

FOREST FIRES IN WASHINGTON AND OREGON

By C. S. CHAPMAN

District Forester, District 5, U. S. Forest Service

THE summer of 1910 was conspicuous by lack of rainfall. Early in the spring the snow left the mountains of eastern Oregon and Washington, where it usually lies until much later, and those who could read the signs predicted a dry summer. From the middle of June until the middle of September, a period of nearly ninety days, there was practically no rain. The result of this drought was that in early August the woods were as dry as they usually are in late September, with no immediate prospects of rain.

East of the mountains the grass was dry and parched, and a match or cigarette stub thrown into it easily started a serious fire. On the west side slashings became tinder-like and a spark from a donkey or locomotive was all that was needed to start a fire which in an hour would require twenty men to extinguish. The dense forest of the West Slope does not ordinarily burn easily. The dense shade protecting the underbrush from the direct rays of the sun causes it to stay green and so serve, in no small measure, to prevent the starting of fires in the ordinary way. But a fire starting in a dry slashing, with an enormous amount of fuel in tops, limbs, and defective and broken trees strewn over the ground to feed upon, will sweep into a stand of green timber, kill and dry out the dense green underbrush beneath the stand, and thus make more fuel for fires which often go into the tops and are then beyond control. The greatest menace to standing timber on the West Coast is the old slashings. Second to this is the campers and hunters,

who not infrequently build fires against defective logs and then fail to put them out. Such fires can gather sufficient energy to dry out the green underbrush and start dangerous conflagrations.

The patrols of the Forest Service and private owners kept the fires well in hand until the middle of July. On the Oregon National Forest a fire started in the Santian country on July 19. This was the first of the bad fires, for although it destroyed little government timber and was soon under control, it caused loss of life. Three men in the employ of the Hoover Lumber Company in trying to recover their tools which were in the path of the fire were overtaken by it and killed. Later the Hoover Mill burned and set fire to surrounding timber. During the latter part of June and during July the forests were getting in serious condition and both the government and private timber owners were taking extra precautions to prevent the possibility of disastrous fires, starting. In spite of this, however, Supervisor Reid of the Colville National Forest early in July reported fires on his forests. By July 29 he reported thirteen fires burning and more starting every day. All available help was secured and the National Forest officers were tireless in their endeavor to handle the situation. Fires threatened on the north across the Canadian border and on the south from the Colville Indian Reservation. On August 11 the Forester was wired for troops as the situation was growing more serious and not enough experienced men could be had to handle the crews of green men, the only men available, brought in to fight the fire. Two



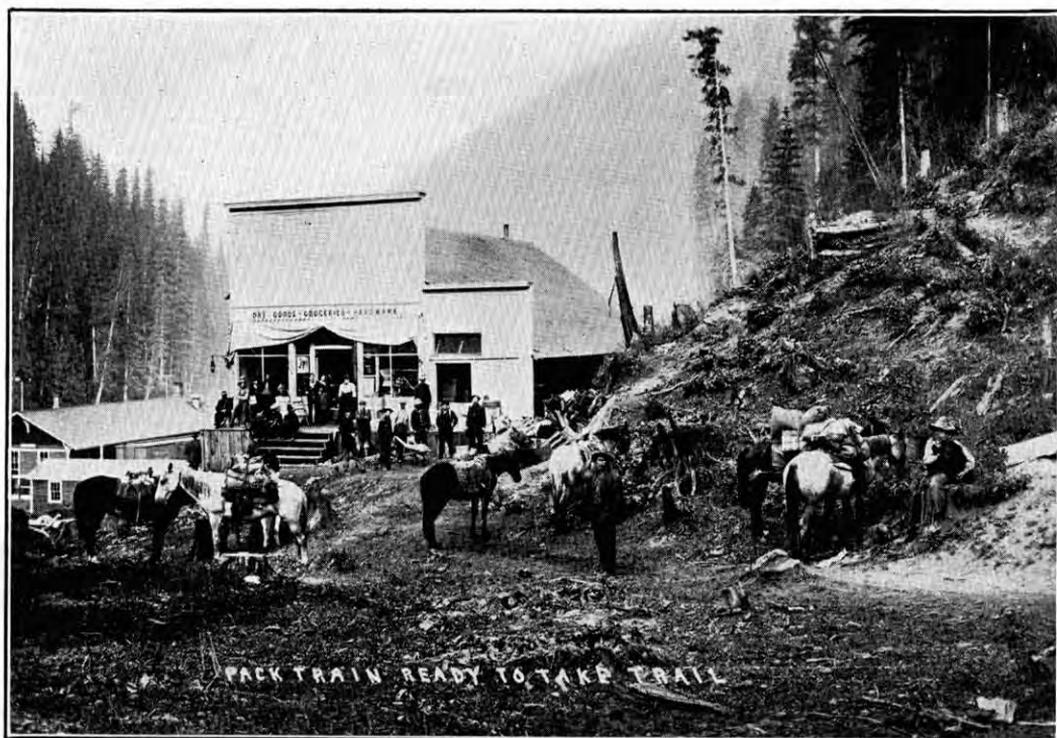
Forest Ranger R. M. Debitt and Crew, near Avery, Idaho

companies of troops left American Lake, August 13, for the Colville. Before their arrival, however, the rains set in and they were only required to assist in patrolling the fire lines to be absolutely sure that no fires started up again. In all, twenty-nine fires started on the Colville Forest this summer, burning over an area of approximately 100,000 acres of merchantile timber and causing a loss of 50,000,000 feet of timber valued at not less than \$150,000.

Before the fires on the Colville Forest were fairly under control, the situation on the Crater in southern Oregon became serious and those on the Wall-owa and Whitman forests assumed serious proportions. But the condition on the Crater was by far the most serious in the two States, for not only did the fires burn in heavy stands of valuable timber, but the lives and property of settlers were seriously threatened, and even a city was menaced. As on the Colville, fires on the Crater were scattered over the entire area and National Forest timber was

threatened by fires burning on private lands outside the boundaries of the Forest. The surrounding country was drawn on to the fullest extent for help, but enough could not be secured. On August 19, 110 soldiers arrived at Medford, and on August 21, 250 more. These men greatly strengthened the force. Through the willingness of the men and the hearty cooperation of their officers they became at once an efficient fire fighting crew, which stayed with the situation until the fires were under control, September 9.

It was estimated roughly, for the timber has not yet been carefully cruised, that on the Crater alone timber to the amount of 140,000,000 feet, valued at \$150,000 was burned, while, if the value of young growth killed is counted, the loss aggregated not less than \$450,000. In all, over 110,000 acres were burned over. The loss on private lands adjoining the Forest was also great. It is not possible to say what this was, but it is certain that it also can be counted in hundreds of thousands. On the Crater alone over



Seventy-two Horses Were Packed Here for the Fire Camps

seventy-five small fires were extinguished by the rangers before they gathered headway. At one period of the fire danger Ashland, a city of 4,000 inhabitants, closed all of its business houses and the men assembled on the fire line to save the city. It is appalling to think what the situation might have been, and the great work done with an insufficient force, emphasizes how much more effective the protection might be made.

The conditions on the Wallowa, Whitman, Wenaha, Cascade and Umpqua were serious. In each of these forests valuable resources were destroyed and, but for the prompt action on the part of Forest officers, not only timber but other property valued at many hundreds of thousands of dollars would have been lost.

This is the most disastrous fire season the Northwest has ever known. It is estimated that in the two States of Oregon and Washington, one billion feet of National Forest timber has been killed by fire. Most of this, because of inaccessibility, will never be marketed.

It is probably true, that the fires in the early 60's, which destroyed an enormous belt of timber along the Oregon Coast, were more destructive than those of this year. But in those days, while the timber was in reality valuable, it meant little to the citizens of that State. The loss would have been placed at a low figure as compared with that of this year. In 1902, Washington and Oregon suffered severely from forest fires, but they were relatively local. This year's fires have been general. No section has escaped and the total loss, if it is ever accurately ascertained, for both the government and private lands, will be staggering. Fires in Washington and Oregon have cost the Forest Service, for extra labor alone, \$150,000, besides the patrols regularly maintained. In addition to this, private owners in both States have expended large sums both for fire fighting and in patrols.

The moral to be drawn is plain. We must always be ready for the unusual year. The losses of a year like the present would pay for protection for many years. Absolute safety must be

aimed at. It is better to spend money in preventing fires from getting under headway than in fighting large fires. During the dangerous season no fire guard should have a district to patrol which he can not cover easily in one day. The average area covered by each National Forest ranger in Washington and Oregon exceeds 50,000 acres. Not infrequently it is more than this.

In many instances the value of standing timber guarded by a single ranger exceeds \$3,000,000, and when it is considered that these same men are also responsible for the prompt and efficient conduct of other National Forest business, the inadequacy of such a force needs no further demonstration. It is sufficient to say that good insurance on three million dollars' worth of property could hardly be had for \$1,100 or \$1,200, the salary of a ranger.

The National Forests of Washington and Oregon contain over one-third of all the standing timber in such Forests throughout the United States. Its value, conservatively estimated, is not less than \$400,000,000. To properly guard this great national wealth requires adequate means of communication, trails, roads and telephone lines, and a sufficient number of men during the summer months to patrol the area properly. Trail and road building is here more expensive than in any other section of the United States, but the value of the timber warrants large expenditures, for it is the finest timber in the world. Provision for its proper protection should be made at once. The people of the United States can not afford to wait until disaster forces the necessity for such protection upon them. Here is a case where the door may be locked before the horse is stolen.

