

## HISTORICAL FOREST FIRES OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN DIVISION

### The H. F. Dearborn River and Falls Creek

Philip Bean vividly recalls a bad forest fire in the mountains in the latter part of August and forepart of September in 1889, that burned much of the Falls Creek drainage and the North Fork of the Dearborn. Mr. Bean was then 17 years old. This fire was understood to originate somewhere near Missoula and to have burned a strip up the ridge between the Blackfoot River and the Sanders Fork of the Blackfoot, for two weeks to reach over the Continental Divide into the head of the Dearborn. It then continued burning for two or three days to lick up virgin timber down through the head of this watershed and over into the Falls Creek areas.

At that time Philip and his brothers had ranches in the foothills on the lower H. F. Dearborn River drainage. They also had a sawmill located a short ways above the forks of Falls Creek. The sawmill by the way was undoubtedly interesting since it was equipped with an overshot water wheel for power.

As this fire worked down the Dearborn and both forks of Falls Creek to threaten their sawmill, they back-fired areas above the mill and thought they had it and the timber immediately adjacent safe. Such however was not the case, since within a day or two, a high southwest wind came up, stirred and started the fire to spreading rapidly down Falls Creek, Dearborn drainage and some adjacent areas. The sawmill was immediately critically endangered and though the Beans attempted to save it the fire burned and raced so rapidly down towards the foot hills, up and over Steamboat Mountain; then called the Dearborn Mountain and to its east slopes, that they were compelled to ride for their lives down country to their ranch at Bean Lake, thinking to try to save the buildings there and as a last resort to save their own lives they would take refuge if necessary in the lake itself.

Mr. Bean described this fire as a raging holocaust in the high wind that carried it along that afternoon that nothing could stop. The grass and other vegetation outside the mountains and in the semi-forest foot-hill areas had attained much growth and was very dry. He described the flames from the burning timber as leaping many hundreds of feet into the air; as jumping across creeks and gulches, up the slopes like a race horse, and easily from mountain top to top.

On the particular afternoon that the fire made its worst run and the Beans boys were fleeing for their lives trying to keep ahead of it, and as they returned to their ranch at Bean Lake, which is a mile or two without the semi-forest foothill areas, they found that settlers of the region had nearly completed burning a fire line over the open rolling prairie grass lands nearly all the way from what is now the town of Augusta up to the foot hills on the Dearborn. It was late afternoon when the Beans arrived at their ranch, and shortly after the wind died down and with the cooler temperature of the evening the fury of the fire abated; then during the night a three day north storm attended with a heavy rain stopped the fire and ~~and~~ practically put it out. ~~This was all that saved the ranches.~~

This saved the winter ranges and ranches down the line from being further endangered by this fire at the time.

There have been a number of seriously damaging fires both forest and prairie, in Montana east of the Continental Divide. In Teton County a number of years it was said that a prairie fire originating a short distance from the town of Cascade and carried along on a strong wind burned in one day and night all the way east over to the Great Northern railroad tracks a distance of probably twenty miles.

It was contended and undoubtedly truly that on the particular afternoon around September 1, 1888 when the Bearhorn conflagration raged towards and seriously endangered the stockman's winter ranges, winds were blown from the burning forest areas out into the prairies as much as six to eight miles to start many spot fires in the dry grass.

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