

TESTIMONY OF JACK N. EWING

Taken at the Scene of Tragedy

HAUSER CREEK FIRE

October 8, 1943

Question: What is your full name and address?

Answer: Jack N. Ewing, U. S. Forest Service, Cleveland National Forest.

Q. Your occupation?

A. Forest Engineer and Fire Control Officer, Cleveland National Forest.

Q. How long have you been in the Forest Service, including your service prior to the time you came to the Cleveland?

A. About 17 years.

Q. About what time on October 2 did you first arrive at the fire?

A. We arrived at the fire at 11:15.

Q. When you say "we", whom do you mean?

A. Myself, Mr. Munhall and Mr. Dick Droege and John Davis.

Q. Will you in narrative form start from there and tell us the action you took after you arrived.

A. When we arrived at the fire we drove down to the point where we turned around, stopped there and sized up the fire. It had apparently started in the canyon bottom or the little side draw bottom up out of the main canyon, possibly 200 or 300 feet, and was running - it would be northwest - up the slope and was confined at that time to the one small side draw but had extended out the lines, had extended out to the small ridge on either side of that particular draw, and the fire had not quite reach the first main ridge you see from standing at that point.

We then began to plan the strategy or the attack we would make when the crew came in. The only crews we knew at that time who were following us. We had asked the Dispatcher before we left the station to send in the Camp Ole crew which is about 20 men and the regular tanker crews, Descanso - 5 men, and Cameron Crew - an operator and 4 men.

Q. Those Ole men are Forestry men?

A. Those are prison men under the Forest Service. C.I.M. crews.

At that same time I instructed Mr. Davis to take my car and go back to Morena Lake to the telephone and call for help from the Marino Camp and Camp Lockett.

Q. How far did he have to go, Jack?

A. He had to go about 7 miles to the Morena Lodge. That's just a guess

We then of course waited for the next crew or the Ole crew and the tanker truck crews to arrive. The crews then arrived, that is, the tank truck crew from Descanso arrived first and told us that the Ole crew were coming in behind. The Ole crew then arrived within approximately 3 minutes; in other words, we considered the Ole crew and tanker crew as the initial attack crew because they arrived within 3 minutes of each other. As soon as the Descanso crew arrived I took that crew with the hand tools and started to work the line on the east side and left Ranger Munhall at the bottom of the canyon at the bottom of the fire with instructions to wait for the Camp Ole crew and take them up the west side of the fire line. At that time the fire was running definitely northwest and we had no trouble in following along the line up the canyon or up the ridge rather, not spotting. We did not make a cold trail. We were hot spotting to try to get to the head of the fire and cut it on the main ridge above.

Up to that time the east wind hadn't caught it - it hadn't raised off of the canyon side - it was burning under its own draft. By the time we had gotten half way up to the main ridge the wind got it and started it traveling faster up the ridge, and I got into the burn and followed right on up through to the first little ridge that would be almost directly above the point of origin. When I got up on the peak I could see clear on over into the next canyon. The wind had caught the fire and was driving it over into Bronco Flat. It was established in the other drainage. I then decided that there wasn't anything we could do - it would be impossible to get the crews at the head of the fire, and I came inside the burn, and I met Mr. Farrell and Droege coming up and I told them the wind had caught the fire and we were going to have a big fire and the best thing we could do would be to make plans to fight the fire over on the Morena-Stokes Valley road and also to catch up the flanks in the canyon with the crews that were coming in. We then come on down into the canyon bottom and let the camp Ole crew on the west line to following up the fire line, and we brought - - - -

Q. Was that in charge of Ranger Munhall?

A. Yes sir.

We contacted the tank truck at that time. We had 2 tank trucks, the tank truck from Descanso and one from Cameron. We instructed them to take their tankers and follow up the fire line along the canyon bottom and get in on the flats if they could, and keep the fire from crossing to the south side of Hauser Creek and also to cut off the east flank of the fire from Hauser Creek if possible.

We then drove up to the Hauser Creek Campground and arrived there at approximately 1:00 and there we met both the marine crew of, well, understood at that time there were 100 men. I believe it turned out there weren't quite that many. We also met the Lockett crew of 100 men. They had arrived in there at approximately the same time.

Q. Where did you meet them?

A. We met them at the Houser Creek Campground. What later became known as No. 2 Camp.

Tools had been dispatched from Descanso and were there waiting at the campground. And Mr. Davis was with them. He'd waited and come in with one of the crews and Mr. Hunt had come in with the other crew and Jack Herndon. They were all at the Campground.

We first instructed Mr. Davis to take the volunteers from Camp Lockett and go to the west line and place those men under the supervision of Mr. Munhall and to help him get them lined out on the fire and to -- for them to try to check and cold trail the west side of the line.

We placed Mr. Hunt in charge of the marine crew and instructed him to take charge of that crew with Mr. Herndon - to drive down the canyon to the flats and turn around, park their trucks there and to make a tie on the east line and to work it up with that crew.

We then went out; that is, Mr. Farrell, myself and Mr. Droege, by Morena Lodge and back over on the Morena Stokes Valley truck trail to scout the fire and make plans as to what we would do with that particular section of the fire up there.

Q. That was based on your knowledge that it would be a major job - that the crews placed by you here merely were for this segment.

A. That is right. Enroute we had met Mr. Fischer at the Morena Lodge and at that time we had instructed him to set up a fire camp at Cottonwood Bridge which later became Camp No. 2 since that was the closest point to get into that particular area and instructed him at that time to order just as many overhead forestry men as he could possibly get in short notice and get them in here because we would want them on hand to take out large crews for the night shift.

Q. Then, Jac, as far as the trapped men in this canyon that finishes what you know about it? You were out scouting the other edge of the fire?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. I would like to ask, Ewing, was the initial behavior of this fire, as started near the bottom of the canyon wall unusual? Was it unusual in terms of your experience with fires here or in the familiar pattern of fires in this area?

A. No, sir, as usual. It impressed me as if it had started in a little draw and was spreading in the usual "V".

Q. Do you mean it had pulled toward the ridge up hill and was it pulling up canyon as well?

A. No, sir. It was pretty much up hill fanning out as the usual fire does to the small ridges on either side and gradually slop over. It wasn't spotting up canyon at all.

Q. Was it spreading as a continuous front of fire?

A. Yes, sir.

- Q. Did you detect any spotting as you went up the ridge at that time.
- A. It was a normal fast spread.
- Q. In a westerly direction?
- A. Up the slope in a northwesterly direction toward San Diego.
- Q. What was your information or appraisal of weather conditions at the time? What is normal for this period we've been through, in terms you wish to state.
- A. The weather conditions were normal for this period of year under our normal east wind conditions. We've had in this area light east wind 15 to 20 miles an hour for the past approximately 2 weeks, and we've had low humidities. This particular fire was spreading - that day rather was a normal day for this time of year. Of course, the fire started at the time of morning when it has all afternoon, the worst part of the day, ahead of it to burn and that was the main reason we determined without much question we would proceed for a good fire.
- Q. About how did it compare with this day?
- A. About the same.
- Q. About the same wind as now?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Were there any weather predictions available to you?
- A. There wasn't any that I know of. I think the day before we had a special weather report predicting thunder storms but none predicting any change in the weather conditions.
- Q. As I understand you, at the time you placed your men here and left the fire to scout the other aspects, and there was nothing unusual about the weather that you could detect for the time of year?
- A. I didn't consider anything unusual at that time.
- Q. Mr. Ewing, when you delegated the marines to Mr. Hunt and Herndon, were you at the entrance here<sup>by</sup> at the fire camp No. 2?
- A. I was at the fire camp.
- Q. Did you tell them where to cut the line?
- A. No, except to take the east line.
- Q. Weren't they under the direction of Hunt and Herndon?
- A. Yes, sir. They were under the supervision of Hunt and Herndon.
- Q. You gave them no particular location for these cuts?

*No answer apparently*  
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Q. Were there any other matters within your own knowledge?

A. No sir. I don't know of any. I, well, of course, the major asked about the location. The fire at that time when we left was quite a ways down and the flat was right opposite the flat, and I instructed them to take their crews in and place them on the flats which was just below Hauser considering that was a safe place for them to get into.

Q. Are there any other members of our review group or Majors Luce or Jardine who want to ask questions?

Q. You said the flat was considered safe. Over here it seems there was a fire on the other side of the flat. How does that make the flat safe? Was there any fire on the other side of the flat opposite of where we are now?

A. No, sir. There wasn't any fire on the other side until the next day.