parallel closely the behavior of panicked animals—bear, elk, and deer. And the result is the same: death.³¹ Thus in accident stories fire fighters’ loss of self-control symbolically equates them with animals. Regression from rational thought and official protocol to instinct becomes a death sentence. So the accident stories assert the importance of subduing fear, of strict organization, and of a clear distinction between human and animal realms. Humans



In this photo taken around 1910, a group of men works to control a fire in Mt. Hood National Forest. Photo courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.

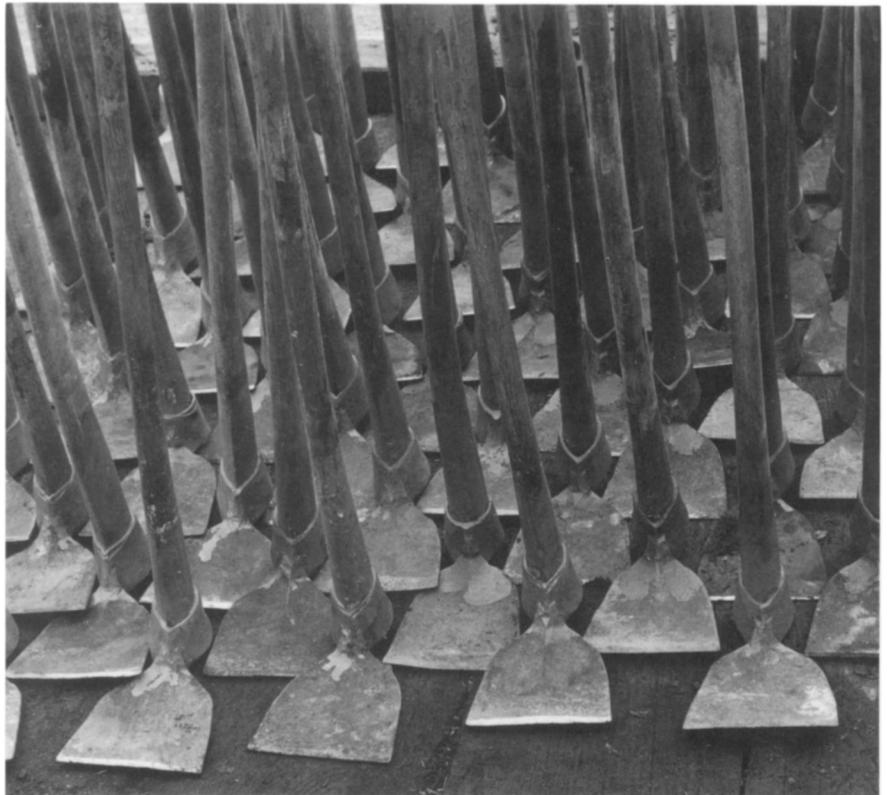
are superior to animals because of their ability to think and suppress instinct. The fire stories warn fire fighters to be careful by threatening those who lose control not only with death but also with the loss of their very humanity. In sum, fire becomes a test of human judgment, control, and social bonds.

Unofficial versus Official Forestry Values in Fire Stories

Rangers' stories often describe fire fighting as a "trial by fire," or a test of quality. A number of stories demonstrate the importance of knowing the "district"—the lay of the land and its unusual resources. The Pulaski legend, for example, demonstrates the special abilities of field men who know their districts well.³² Pulaski could save forty-some men largely because he knew where an abandoned mine tunnel was located and got his men there in time. He knew the mine only because he had worked in the area as a miner prior to employment with the Forest Service. The early rangers relied on and defended the knowledge they had gained from pre-Forest Service work or long stays on one district more than do latter-day rangers.

Fire stories also make clear that occasionally, under trying circumstances, formal rules have to be broken to ensure the overall safety of men.³³ Fire conditions may call for creative, on-the-spot solutions that contradict official policy, as when Pulaski pulls his pistol to prevent his men from leaving the mine tunnel. Willingness to break rules, leaving the ranger open to criticism that might cost him his job, underscores the extreme personal responsibility of rangers for their men.

In the stories fire is taken for granted as a part of forest life, and fire control as part of defending a ranger's territory and reputation.³⁴ Listeners learn that fire must be tolerated—even though tolerance is easier when the fire is on another's district. Commonsense rangers figured that fire, like forest pests and other natural phenomena that preceded White arrival and management of forests, had a place in forest life.³⁵ These "shoot, chop, pack, and ride"



Among the tools used in fire control are mattocks, shown here in storage. Photo courtesy of American Forest Products Industries, in Forest History Society archives.

rangers' ideas about fire's role in forest life differed from the ideas of their replacements. Indeed, their evenhanded attitude toward fire was more akin to the "natural fire" policy of contemporary management than to the policies of their immediate successors. At the bottom of the early rangers' attitude was a folk idea that "harmonious" presettlement biological conditions should be the model for all subsequent management.³⁶

The first Forest Service rangers often considered naturally caused fires less sinister and less urgent than fires caused by careless campers or ranchers on their grazing allotments. Ranger responses to the Blackwater Creek Fire in northwestern Wyoming illustrated this set of priorities. The first rumor to circulate on the fire line was that the fire was "man-caused."³⁷ Though this rumor was eventually disproven, the Forest Service was in no hurry to combat it because it motivated crews to corral the fire. This did not illustrate a general policy of allowing rumors to fly on the fire line—the service moved quickly to squelch any rumors that it was mishandling a fire.

Commonsense rangers were ambivalent toward fire: it was both natural (good) and powerful and unpredictable (bad). Their tolerance of some fires and their willingness to break fire-fighting codes in exceptional circumstances distinguished the old-timers' attitudes from the official policy of the Forest Service. The service's harsh rhetoric, even tirade, against all fire is simply absent from the older fire stories. In short the field men rode to a different drummer than their bosses, who were largely responsible for creating official fire policy. The commonsense rangers shared with many cultures throughout the world the idea that fire is both good and bad.³⁸

The Use and Implications of Fire Stories

To understand how the early rangers implemented official Forest Service policy, especially when they disagreed with it, we must first consider what the commonsense rangers valued. Since fire stories were primarily told between rangers, they are uncensored "documents," speaking directly to what rang-

ers held near and dear. Candidly autobiographical, they give us a window into the social processes among rangers.

Fire stories helped to articulate and validate the commonsense rangers' shared beliefs. The stories had strong personal and occupational implications for both the storyteller and his audience. They taught newcomers how to fight fire, and they provided seasoned fire fighters with a definition of self. The fire-fighting experience was a crucible in which rangers were tested. Those who passed the test and proved themselves as experienced fire fighters were elevated to the status of "fire-wise." In short, fire stories are about a secular, informal, occupational rite of passage.³⁹ The ranger had to prove his worth by demonstrating his ability to get along in any circumstance nature could throw at him.⁴⁰

The early Forest Service rangers' view of fires as rites of passage arose from their fraternal, all-male ethos, a remnant of cowboy culture. Fire stories served first to define a select occupational group in which individual achievement occurred in the context of dangerous cooperative work. They also established a pecking order among the fire fighters themselves: a man's demonstration of competence raised his social stature among his peers. And for those not yet tested by fire, the stories raised the question: What would I do under similar circumstances?

Fire stories exhibit the tripartite structure characteristic of rites of passage: separation, marginality, and incorporation.⁴¹ The separation phase begins with the onset of the fire and fire fighting. The marginality phase begins when the fire becomes dangerous or behaves unusually, or in Halm's words, "when all of nature seems unnatural." This middle phase, with its inversions, earthiness, and different rules, occupies the bulk of fire narratives. In contrast, the final phase, incorporation, is usually given short shrift, but it is always assumed by the successful suppression of the fire and the narrator's presence while narrating the story. Its overt "lack" underscores the high value this group places on individuality.

Early rangers thus used forest fires to define their occupational culture and personal identity.⁴² Above all else,

fighting fires helped participants see themselves as Forest Service rangers. Yet fires engendered mixed emotions and thoughts. Fire was a multivalent symbol, both bad and good: it gave symbolic and social life by serving as a rite of passage into an elite group, but it also took human life; desirable because it occurred naturally, yet undesirable on one's own turf.

New generations of technical, college-trained, and policy-entrenched rangers face fire as an inherited test from their predecessors of their "commonsense." The experience bonds them with fire-wise old-timers. As the Forest Service has expanded and specialized, however, fewer and fewer Forest Service employees themselves actually fight forest fires. Their one link to the past is the old fire stories still told, if the modern foresters choose to listen. Today some would step over the body of fire stories and remark, "Too damn bad, the fire story is dead." To this, however, the sooty fire fighter, veteran forester, and folklorist can all reply, "Like hell it is." ▲

Notes

1. The names of this early group of rangers vary widely, often depending on the commentator's opinion of them. Labels such as "commonsense," "pick-up," "saddle-horse," "rough-neck," or what a hard-boiled forest supervisor called "the old-time, trapper, cowboy, and ignorant ranch hand" rangers have all been used. Personal correspondence with Mary White, Dubois, Wyoming, 21 July 1982; Alfred Clayton, "The Evolution of a Forest Ranger," *American Forests* 36 (August 1930): 511; S. Edwin Cazier, *The Last Saddle Horse Ranger* (Afton, Wyoming: Star Valley Independent, 1983), pp. 34ff; Joe Back, interview with author, Dubois, Wyoming, 9 July 1982 (Wyoming Archives, Museum and Historical Department, Cheyenne, Wyoming); John Lowell, "Early History of the U.S. Forest Service and Events Leading up to the Author's Connection with It," in *Early Days in the U.S. Forest Service*, vol. 1 (Missoula, Montana: U.S. Forest Service, 1944), p. 152. In these notes the location of interview transcripts appears in parentheses after the first mention of each interview.
2. William Greeley, *Forests and Men* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1951), p. 17.
3. Theodore Shoemaker, "Fighting Forest Fires—Then and Now," in *Early Days in the Forest Service*, vol. 2 (Missoula, Montana: U.S. Forest Service, 1955), p. 37; Edward C.

Pulaski, "Surrounded by Fire," in *Rangers of the Shield*, edited by Ovid Butler (Washington, D.C.: American Forestry Association, 1934), p. 80.

4. John W. Bennett, "Range Culture and Society in the North American West," *Folklore Annual* (1985): 90–92.
5. Glen A. Smith, interview, Missoula, Montana, 1956 (University of Montana Oral History Collection); John K. Rollinson, *Pony Trails in Wyoming* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1941), p. 400; Wilbur Goodsen, "Reflections of an Old Time Ranger," *Rocky Mountain Region Bulletin* 20 (1937): 17.
6. Samuel Trask Dana and Sally K. Fairfax, *Forest and Range Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), pp. 104ff.
7. Shoemaker, "Fighting Forest Fires," p. 34.
8. Stephen Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 261ff.
9. The stories' tendency not to discuss the intricacies of fire behavior persists today. Robert McCarl notes a similar "disinterest" in discussing fire behavior in smokejumpers' "jump stories." Robert McCarl, "Jump Story: An Examination of an Occupational Experience Narrative," *Folklore Forum* 11 (1978): 2.
10. For practicality and closure, my examples are based on stories about two principal fires in the northern Rocky Mountains: the 1910 Great Burn and the 1937 Blackwater Creek Fire. The Great Burn, which was really multiple fires in northern Idaho and northwestern Montana, burned more than one million forested acres and killed more than eighty men. The Blackwater Creek Fire, fourteen miles east of Yellowstone National Park, was much smaller but still traumatic. Fifteen fire fighters were killed as a crown fire trapped two crews on steeply forested terrain.
11. Joe Halm, "The Great Fire of 1910," *American Forests* (July 1930): 423; Pulaski, "Surrounded by Fire," p. 79; Shoemaker, "Fighting Forest Fire," p. 37.
12. Jack Santino, "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives," *Smithsonian Folklore Studies* 3 (1978): 59ff.
13. As artistic creations, fire stories carry a heavier cultural load of symbols and metaphor than fire talk. In contrast, fire talk is meant to be strictly informative, aiding the exchange of ideas about fire behavior and suppression techniques. For more on the relationship between fire-line legends and rumors, see Timothy Cochrane, "Blackwater Creek Forest Fire Legends and Rumors and Their Relationships," *Northwest Folklore* 5 (Spring 1987): 3–14.
14. Greeley, *Forests and Men*, p. 17.
15. Halm, "The Great Fire of 1910," pp. 426, 428; Pulaski, "Surrounded by Fire," pp. 78, 80; Jack Albano, interview, Kaysville, Utah, 24 May 1965 (Intermountain Region Office); James G. Bradley, "When Smoke Blotted out the Sun," *American West* 11 (November 1974): 4, 8; Alice Shoemaker, interview with author, Dubois, Wyoming, 11 June 1983 (Dubois Museum); Edward G. Stahl, *Early Days in the Forest Service*, vol. 3 (Missoula, Montana: U.S. Forest Service, 1962), p. 240.

16. Smith interview, 1956.
17. Albano interview, 24 May 1965.
18. Les Shoemaker, interview with author, Dubois, Wyoming, 24 June 1983 (Dubois Museum); M. F. Pincetl, "Fire at Plum Bar," *American Forests* 30 (November 1924): 677.
19. I found only one instance in which fire was personified to the degree of being given a name. Len Shoemaker, *Saga of a Forest Ranger: A Biography of William R. Kreutzer* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1958), p. 150ff.
20. Although fire stories are a rich bank of rangers' attitudes and conceptions, we must be careful about assuming that the principles embodied in the narratives are rules or axioms of behavior. Although some studies assume that attitudes are inflexible and rigid, most folklorists argue that attitudes and conceptions depend on context and vary from one story-telling situation to another. In short the values embodied in stories are dynamic, not static or superorganic, as some might imply. Thus it is more accurate to view a story as an ongoing effort of articulation rather than the application of a completed "code."
21. Santino, "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives," p. 60.
22. Arthur (Dutch) Nipper, interview with author, Crowheart, Wyoming, 3 June 1983 (Dubois Museum).
23. However the homage to self-sacrifice in fire stories goes only so far. Both Pulaski and Post lived through their ordeals. In contrast, a Blackwater Creek Fire crew boss, Paul Tyrrell, who died from injuries suffered while holding and sheltering three panic-stricken CCC men, is not remembered in occupational legends.
24. The reluctance to boast about life-saving actions is similar to the story-telling canons of contemporary urban firemen. Robert McCarl, "The District of Columbia Fire Fighters' Project," *Smithsonian Folklife Studies* 4 (1985): 197.
25. Joe Halm, "All in a Day's Work," in *Early Days in the U.S. Forest Service*, vol. 4 (Missoula, Montana: U.S. Forest Service, 1976), p. 93; Halm, "The Great Fire of 1910," p. 426; Blackwater Creek Fire File, U.S. Forest Service Region Office, Denver, Colorado.
26. W. C. McCormick, "Trapped by Fire," *American Forests* 44 (July 1938): 322.
27. There are occasional exceptions to this attitude of extreme responsibility, but the ranger who cares little about his men is very much disparaged. Albert Cole, "Early Experiences," *Early Days in the Forest Service*, vol. 1 (Missoula, Montana: U.S. Forest Service, 1944), p. 52; Albano interview, 24 May 1965.
28. Tom Redman, interview with author, Dubois, Wyoming, 5 July 1983 (Dubois Museum); Charles S. Cowan, *The Enemy Is Fire* (Seattle, Washington: Superior, 1962), p. 71; E. John Long, "Menace of the Stills," *American Forests* 62 (May 1956): 36–39; C. Y. Garber, "Fire on Pine Creek," *Idaho Yesterdays* 11 (November 1967): 27. In contrast to Forest Service personnel, fire cooperators—private citizens who were the primary work force for fire control prior to the New Deal—tell some stories in which rangers do use alcohol from stills found in the woods. The negative view-
- point of the fire cooperators may be explained by their western animosity toward the Forest Service and toward its attempts to maintain a "good image." Fred Hawley, interview with author, Dubois, Wyoming, 13 July 1983 (Dubois Museum); Redman interview, 5 July 1983.
29. Formally "bracketing off" fear in this way lets a storyteller acknowledge its power without undermining his credibility and manliness. McCarl noted a similar reaction among smokejumpers and structural (urban) fire fighters. Robert McCarl, "Jump Story," p. 3; McCarl, "The District of Columbia," p. 196. Overall the tendency toward understatement, a droll sense of humor, and a lack of personally boastful claims in fire stories seems consistent with other western traditions of story telling. Here, as in other ways, "commonsense rangers" seem very closely aligned with western cowboy culture.
30. Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), pp. 70, 106.
31. Urban Post, "Blackwater Fire on the Shoshone," *Fire Control Notes* 20 (September 1937): 313, 315; Blackwater Creek Fire File, U.S. Forest Service Region Office, Denver, Colorado; Pulaski, "Surrounded by Fire," p. 79; Stan Cohen and Don Miller, *The Big Burn: The Northwest's Forest Fire of 1910* (Missoula, Montana: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1978), p. 16; Bradley, "When Smoke Blotted out the Sun," p. 7.
32. Pulaski, "Surrounded by Fire," p. 79; Greeley, *Forests and Men*, p. 17. Greeley's comments are unusual in that although he was not a commonsense ranger he recognized the importance of Pulaski's "knowing his home ground"—a value held strongly by the field men themselves.
33. For example, in the Blackwater Creek Fire, Post and his men escaped into an open park by ignoring the rule against fleeing uphill. Post, "Blackwater Fire," p. 309; Arthur A. Brown and Kenneth P. Davis, *Forest Fire Control and Use* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 498. Other examples of informal instructions that warn fellow employees to break the rules when necessary in trying circumstances are found in McCarl, "Jump Story," p. 5; McCarl, "District of Columbia Fire Fighters' Project," p. 203.
34. Glen Smith's and Theodore Shoemaker's comments about frontier townspeople watching forested mountainsides burn affirm that westerners accepted forest fire. I suspect commonsense rangers shared some of this "early" western sentiment. Smith interview, 1956; Shoemaker, "Fighting Forest Fires," p. 34.
35. Joe Back, interview with author, Dubois, Wyoming, 13 July 1983 (Dubois Museum); Brian Attebery, "Land Use Attitudes and Ethics in Idaho Folklore," in *Idaho Folklife: Homesteads to Headstones*, edited by Louie Attebery (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), p. 226; Timothy Cochrane, "A Folk Biography of an United States Forest Service Ranger, Westerner, and Artist: A. G. Clayton" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1986), p. 118.
36. This conception blithely ignores the notion that native Americans may have greatly altered the "natural" environment. Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 705. I have noted this same folk idea among a number of Lake Superior commercial fishermen. Timothy Cochrane, "The Folklife Expressions of Three Isle Royale Fishermen: A Sense of Place Examination" (M.A. thesis, Western Kentucky University, 1982), pp. 85–89.
37. The most complete example of this rumor is in the national Civilian Conservation Corps newspaper, *Happy Days*, 28 August 1937. See also the Blackwater Creek Fire File, U.S. Forest Service Region Office, Denver, Colorado.
38. Emerson Hough, "Fire as an Agent in Human Culture," *Smithsonian Institution Bulletin* 139 (1926): 143; Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, translated by Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 7. It is interesting to speculate about how symbolism might have influenced fire policy. For example, if fire is traditionally evaluated as ambiguous, then policymakers may find it difficult to convince the public of a strictly negative view. Indeed I believe that this was exactly the point of the Forest Service's extremely sharp rhetoric against fire during the 1930s: the agency was attempting to overcome the traditional ambivalence about fire. The inertia of past opinion could be budged only by extreme tirades.
39. The rites of passage most discussed in writing have been religious and formal, and produce a radical change in the person undergoing the ritual. Secular, informal rites of passage, like those in fire stories, are much less studied. Classic works on rites of passage are: Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, translated by Mokika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, Illinois: Aldine, 1960); and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago, Illinois: Aldine, 1969). Robert McCarl has noted among smokejumpers a rite of passage similar to the role fire plays for rangers on the ground, in "Smokejumper's Initiation," *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (January/March 1976): 49–66.
40. Many rites of passage involve immersion in earthy and chaotic conditions very like those that occur on the fire line. Also, rites of passage frequently involve role reversals or symbolic reversals, such as daylight masked by smoke and haze, or the night lit up by flames. Barbara A. Babcock, *The Reversible World* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 24ff.
41. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94–130.
42. Stephen Pyne, "The Fire Next Time: Old Fire Problems and New Problem Fires," Ninth Conference on Fire and Forest Methodology, 27 April 1987, San Diego, California. Pyne concurs with this assertion. He notes the importance that fire experiences—as rites of passage—have on young, predominantly male, fire fighters.