

TESTIMONY OF JACK F. HERNDON

Taken at the Scene of the Tragedy,

HAUSER CREEK FIRE

October 8, 1943

Q. What is your full name and address?

A. Jack Francis Herndon. Pine Valley, California.

Q. What is your occupation?

A. Forest Guard.

Q. On the Cleveland National Forest?

A. Yes, Sir.

Q. You were with Mr. Hunt on October 2 when he met the marines and came into the canyon, turned the trucks around and unloaded his men here?

A. Yes, Sir.

Q. Will you tell us in narrative form, after the men were unloaded what instructions you had and what action you took.

A. We were instructed to brush a trail through this little draw to backfire here to check the fire from making inroads over into new territory. Before we came in with the men I went over on that little ridge and to observe where the fire was burning and how far away it was, the speed of it so we could judge and calculate for our own safety. Then I came down and took the men that were assigned to me with the cutting tools and we started up this little ridge.

Q. Where was the fire?

A. It was beyond. It hadn't started up the south slope of this little hump here.

Q. You mean the rocky one?

A. This gentle slope. The fire was over quite away the other side of this when we came in.

Q. In what relation to that Oak tree?

A. It was this side of that big rock right across the top of this. It was just about in there.

Q. Was the fire running up this big rocky ridge at the time?

Testimony of Jack F. Herndon (Continued)

Q. This side of the Oak?

Q. Where was it?

A. It was a long ragged line angling from that point right up across through here. It was about 150 feet from where I am standing now. As the men were coming up I kept on the high ground here directing their operations and also observing the fire.

Q. You have been on several fires, haven't you, Mr. Herndon? Was the behavior of this fire as it approached that flat any different than many fires you have been on?

A. That is a hard question to answer. There aren't any fires alike, and you have just got to follow them through as they come and keep ahead of them - to outguess them, and apparently the way this fire was at that time it was burning at very slow speed and we were apparently in safe territory and not in any danger because the wind wasn't very strong at that particular time and it was carrying the fire away from us. We were parralleling it but carried it up the ridge.

I was standing along in here and had a flare in my hand for back-firing which was our object for building this trail. Some of the men were up ahead watching. My flare should be in here someplace. I set one backfire in here.

As I turned around a blast of wind came up the canyon. I told Mr. Hunt it hit the top of the ridge. It was right over there by those big rocks.

Q. Was it the main fire that started it?

A. No, it was a spot fire. It had come up the ridge there and I hollered to Buel "She's on the ridge," and I had no sooner gotten the words out of my mouth when she seemed to explbde at a spot in here. I called th men to come down in here. It was their only place of safety. I got a chance to set one backfire and started to set another one, and it was that fast. Then I went down in the canyon.

Q. The first fire you set - was that after you detected the spot fire or before? And it hadn't taken off fast enough to make a safety zone?

Q. Did you start a backfire to create a safety zone?

A. That was a last resort for safety for retreat.

Q. You set one and then started a backfire?

A. No. I set it after I saw the spot fire.

Q. You weren't ready to backfire?

A. No. I didn't set my fire until I saw it was there and it had surround

Testimony of Jack F. Herndon (Continued)

us and that was the only chance of safety to set some more and the men could go on behind us.

Q. Where were you when the fire went over.

A. Down at the bottom of the gulch. There were four or five marines with me. It was right in those rocks there. I first was up above but so many men were in there I got out to find another place. I wanted to let some more men get in there. I thought if I could move up farther there would be room for some other marines to go in there.

Q. You mean the little cliff up there?

A. That little cleared place up there. They were concentrated up there. I came down and got with the marines in these rocks.

Q. Were men working on up previous to the time the fire was breaking? How far up there?

A. They were up there just a little ways. They didn't get very far, just above me.

Q. They didn't get into that big rock?

A. No, Sir. Some of the boys were right there where the little erosion . where the rock is laying. That is my last observation of them.

Q. Prior to the time it blew across how far up the draw had you been?

A. Right there by those rocks. We were surrounded there.

Q. Were the marines above you?

A. Yes, in that nest of rocks.

Q. That is where they were caught?

A. They were caught all along in here.

Q. What marine officer was with you and the men up in there? Non-commissioned officer or . . .

A. Non-commissioned officer was Stewart.

Q. He was there with the men?

A. He was there with the men, yes.

Q. You called to him and gave him instructions to pull the men back. Are you sure he heard you.

A. He heard me, I'm pretty sure he did. The men started coming back when I hollered at them.

Testimony of Jack F. Herndon (Continued)

- Q. Did you observe men doing other than coming down here?
- A. Yes. There was a radio man way up on top. I hollered to him. A sort of red headed fellow. He said "I'm going." I said "well, if you can make it, go ahead." The fire met him in the road. The fire burned him on the legs.
- Q. Was there any undue excitement, men breaking out individually or anything of that sort?
- A. No, Sir. Not a whimper out of any of them. The discipline was excellent.
- Q. Where were the men who were fatally burned?
- A. I don't know. That is not within my own knowledge.
- Q. You directed the marines through Corporal Stewart. When you saw they were in danger you told him to have them come down, did you?
- A. Yes.
- Q. One of your duties was to observe what the fire was doing in connection with your line?
- A. Yes, that was a very definite order.
- Q. How many marines did Corporal Stewart have with him.
- A. I couldn't enumerate the number of men. I was to detail the men with brush hooks. We had 24 brush hooks and I presume that was the number of men we brought in here.
- Q. The brush hook detail was under Stewart.
- A. Yes, Sir.
- Q. Do you know if the man with the radio had been given any definite instructions as to actions?
- A. No, I believe he was to let them know exactly what was taking place. That was the purpose of setting up the radio here, to relay what was happening up there.
- Q. He was supposed to give you men answers as to what was going on?
- A. To tell camp what was going on.
- Q. To establish communication with the outside then rather than you people here?
- A. Yes. That was it exactly.

Testimony of Jack F. Herndon (Continued)

Q. What was the name of the radio man?

A. I don't know.

Q. Was it Stewart with whom you dealt?

A. Yes, Sir.

Q. You were working under Mr. Hunt on this line?

A. Yes, Mr. Hunt is my senior.

Q. How long have you been with the Forestry Service?

A. One year and one month.

Q. Have you lived long in these mountains in this vicinity?

A. About eleven years.

Q. Have you had any previous experience with fighting fires?

A. I volunteered with the State Forestry on fires. They called me and I went voluntarily.

Q. Have you ever acted in the capacity of a crew leader before on a fire?

A. Yes.

Q. Had you been with this group of marines this year.

A. Yes, I had been on two fires prior to this with the same contingent; The Laguna Fire and the Chiquita fire.

Q. Where did you go after the men were trapped and able to get out? Did you go back to the road?

A. I started there with them. They wanted to go out, but I wouldn't let them. I said "no, it would cool in a minute or two and then we could all go out."

Q. You went out with the group of marines?

A. Yes, I went out with them. 20 men went out ahead of me. We took turns going out. We climbed up a pretty steep bank. It was too hot and steep down in there.

Q. Was this the only way out?

A. Yes, this was the only way out.

Q. How long after the fire had gone on did you know there were fatalities?

Testimony of Jack F. Herndon - (Continued)

- A. Not till we got back to the campground. There were about 20 or 25 men with myself lying in the road and I asked "God, did they all get out?" Someone said "I believe they are all out", and we started to the campground.
- Q. Were there two groups of men at that time?
- A. I couldn't say. Stewart was there. I asked particularly where Stewart was, and they said he's coming out with the men. I presumed he was getting the men together and getting them out.
- Q. Then you didn't miss anyone until you got up to the camp?
- A. Well, they were going out in trucks. It was hard to check up.
- Q. That was at the camp?
- A. That was at the camp ground.
- Q. Were all men able to walk?
- A. Yes, we walked from here to the campground. That is all that were with me. All that came out.
- Q. You had no severely burned men in your group?
- A. They were all able to walk. None were carried out.
- Q. Did the marine trucks stay in this draw.
- A. No, they were in the campground. The road was too narrow. They were left there for safety measure.
- Q. Were any men with you fatalities? Did all of them make it through alright?
- A. I don't know. I didn't get a chance to check up on all of them. There was more or less confusion at that time and everyone not saying much.