

Interview: Lynn Biddison

Crew: Chilao

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They started in Southern Calif. It was a name to distinguish them from anybody else. Who actually came up with it, I don't know.

Started on the Angeles, then on San Bernardino as District Ranger, then FCO

I started on an engine crew, what they called tankers in those days, engine crew member in Soledad canyon in 1943. You could start when you were 16 in those days.

I was extremely fortunate to hold every job in the fire organization from a crewmember to the director of aviation and fire control for both R3 & R5. Every job in the fire organization except smoke jumping. I was really fortunate. I was really lucky.

Superintendent of Chilao 1950

I left the crew in August of 1953, I became assistant ranger and district FCO on Arroyo Seco Dist. Ray Bond actually succeeded Biedebach and he was there for a year. I was a foreman for Ray. Then I became the superintendent for 51, 52 & 53.

The biggest change was primarily in the numbers (of crews) but also they travel a lot more than we did in those days. For example, on the Angeles, we had both Chilao & Oak Grove, that's all they had at that time. Because both of them were financed from special Los Angeles River Flood money, one of the two had to be on the forest at all times. So that restricted the amount of travel you could do to other forests.

I was there, they had the first hot superintendent's meeting they ever had about 4 years ago in Portland. I was invited to come up and sat there in the back of the room. I listened to those superintendents talk and I thought. My God, am I glad I was superintendent in the 50s and not today. Because all I had to worry about at that time was whether we had food, water, tools and putting the fire out. Today that is the least of their worries. They're so damn wrapped in the social issues, they don't have time to worry about what they were hired to do. From my standpoint, I was just damn glad I don't have to put up with the crap that superintendents have to put up with today.

We were there to do a job and we could do that job.

They tell a story about Jim Smith, superintendent of the Fulton Hot Shots several years ago. When he first had females on the crew. Jim, as you may or may not know is a minority and a super neat guy. He had several females and they just could not keep up with the crew even walking into project work. Finally he went to the District Ranger and said 'this is not right, they can't keep up with the crew. I always have to leave a squad boss behind with 'em'. The District Rangers response was: Your standards are too high, lower them. Horrible.

Los Padres
Chilao
Oak Grove
Del Rosa
Laguna
original 5 crews

There were a lot of Blister Rust Crews in those early days. There was a lot of competition between those crews and some of those BRC crews were very good crews. They didn't have any money for things like that in Southern California, it was just purely fire dollars. I guess the hot shot was the name originated there. Part of it, at least was to distinguish them from all those other crews. There were a lot of other crews that were financed from money other fire. But they were hand crews, just like hot shot crews were. Even in those days we had, what are now type II crews. They were Mexican nationals (braceros). Hell, those guys used to come out there, their shoes were thongs made out of tires. Good workers, never any complaints and if there was, nobody understood 'em. Cause you couldn't talk to 'em. But they were good.

The SWFFs came out of Region 3, the Mescalero Red Hats. Those were good crews but the Hot Shots were always the standard from which everything was measured.

For example, when I was at Chilao. The Del Rosa's. They were tough. They had one of the colleges, Chaffey College or one of the colleges in the San Bernardino area. They had the football team on there. Or a good part of it. That was their summer conditioning program. They were tough. A lot of competition. There was no fooling around. You either did the job or you got somebody that would.

One of the things that was unique in those days at Chilao, was that we had a year round hot shot crew. We started that in 51, it went thru 54. It was a year round crew. They did a lot of project work when they weren't on fire suppression or training.

When I was superintendent, it was an inmate crew; San Quinten prisoners. In 50 it wasn't it, It was a freeman crew. All Indian, they were all students at Sherman Institute at Riverside. In 51 we went to San Quinten prisoners. That was a real education for a young person like myself, and all the rest of our foremen. The first 3 months, they tried everything, and once they figured out what the limits were. It was neat then. One of the things you found, one of the reasons those people were in prison was they didn't get there because they liked to work. If you set the standards, and they would meet those standards just as well as any other hot shot crew. That proved to me that people, no matter who they are and what they've done in their lives. They will meet any expectation you set for 'em, if you go about it in the right way. And they did that. But for the first 60 days, they tried us every which way they could. Just to see what they could get away with. It's understandable. Pretty soon after that it was all right. That was the year around hot shot crew. It was the only one, I guess they ever had. It was 1951, 52, 53 and 54.

Chilao was discontinued in '81. I was director of fire and aviation in the region at the time. Ben Clar, one of my assistants said we gotta cut hotshot crews and Chilao because of these criteria falls out. I didn't like that but his analysis made sense. We did it but that hurt me.

Oak Grove went down before Chilao but no sure when that happened.

Two Tours on San Bernardino. District Ranger on Cajon District from '56 to 60.

FCO on Cleveland 60 to 64

FCO on San Bernardino 64 to 68

3rd generation Forest Service, all worked on the Angeles.

My grandfather was the first forest guard in Bouquet Canyon.

My father was a technician on the Sagus. He was the first Assistant Fire Control Officer on the Angeles, and the first AFCO in the nation as far as I know. He'd been district FCO on Arroyo Seco and the Sagus before that. Be he'd started in the CCC program.

He'd been a foreman in the CCC program.

Mill Creek and Converse are one and the same. On the same district. Converse is where the station is. Mill Creek is the Ranger Dist.

San Jack, San Jacinto is Vista Grande. San Jacinto RD

Del Rosas.

Got hot shots started in Region 3.

When I first came to the region in '68, they didn't really have a fire plan that was done to national standards. So we did a fire plan to national standards and found that we needed all these things. By using the manning plan and money that was available through action and specific action and management we were able to start all those crews. The first hot shot crew in the region was the Negrito. There was special money available in Region 3 for employment of people in northern New Mexico. We were able to use that money to start the Negrito Hot Shots. We hired all the people for the crew out of northern New Mexico. And just put 'em on the Gila. That's how the program started.

Once we made a fire plan that met national standards, they had never done that in Region 3. Then what we did, in those days, they had an item called; specific manning and action plan. It authorized the use of emergency funds, when you met certain fire conditions.

That's how we started to finance all those crews. Then after a while it became a regular budget item.

The most we had at one time was 16. I think there are 14 now.

Some crews that call themselves hot shot crews that really are not.

I'm not sure, don't know how to say that..they call themselves hot shots, but aren't part of the national system of recognized hot shot crews.

Hot Shot Crews.

Those were purely Southern California entities, it was while I was on the Cleveland as Fire Control Officer and El Cariso was there at the time and it was about '62 that the Washington Office, when Merle Outten was the director of fire and aviation for the Forest Service, put out an edict that those were now national resources, not just southern California resources and they became part of the way they were financed. Money was earmarked by Washington for those particular crews. But they weren't considered to be national resources until about '62. They just became a national resource.

We were on an airplane every once in a while. Buses really didn't come about until I was Fire Control Officer on the San Bernardino. About '66 or '67, the Del Rosa crew was on a fire on the Angeles. One of the stake sides went off the road and rolled down the mountain and a couple of kids were killed. That led to the Forest Supervisor, Don Bauer, being very emphatic in his instructions to me that we were gonna start putting those people in buses. There weren't any using buses until '68. That was what brought the buses was the accident with the Del Rosa Hot Shot Crew.

We pulled some long trips in the back end of those trucks. Really, the size of the hot shot crews were dictated by the capacity of the stake bed. That's how the numbers were established. The old CC crews were 32 people and they had benches they sat on crosswise. Had to carry all our tools and our bags and all that. We had to make boxes down either side and cross the front and on top were the seats and you could only get 20 people in there. No matter what they did. That's how the size of the crew was established. By the size of the trucks.

It happened long before the airplane. We tried to cut 'em to 18 at one time, when I was in Region 3, because we could get that many on a Twin Otter.

Region 3. They used the SWFF crews primarily. (Before hotshots) Just took a long time to get 'em going.

The FS: They've almost become a social agency rather than a land management agency. It's not as true in Region 3 as it is in Region 5. Or any other region as it is in Region 5. There the Consent Decree is the real problem. That judge said: "your work force will be proportional to the population. If there's 43% women in the population, 43% of your work force will be women." By God, he meant it.

The FS was the training ground. On the Angeles, we went through a period where we were a training ground for the Los Angeles County Fire Department. And then the whole of Region 5 was a training ground for CDF. There are some pluses to that. Course there are some minuses. As far as cooperation out on the fireline and all that. It's a real plus. You know 'em and you can trust 'em. Worked out really well in that respect but it was sure hard on your programs.

The hot shots are probably the soft spot in my heart.
No matter what job I held in the outfit, that was my favorite.
It's the Marine Corps of the whole fire organization. There's nothing they can't do.
When they arrive, they're prepared to go on the line and stay there. We were proud of
that. You could do things no other crews could do. You were proud, the most difficult
part of the fire, that's where you were.

Leaders We Would Like to Meet - Lynn Biddison

by Jim Cook and Mark Linane

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