

# HOW TELEPHONES SAVED LIVES

By C. J. BUCK

Assistant District Forester, U. S. Forest Service, Portland

(From the *Pittsfield (Mass.) Journal of October 5.*)

(The following account of the fight against the destructive fires in southern Oregon demonstrates by experimental proof what the value of prompt communication is in emergencies such as are likely to arise at any time during the danger season in the rugged country of the West. Mr. Buck, who tells the story, is at present assigned as chief of the Office of Lands in his district, but assumed charge of the fire-fighting force, as described, when the need of good generalship became great.—Ed.)

HOW telephones saved settlers from death in forest fires," is the attractive title of a story told by Assistant District Forester C. J. Buck in the *Oregon Sunday Journal* of September 25, when he returned from successful generalship of the southern Oregon fire situation.

The timber loss in southern Oregon was 800,000,000 feet on Government and private holdings, yet not a life was lost. It was the worst fire in northwest history, but telephones carrying warnings with electric speed warned the settlers and the hunters and the campers so that they got safely each time from the path of the devouring destruction.

There were fires that raced faster than a man could run and burned with such tremendous ferocity that green forests were completely burned. Where great trees had towered to magnificent heights, only smoking stumps were left. The breath of the flame in the canyon like a furnace heated seven times laughed derisively at the puny efforts of puny men to stay its course and reached out a menace of death, to enfold them.

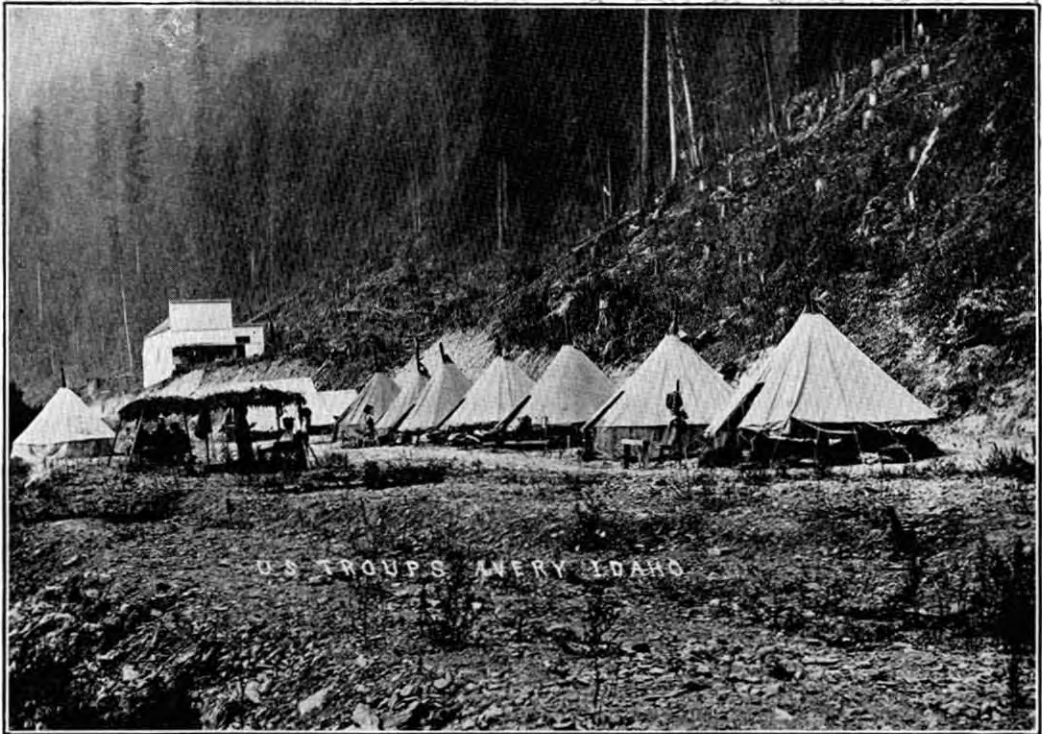
Here and there were the isolated homes of lonely settlers; out in the woods were hunters; along the streams were fishermen. Over the country hung the smoke pall. The great area with its clustering towns and its scat-

tered people had never known such a drought. It was as dry as the sands of Sahara where rains never fall. The sun had been shining down day after day its heat unbearable and the forests were like tinder, ready to blaze from a spark. The hot winds raged, too, day after day, ready to fan the spark into a roaring torrent of madly spreading fire.

This was the condition found by Forester Buck when he stepped off the train at Medford, going from Portland to respond to urgent calls for assistance. The people were almost scared to death. The country was so dry, the winds so high and so unceasing, and the smoke cloud so dense that no one knew just when the flame would reach out hungrily in his direction.

## FIRES ALL AROUND

"Fires were burning at Mount Pitts, Anderson Creek, Wagner Creek near Ashland, near Butte Falls, on Clover Creek, Elk Creek, and at Cat Creek," said Mr. Buck. "There had been no preparation for so many fires. They were all unexpected. There were not by any manner of means enough of a fire-fighting force on the ground to handle the blazes, even had they been of the ordinary controllable sort. Confusion was added to apprehension by



Company G, 25th Regiment from Fort George Wright, Washington

reports constantly being received of new fires. I'm going to say frankly, now that the danger is over, that for a time we thought the whole country would go.

"To get an organization under such conditions was as imperative as it seemed impossible. Never at the best of the time could we get enough men to fight the fires and get the kind of a continued patrol we needed.

"Right here is where the telephones saved the day. In the Crater National forest the government has spent \$3,500 in constructing 60 miles of telephone lines between the various outposts of the patrol rangers. We also had free use of such private telephones as there were. The fire situation was constantly changing. When a few hours before it might have been clear, a carelessly dropped cigar might have been fanned into a raging fire. At a point a little distant, where the fire had been serious, control of the situation might have been obtained. So by a constant system of telephone reports we were enabled to know where the

need for fire fighters was greatest and to keep them moving accordingly.

"The fire at Deadwood, a small but serious blaze, will serve as an instance. Dead Indian, a few miles to the north, had been pretty well burned over, when in the middle of the night, news of the fire at Deadwood came. I found it possible to move men from Dead Indian and from Ashland at the same time by using the telephone. In 24 hours the situation was under control. Had messengers been trusted to bring the news, and other messengers been necessary to gather up the men and send them to the fire front, the blaze might have spread beyond all control. At Deadwood the settlers came near losing their property. Fire burned clear up to the back yards and the fire-fighting that was done, before the blaze could be controlled, was of the heroic kind.

#### THE WORST FIRE

"The worst of all the fires was on the South Fork of Rogue river. A for-

est officer told me that at a distance of a mile the roar of the flames sounded like an express train crossing a trestle near at hand. I do not believe another fire in this district destroyed so much timber. The total loss was not less than 350,000,000 feet, worth on the stump about a million dollars. Here the flames, racing through the tree tops when the wind blew at all, spreading along the ground when the air was calm, burned down the green timber, absolutely destroying its merchantable value.

"The pick of Jackson county timber, to be brief, was destroyed. Much of it was in private ownership.

"Two companies of soldiers were sent to help the local fire fighters. They spent a good deal of their time protecting the settlers' houses, but they did splendid work. Unorganized work on the Rogue river fire would have done little good. The thing that puzzled them most was the way the fires spread. They arrived first at the northwest corner of the burning area then began the work toward the east, trenching and back-firing.

"Occasionally they sent ahead to learn how the fire was spreading. In the morning it was about a mile ahead of them. This gave confidence. They thought by night they would surely have caught up. Night came, and imagine the chagrin of the fighters when they found that the blaze was five miles ahead of them. It was burning around them and coming back toward them. It was then found necessary to immediately move camp a distance of 12 miles before they could get at the fire front. But there is no doubt that the soldiers saved in this locality 300,000,000 feet of timber. They certainly earned their transportation and their wages many times over.

"As much could be said for all the soldiers sent to fight fire in the Crater forest. They worked as hard as men could work, unmindful of the danger or the exposure. Some of them pleaded that they might be allowed to work extra hours in order that there might be a greater certainty of bringing the flames under control.

#### PRAISE FOR THE SOLDIERS

"Particular credit is due their commander, Major Martin, for the masterly way in which he handled his men. He inaugurated a system of keeping in close touch with all points of danger that was well nigh perfect. He cooperated closely with the Forest Service. He kept in constant communication with me, so that he might know where to send his men to work the most effectively. It would take a long time to tell how they worked eagerly and uncomplainingly, with perfect system and discipline and with organization impossible to the volunteer fire fighters or to the laborers that we hastily employed.

"To say that no lives were lost does not imply that there was no danger. Ashland was in serious danger. It was a wild and dramatic time when the fire bells rang and the people assembled on the public square. No wonder the faces of the men grew pale as they heard Ranger Gribble tell them that if the wind kept blowing, their homes and the city might go.

"Ashland, understand, is a fine little city of between eight and ten thousand population. But from the edge of the town to dense timber is not more than a mile and a half. There is a great area on other sides of the town that is overgrown with brush tremendously inflammable in such a season as this. The business men closed their stores and went out to fight fire in the forest. They did good work, for they were fighting for their families and their property. A foggy day came, when in other places it rained, and the fires subsided. Fear was relieved, the tension relaxed. Then the wind came again, and again the town was in danger. So the people fought their battles against the fire fiend all over, and they won.

"In the office there was press of business and dramatic scenes. It was like headquarters in war time. I talked on the telephone on an average of six hours a day. When I got away from that job I had scarcely any voice left.



"Telegrams poured in from every part of the United States. They were inquiries from people who had friends out in the forests. These had to be answered. A local paper printed a story about settlers being endangered. A man stumbled into the office, his face blanched. He could not speak. In his hand he held a copy of that paper. 'My family is there,' he finally gasped. It took a lot of work to reassure that man and send him on his way again.

"Up at Mosquito Ranger's Post, Mrs. Holts, the ranger's wife with her children were hemmed in by the flames. For a while we thought them burned. But finally they got out alive. But it would be hard to picture the grief and the worry that attended all these things.

"There were so many reports of lives endangered, lives lost, settlers, fire-fighters and hunters hemmed in by the flames, that we never knew what to believe. It was such a time as a man never forgets.

#### THE FIRES' LESSON

"Now that the danger is past, we who fought the fires are left with certain conclusions concerning the way in which the situation must be handled another time.

"There must, in the first place, be better fire protection. More rangers are needed. This not alone for the southern Oregon country. No one can tell where the fire will be worst next year.

"Crater national forest has an area of over 1,000,000 acres. At the time the fires broke out there were between 25 and 30 rangers for the whole vast area. There should at least be a

ranger for each township of 36 sections. There should be more complete provisions for the reporting of fires. The telephone service, such as we had, undoubtedly was the agent of preservation from double the destruction recorded. But there should be at least 250 miles more of telephone lines. This costs \$60 a mile—cheap compared to the value of the service.

"The most essential thing in forest fire fighting is getting men on the ground. Ten men to handle the blaze in its incipiency are worth more than 200 after the flames gain headway.

"And, of course, the great thing in preventing destruction of forests by fires is precaution. Campers and hunters set most of the blazes. There seem to be indications in southern Oregon that some of the forest fires were purposely set. Some of them originated in slashings. But the people tell me that when they have learned of a hunter or a camper moving from their vicinity they go to look at the site of his camp, and, ten chances to one, they will find embers, which if caught up by the wind constitute the beginning of an uncontrollable fire."

Assistant District Forester Buck is accredited by the people on the ground who watched his work and by others who know of the menace of the fires with having given an almost super-human service in preventing greater destruction. It was a time when a man needed to keep his head cool and his mind working rapidly. Order needed to be worked out of confusion. This the assistant district forester did. Had it not been for his work undoubtedly the timber loss, great as it is, would have been doubled.

