



The **FIRE WITHIN**

A History of Women Wildland Firefighters in the United States

Carol J Henson



This interview with Eva Aragon was conducted by Carol Henson in 2017 and is an excerpt from her book “The Fire Within”

Born in New Mexico, Eva Aragon spent the first seven years of her life on her family's homestead in Catron County, New Mexico. She grew up in a big family, with four brothers and five sisters. Her grandfather was a sheep rancher who had homesteaded their ranch in 1910. “My mother always told me when I was a little girl I was always outside running around, chasing lambs, and climbing hills,” she recalled.

It was a tough time on the ranch, and her father realized that they needed to find paying jobs, so when Aragon was seven, her parents moved the family first to Southern California for two years, and then north, settling in Alexander Valley in Sonoma County, California. Aragon and her entire family started working right away, picking fruit and vegetables or whatever work they could find.

Growing up, Aragon was very athletic and loved playing softball and team sports. In sixth grade, she won the girls pentathlon, beating out other girls in school. She doesn't remember being the fastest runner, but she had a strong arm and could throw well. She enjoyed hiking and just being outdoors in Alexander Valley with its hills, lakes, and orchards. “Just a beautiful place to grow up.”

Her parents and two younger siblings returned to the family's ranch in New Mexico in 1969, but 19 year-old Aragon remained in California. After her father's death in 1972, Aragon left her job as a live-in housekeeper for an affluent family in Marin County to go back to New Mexico to care for her mother. The ranch didn't have electricity or indoor running water; it had one outhouse—a long way away from the beautiful home with nine bathrooms she had been responsible for keeping clean.

Not one to dwell on things, Aragon decided she should go to work on the ranch and become a cowgirl. “My father [had] always involved us in his work—whether he was repairing a car; maintaining a windmill; fixing fence; or butchering a cow.” The ten kids in her family all did the same work. “It wasn't like the girls were set aside to just do the girl things,” she remembered. While she learned many skills from her father, her mother and her aunts had the greatest impact on Aragon.

“I am who I am because of my mother, my grandmothers, and my aunts. They were all hard-working women, and I lived the way they did. They were ranch women, and my life was molded by them,” she told me in her 2017 interview. She described her mother and her aunts as “just little tiny women”—none of them were five feet tall, but they were strong women. They taught her how to brand cattle and run chainsaws.

In the fall of 1973, Aragon decided that she needed a paying job. Over the years, her family had had annual grazing permits for their cattle and sheep on the Gila National Forest (New Mexico) and her mother had to go to the Forest Service office to renew their annual permit, so Aragon went with her. While at the office, Aragon asked a ranger whether they hired women to do any outdoor work. The ranger told her, “Well, put in an application.”

She did. In March 1974 she was hired to a fire engine on the Reserve Ranger District in the Gila National Forest.

“I didn't get into fire because that's what I wanted to do; it was just something that happened. I just applied for the job, and that's what I got,” she said.

Aragon was nervous when going for her first day of work because she was not sure what to expect, but she remembered there being a lot of men and only two other women at her station. One of the first things they did was take a fitness test, which at that time consisted of the step test or a 1.5-mile run as an alternate. The Negrito Fire Base firefighters on the Reserve Ranger District were given the step test. Because she was so strong, her pulse rate remained slow and steady. She did so well that the test administrator asked, "Do you have a pulse?" Her pulse was slower than he expected.

Fire school began right away at the Negrito Fire Base where the Gila IHC and a helitack crew were stationed. Crew members learned basic wildland fire behavior, wildland fire safety, and firefighting skills. One day, during fire school, a wildfire started, and the fire management officers saw an opportunity to give their crews some hands-on training. The hotshots, helitack crew, helicopter, airtankers, smokejumpers, and Aragon's engine crew were assigned to the fire. The fire didn't get big, but it gave her a taste of what wildland firefighting was all about.

Thanks to her background of working on her family's ranch, she already had a long history with using hand tools, so learning how to use fire tools wasn't a problem for her. However, Molly Thomas, one of the other engine crewmembers, didn't have any experience with hand tools and struggled with using a Pulaski. Aragon and one other engine crewmember, Linda Day—who had also grown up on a ranch—took Thomas over to a tree and taught her how to use the tool, where she chopped down the tree.

Aragon's first fire supervisors were Todd Heckert, a supervisory tank truck operator (now called an engine captain), and John Barmory, a tank truck operator (now called an engineer or assistant captain); they were detailed (temporary position) with their fire engine from the Angeles National Forest, in California, to the fire base after fire school was done. Aragon felt that the two men were good supervisors and provided a lot of training, especially on the engine and hydraulics; Heckert and Barmory also did have some fun at the three women's expense by turning up the pressure on the fire engine's pump to see what the women would do.

Aragon remembered the engine crew being sent to a large fire in northern New Mexico. "This fire was eye-opening because we were exposed to other crews, and those crews were exposed to women firefighters for the first time. These crews kept asking the women, 'What are you guys doing here?' and there was a lot of harassment, a lot of yelling and whistling, but the women made it through," she said. She disliked the harassment they received, but she learned a lot from the fire itself.

In a June 1974 article in the Silver City Daily Press, Heckert said, "I've worked with women fire fighters before and wasn't too impressed, but these three really surprised me. They are not only willing to do the work, but are more capable and able to do the work assigned them." Barmory agreed. "The girls put forth a lot more effort and once they get the hang of the job, they do better than some men I've seen."

Heckert's and Barmory's details ended in late June, and the men were sent back home to California, taking their engine with them. Soon after they left, the annual Southwest monsoons brought lightning that ignited three hundred wildfires in New Mexico. Aragon, Thomas, and Day were then assigned to their own engine, a small slip-on tank and pump unit placed in the bed of a rental truck—typical of fire engines in New Mexico at the time. The three women were sent to fires on their own, including the 26,000-acre Salvation Fire, not far from Aragon's ranch.

Aragon realized that she liked the job as a wildland firefighter and decided to stay. She spent the next eleven years on the Reserve Ranger District on the Gila National Forest as a seasonal—or temporary—employee, working as a prevention patrol technician, engine crew assistant foreman, helitack crew squad boss, a Gila (Negrito) Hotshots squad boss (for five years), and then as a fuels technician. Permanent firefighting positions were few and far between, and she applied for a fire position on another district but thought she did not get the job because they weren't ready to hire a woman in a supervisory role. She also thought she was not as assertive as she could have been.

The Reserve District Ranger convinced her to put in for a permanent position on the timber marking crew. Aragon agreed to apply only if they promised that she could go to fires. They agreed and offered her a job.

After four years on the timber marking crew, a fire position opened on the helicopter, so she applied for and got a permanent position as the helitack manager. After 1994, she was promoted to Reserve Ranger District assistant fire management officer, a position she held until she retired in 2004.

In her career's early years, she believed the men did not want women on fire crews, and it was especially difficult when they got into fire camp; but she learned to deal with that on her own. If she was confronted, she stood her ground and did not back off. Once they saw that she could do the work, she found that the problems went away.

"I made a lot of friends in fire...mostly men, you know. But I got a lot of good compliments and I'm real proud of that...that I was able to go out and do the job. I didn't expect anybody to do it for me," she said in her 2017 interview.

Overall, she felt that Reserve Ranger District fire managers supported her and moved her into supervisory positions, which was rare for women during this period in wildland fire agencies.

Aragon attributed her success in fire to working hard, learning what the fires taught her, and paying attention. She believed good supervisors taught her a lot, especially her district fire management officer. "He was really good to me. I don't know why he kept pushing me and pushing me, but I guess he saw something that, maybe, I didn't see. But he encouraged me to keep going on, and he trusted me," she recalled.

Her fondest career memories included the travel—where she got to see a lot of the United States while fighting fires, even Alaska—and the camaraderie, working on crews and with different people, whether fighting fire or working on projects together. Although Aragon had not planned on becoming a wildland firefighter, she did—and would do it again.

Today Aragon is enjoying retirement and currently lives in Tome, New Mexico, but still has her family's ranch as a getaway.