

PAGE 6 • Choteau Acantha • Wednesday, June 11, 2003

Fire comes to the Forest

5 firefighters, eager for any Depression-era job, die in '31 blaze

Stories by Nancy Thornton, Acantha reporter

The small but vicious wildfire that claimed the lives of five men in 1931 is one of the worst tragedies ever to happen on the Lewis and Clark National Forest west of Choteau.

The trees have grown back on the lower slopes of Waldron Creek's south fork; but at a higher elevation the sparse growth and 1-year-old snags are a reminder that fire comes to the forest, and sometimes takes a toll in human lives.

In January 1932, four months after the Waldron Creek wildfire was extinguished, County Agent Robert Clarkson said that 1931 had been the warmest year ever recorded. Added to that, precipitation during the growing season was only 5.97 inches with a total of 8.98 inches for the year, 37 percent lower than average.

When the fire season began on June 5, no one knew that the luckless men, recruited from the Depression-ravaged streets of Great Falls, would die on Aug. 25.

Today, no one is alive who has first-hand knowledge of the tragedy. It has been forgotten in the collective memory of the U.S. Forest Service, an agency created in 1905. The National Inter-agency Fire Center has no record of the deaths.

Two of the dead men lie buried in unmarked graves in Choteau Cemetery. Two are buried in Highland Cemetery in Great Falls. Only one man has a gravestone, and he lies within sight of his fire-fighter friend in Highland Cemetery. The fifth man's body was shipped to Chicago and a family member contacted for this story didn't know whether his great uncle has a gravestone.

County Coroner Charles G. Roberts also closed the book on the incident when he wrote these blunt words under the name of each man in the official register of deaths in Teton County, "No one to blame but himself."

The lost story has been pieced together here, although not as dramatically as Norman Maclean's tale, "Young Men and Fire." That book tells of 12 smokejumpers who died in the

1949 Mann Gulch wildfire north of Helena. Still, the Waldron Creek fire is a somber account that should be remembered.

Of the five fires on the Lewis and Clark Forest that occurred in 1931, only the Waldron Creek fire, at 800 acres, exceeded one-fourth of an acre. Suppressing it cost \$12,424, which was \$2,900 more than the Teton District's yearly budget. The Forest Service employed as many as 181 men at one time on the fire and they built 11-3/4 miles of fire line.

In 1931 the Teton district comprised an area of approximately 450,000 acres and extended from the south fork of Deep Creek north to Glacier National Park and west to the continental divide. The district had 439 miles of rail and 148 miles of telephone line, with three men, called smokechasers, employed at lookout stations, and four men who were "fire guards." Another half-dozen to a dozen men did trail work and were available for fire duty.

Locals were familiar with the Waldron Creek area before 1931. Forty years earlier the Montana Central and Great Northern Railway logged it for railroad ties. Some of the best timber on that part of the Lewis and Clark Forest was said to be on Waldron Creek.

Before the 1931 fire started, the Forest Service sold the Waldron Creek timber tracts to Nels Stengrimson, who started to build a logging road fit for horses there. He also planned to manage a steam-powered sawmill to the site.

Lightning strikes Waldron Creek
The Waldron Creek area had burned before 1931. On Aug. 24, 1917, lightning ignited a fire—the first one of the 1917 season—that burned 1,500 acres. The snags from that fire dot the Waldron Creek drainage and Teton Pass Ski Area today.

Fourteen years after the 1917 fire, almost to the day, lightning started a fire on the south fork of Waldron Creek again, "on a very bad place where it is hard to fight," an old Acantha reporter. Tagged as the most serious fire in recent years, it became the worst fire of the 1931 season even before five men died.

Smokechasers Freeman Page and C.E. Spires worked nervously in the hot, dry weather from the Wrong Ridge and Mt. Wright lookout stations. They first noticed the fire on Sunday, Aug. 23.

Teton District Forest Ranger Walt Streeter traveled from Great Falls to the

fire during the night after he assigned 15 men to go to the fire zone. On Monday they walked five miles from the trail through fallen timber to get there only to find that the wildfire had grown to more than 20 acres during a high wind. The fire was beyond the ability of a few men to handle.

By then the fire cast an eerie glow on the sky and smoke was visible from Choteau. Streeter returned to Choteau and recruited about 25 men and rushed them to the fire. This had been the Forest Service policy since the devastating 1910 "Big Blowup." Pushed by gale-force winds, hundreds of separate fires came together and burned more than 300,000 acres of Idaho and Montana forests in just two days. Before the fires were out they had killed 78 firefighters.

Every available man
In 1931 the Forest Service continued its policy to suppress almost every fire with every available man. That was a challenge because the fire hazard across the dry Northwest in 1931 was already straining resources with 4,500 men battling fires on more than 149,000 acres.

When the forest headquarters at Great Falls took up the recruiting on Monday, the staff scoured every tavern and hotel, the unemployment office and the soup kitchens to man the fire crews. By Tuesday morning 100 men were at the fire zone, among them five men who wouldn't leave Waldron Creek alive.

The men were transported to Choteau by rail, and transferred by cars and trucks to the mouth of Teton Canyon. From there they had to walk 12 miles to the fire.

The local population was mobilized as it always was for a forest fire and soon they had a camp at the mouth of Teton Canyon from which three pack trains took supplies to a camp near the fire.

Charles Buroker was camp cook and Clifford Blizrud packed in square five-gallon containers of fuel. Clyde Darby, who later became the Choteau police chief, was on the fire crew, as was Altemate Ranger Bud McNeal.

Bellevue-area farmer Franklin Fellers, 31, an experienced woodsman and fire fighter, usually was a camp cook at the fires, but on Tuesday morning, his duty was to guide 20 additional recruits to the fire.

Five recruited from Great Falls
Among the new recruits enlisted from Great Falls were Herbert Novotny, 20, a married

truckdriver and father of two, and his friend, Frank M. Williamson, 24. The heaviest man in the group at 190 lbs., Williamson was a cook at the Quick Lunch in Great Falls and an employee at the Pastime Pool Hall there. The group's oldest man, laborer Ted Bierchen, 47, also joined the crew, along with Hjalmer Gunnarson, 39, a Canadian World War I veteran.

The fifth man was Charles Allen, about 37, who said he was from Pittsburgh, Penn., but whose next of kin were never located. Friends of Allen said he had worked for the Sells-Floto circus and was a World War I veteran but the coroner could not confirm this. The five men had assorted backgrounds and nothing is known of their prior firefighting experience. Most of the experienced men were already busy on other Montana fires, leaving only those locals who had never served on a fire crew before to be recruited. Still dressed in street clothes and wearing oxford shoes, they took a shovel or a pick ax, and did what they were told.

Other facts have been gleaned about the men who would burn to death on the slopes of the south fork of Waldron Creek.

Born in Luxembourg, Bierchen

Austria. Their mother, a North Carolina native, Mattie Byers Welsh, was divorced and remarried, by the time of their son's death.

Other records list Herbert as white, including the death certificate, but because his body was badly burned, the coroner may have marked the certificate "white," without looking into the matter further.

Curiously, the late Alice Gleason's account of the 1931 fire in her book, "Starting from Scratch," includes an African American as one of the men who died, but she gave the man a different name in her account.

Gunnarson was born in Iceland and his parents were among the first settlers of Arborg, Manitoba. His name is variously spelled as Harry Gunnerson or Gudmundson on different records from the fire. The confusion comes from the unique naming of Icelandic children. Boys are given first names and then their father's first name plus "son" as a surname. Girls are given first names and then their father's first name plus "dotter" (daughter) as a surname.

Gunnarson came to Canada when he was 8 or 9 years old with his parents, Gunnar Gudmundsson and Veronika Eiriksdottir.

Although he had served in World War I and had grown up on a farm, nothing is known about him except that when he joined the crew he had recently arrived in Great Falls from Lethbridge. In an Arborg history book published about 15 years ago, his family says, incorrectly, that he died in an airplane accident in Montana.

Other members of Feller's recruits who survived and would later make a statement about what happened included Pat Menahan of Ana-

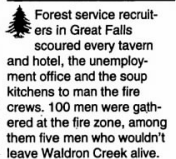
conda, Tom Sullivan of Great Falls, and Dick Hendricks of Astoria, Ore.

Ordered to wait
After the long walk to the fire zone, Fellers left the men at the edge of a 20-acre burned area about a quarter of a mile east of the fire. He proceeded alone farther up the ridge to find McNeal who was foreman of the crew already there. The exact location of the main fire, whether it was on the north or south slope of the south fork has been lost, as is the exact path that the deadly fire took. The accounts speak of ridges, hills and gulches; however, it is left to readers who are familiar with the area to speculate as to what path each man took during the next hour.

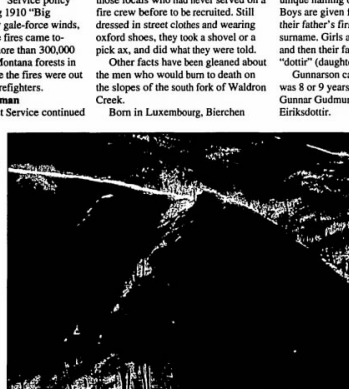
The Forest Service fire history maps show a burned area on both sides of the south fork and also in a place east of the south fork.

The 20 recruits waited for Fellers to come back on that fateful Tuesday morning. After the long hike they needed the rest, and as they caught their breath they became aware of their surroundings amid the smoke and wind.

■ please see FIRE, page 7



Forest service recruits in Great Falls scoured every tavern and hotel, the unemployment office and the soup kitchens to man the fire crews. 100 men were gathered at the fire zone, among them five men who wouldn't leave Waldron Creek alive.



This closeup shows burned trees still visible on the west edge of the gulch where five men died in 1931.

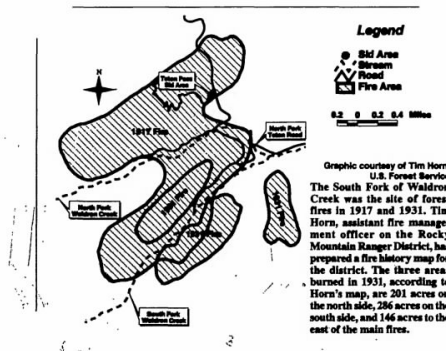


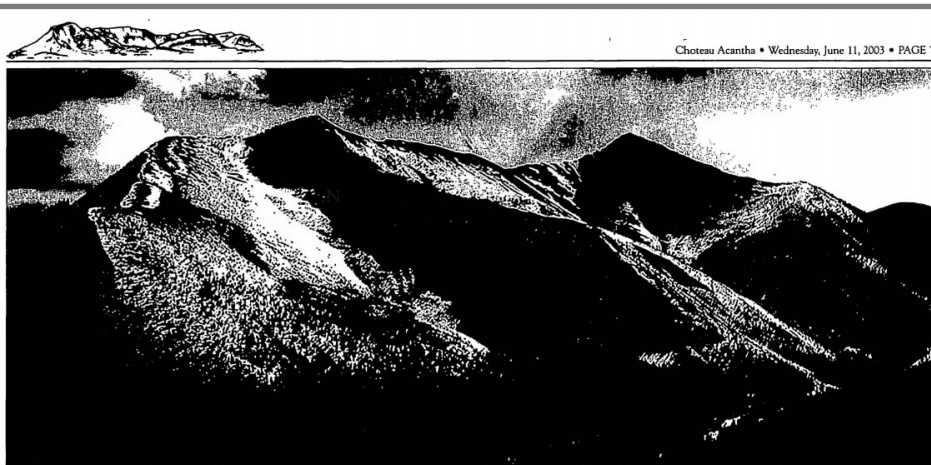
came to America when he was 18. He had worked for the Civilian Conservation Corp after heading west from Illinois. According to family lore, he was looking to work his way to California. He arrived in Great Falls prior to 1920 and in Montana he found work as a laborer on a dairy farm. His job switch to firefighting would prove fatal.

Williamson was born in O'Neill, Neb., and had lived in Great Falls for nine years. His mother lived on Vaughn Road with his stepfather, Frank Blasing, a car inspector for the Great Northern railway. Perhaps having a good job during the Depression is why Blasing could afford a headstone for his stepson.

Born in Belt, Novotny lived with his wife, Agnes, and two young children on Ninth Avenue South in Great Falls. He lived in the same apartment building as his brother, Harvey, and Harvey's family.

The U.S. Census enumerator in 1930 listed the Novotny brothers' race as African American; however, their father, John, was white, a native of St. Cloud, Minn., whose parents were born in





Choteau Acantha • Wednesday, June 11, 2003 • PAGE 7

Five firefighters burned to death in the gulch on the left during the Waldron Creek Fire of 1931. The north-facing gulch acted like a chimney and overtook the men. Note the fire burn perimeter where the trees have not grown back. The Choteau Acantha reported that the fire on the south fork of Waldron Creek was "on a very bad place where it is hard to fight." The picture was taken from the top of the ridge that lies between the south fork and the main fork of Waldron Creek.

■ FIRE, from page 6
In a westerly direction they could see the north slope of the south fork rising to a height of 7,833 feet; and of five of them would soon have their last glimpse of the peak from below it before they died.

Firebrands from the main fire had started a spot fire on Monday and it had burned 20 acres before the first crew put it out. Now the new recruits waited near that burn which a newspaper account says was some distance away from the main fire and over a ridge and on the opposite side of the gulch.

The men noticed the wind first, but then they noticed the fire. It was "crowning," rapidly igniting the tree-tops, and the men had no doubt that they were in trouble. The main fire, which had already covered 300 acres, expanded over an additional 400 acres. It advanced over the ridge from an opposite gulch and was rapidly descending down the hill in the gulch adjacent to the burn and toward the 20 men.

The survivors later said that Gunnarson took the lead in arguing that the men left on the burn were unsafe. He said he had had much experience with forest fire. He convinced Bierchen, Allen, Novotny and Williamson to leave the burn and go with him. They headed down the sidehill to the bottom of the gulch. The men were moving toward the fire which was approaching from the other side, the survivors later said.

In a few minutes the fire had reached the bottom of the gulch and into heavy timber and then it roared up the gulch. In the minutes that followed, the five doomed firefighters endeavored to outrun the flames up the gulch but were overtaken.

Looking at the north-facing slope today it is easy to believe that the slope made a perfect chimney that would have funneled smoke, flames and hot gases toward the men, killing them. We have Ron Hinman's line father and forester, Jack, to thank for pointing out the spot to his son. The old times had told Jack where the men died.

The rest of the recruits ran into the burned area and away from the fire. They ran farther up the hill and along the ridge and escaped down the middle fork of the Teton River to its confluence with the north fork. Exhausted, they made their way up that fork to the fire camp, which had been moved from Waldron Creek to the north fork for fear that flames might reach the first location of the camp.

Fire is missing
The record of what the main crew was doing during the blowup is lost; but on Wednesday a roll call of the men who had been left at the burn the day

before showed that five men were missing. Streeter and McNeal organized a search crew.

Coroner Roberts in Choteau received word of the disaster via the Wrong Creek and Ear Mountain ranger stations. Roberts had been coroner since being elected in 1929 after moving to Choteau and opening Roberts Funeral Home. An experienced mortician, he had practiced in the state for many years, and previously had lived in Great Falls and Billings.

With seven men in two automobiles Roberts drove as far as the Deer Canyon Ranch, and they packed in the rest of the way.

The Waldron Creek fire continued to spread in the high winds as did news of the tragedy.

The search crews found Bierchen, Allen, Gunnarson and Williamson on Thursday within a few feet of each other. Both Gunnarson and Allen broke their legs in their panic to run over rocks and through down timber.

Upon Roberts' arrival late Thursday night he gave orders that the search continue and on Friday the searchers located Novotny's body. Perhaps because he was the youngest of the five men, he had succeeded in getting about 75 yards farther up the north-facing slope before he died. One report said he was found at the 7,500-foot elevation.

Although the high winds continued on Friday and Saturday, the firefighters were able to prevent the fire from crossing the fire lines.

The burned remains
The grim task of bringing the bodies out began on Saturday. Roberts' men took them first on litters to one of the forest fire stations in the mountains and then packed them out on horses for about seven miles.

The bodies were held at Roberts' funeral home while the forest headquarters at Great Falls worked to get in touch with relatives. On Saturday evening undertakers from T.F. O'Connor Chapel and Merrill Mortuary brought the bodies of Novotny and Williamson to Great Falls.

Williamson was buried in Highland Cemetery the following Monday. Two days later Novotny was buried on the gentle slope 50 feet away from his friend, Williamson. Afterwards, Novotny's widow, Agnes, and her two

young children, moved to a room in the rear of the building where her husband's brother Harvey lived with his family. She worked as a housekeeper in 1934; however, her name doesn't appear in the 1935 Great Falls directory. One wonders whether her children got any survivors' benefits.

Bierchen's body was shipped to his brother in Chicago, who arranged to have Ted buried in St. Henry Cemetery there. He was the only one of five brothers who immigrated to leave the

Midwest to seek his fortune. He returned in a coffin.

On Tuesday, a week after the fire, the supervisor's office in Great Falls finally reached

Gunnarson's sister in Arborg. She said that unless the government could pay for shipping her brother's remains to her, the Forest Service would have to bury them in Choteau.

According to forest service policy of the day, the government would pay the expense of shipping bodies of men whose lives were lost in fighting forest fires to any place in the United States, but would not pay the expense into foreign countries.

Allen's relatives were never located. He gave his mother's address as Pittsburgh, Penn., at the time he enlisted, but she could not be found at the address given. Roberts later received six letters from many localities in regard to a Charles Allen who might be the man; but none matched the dead man's description.

With nothing more to be done, the Choteau community buried Gunnarson and Allen in Choteau Cemetery the following Saturday. The Acantha noted it as a simple, but impressive service attended by forestry officials and a small group of others.

Battling the fire
During the week that headquarters was searching for Allen's relatives, the fire crews were still battling the Waldron Creek fire. On Monday, a week after he had arrived at the fire zone, Streeter traveled to headquarters to seek more equipment and supplies and to nurse a swollen ankle that he had severely twisted while fighting the blaze. He was relieved at the fire by H.H. Hendron, assistant supervisor of the Helena National Forest.

Twenty-five men came out from the fire the next day, but 50 more were sent in to mop up, making about 125 men at the fire zone. The new firefighters had been released from the Hoover Springs blaze in the Little Belts district. They arrived at the edge of the mountains in three trucks and brought a truckload of supplies with them.

Streeter was hopeful. He said the fire was under control unless a strong wind came up. The lost timber concerned him now, and he estimated that not over 30 percent of the 4 million board-feet of timber in the Waldron Creek watershed was damaged. Many trees were killed, but it wouldn't be a total loss.

On Wednesday during the second week of fire, the crews were kept busy putting out spot fires, and although it was officially listed as under control, 50 additional fire fighters were sent to the fire from Great Falls early Thursday morning. They continued to combat the large blaze and to mop up persistent spot fires for several days until it rained and the fire was out, leaving about 60 men on the job.

The aftermath
Streeter and Roberts were also busy trying to get loose ends on Wednesday Roberts traveled to Great Falls and he and Streeter interviewed the survivors.

Menehan, Sullivan and Hendricks signed a statement that, in their opinion, all possible precautions were taken by those in charge of the fire to provide for their safety. Roberts filed the statement as a part of his record of the men's deaths and Streeter put one in the Forest Service files.

The coroner concluded that the unfortunate men may have become unconscious from exhaustion, heat and smoke before the flames actually reached them. All were burned beyond recognition, but it was possible to establish their identification by their size, things found that belonged in their pockets, and portions of their clothing next to the damp ground.

No inquest with jurors was needed. Roberts concluded. In his coroner's register, he wrote an entry for each man with a cursory physical description and the place of death. "Body in burned forest 37 miles northwest of Choteau." He added, "Came to his death by being

trapped in forest fire. No one to blame but himself."

After he finished his report, Roberts was paid \$7.40 for mileage and \$15 for three days of work.

Acantha publisher E.L. Jourdonnais, in an editorial written before Gunnarson and Allen's funeral, stated that the men had died in the fire of duty, that they were real heroes and their "lifeless forms are entitled to the caresses of Old Glory."

But the tragedy was forgotten with their funerals. The south fork of Waldron Creek is marked but no memorials mark the place as are in Mann Gulch. Gunnarson and Allen lie in unmarked graves in Choteau Cemetery.

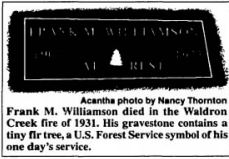
Novotny suffered the same fate. Only Williamson has a headstone and the tiny design of a fir tree is carved in the center of the flat monument, a symbol to remember his faithful day working for the Forest Service.

Firefighting continued to prove dangerous that deadly August. Timberman Vernon Leroy "Mickey" West was killed Aug. 30 near Hamilton in Ravalli County and firefighter

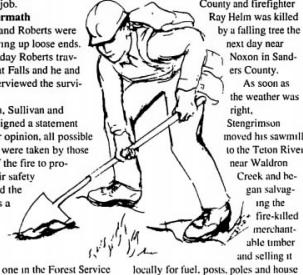
Ray Helm was killed by a falling tree the next day near Noxon in Sanders County. As soon as the weather was right, Stengrimson moved his sawmill to the Teton River near Waldron Creek and began salvaging the fire-killed merchantable timber and selling it

locally for fuel, posts, poles and house logs. Streeter said it would take Stengrimson from three to five years to complete his harvest. His legacy can be traced in the logging road one sees heading off into the thick stands of lodgepole, spruce and fir today. Snowmobiles use the road now.

A National Forest Review Board didn't exist in 1931 and it appears that any other accounts of the tragedy are fragments told by the descendants of the local ranchers who worked as firefighters when wildfire threatened the Rocky Mountain Front. One hopes that when the fire comes to the forest again, as it surely will, this generation will remember what can happen and has happened in the forests west of Choteau.



Acantha photo by Nancy Thornton
Frank M. Williamson died in the Waldron Creek fire of 1931. His gravestone contains a tiny fir tree, a U.S. Forest Service symbol of his one day's service.



Fire survivors once learned in school of hard knocks

...service employees Norm Kinnard, Tim Horn, and Ray Mills (retired), Choteau residents, Jane Lanning, Chuck Bierud, Marge Scott and Ron Hammer, the staff at the Teton County Clerk and Recorder's office and the Clerk of District Court, Sheriff and Coroner George Anderson Jr., Highland Cemetery sexton George Sayers, Nicholas Bierchen of Fort Detrick, Md., and Nelson Gerard of Arborg, Manitoba.