

## New sign honors firefighters who died in 1931

By Melody Martinsen

Jun 3, 2026

Just beyond the Teton Pass Ski Area turn on the West Fork Road, before it drops down into the campground, a sign now commemorates the “forgotten five” U.S. Forest Service firefighters who died on the 1931 Waldron Creek Fire.

On May 29, nearly 95 years after this fire, USFS firefighting personnel past and present; members of the Old Men and Fire group; professor, smokejumper and author Charles Palmer of Missoula; retired Choteau Acantha reporter Nancy Thornton and others gathered at the turn on the West Fork Road to remember the fallen and dedicate the sign, made by Choteau High School agriculture-education teacher Garrett Depner with help from his students and Fairfield High School ag-ed teacher John Park.

“This past Monday was Memorial Day, which is our nation’s attempt then to honor those armed forces members who have lost their lives serving our country. Today we are really here doing the same thing. We are honoring these five men and the loss that they had,” said Palmer, the author of “Montana’s Waldron Creek Fire of 1931: The Forgotten Five,” published in 2015.

As those gathered looked south and west of the sign, they could see the sparsely timbered bowl, still holding snow, where truck driver Herbert Novotny, 20, and Frank M. Williamson, 24, a cook, both of Great Falls; Hjalmer Gunnarson, 39, a Canadian World War I veteran; Charles Allen, about 37, of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, also a World War I veteran; and Ted Bierchen, 47, a laborer with family in Chicago, Illinois, died as the Waldron Creek fire roared through the area on Aug. 25, 1931.



*Author Charles Palmer of Missoula speaks to those gathered on May 29 to commemorate the installation of a memorial sign for the five firefighters killed on the Waldron Creek Fire west of Choteau in 1931, The snow-covered slope where they died is visible in the upper right of this photo.*

Acantha photo by Jeff Martinsen

The 800-acre fire on the Lewis and Clark National Forest's Choteau district started by lightning in one of the driest years on record at that point on the forest. Fires throughout the region stressed the young Forest Service's ability to fight them, and by late August of 1931, the USFS had to recruit people — desperate for jobs during the Great Depression — from taverns, hotels, unemployment offices and soup kitchens in Great Falls.

About 100 were recruited and the forgotten five were on a crew of 20, who rode a train up from Great Falls, were taken by vehicle to the forest and then walked and hiked in 12 miles to get to the fire lines. They had no formal training, no personal protective gear and their only tools were axes and shovels for digging fire lines.

As the fire raged and created its own weather, the five firefighters made the decision to leave the burned over area where the rest of their 20-person crew was and try to outrun the fire. They were not successful.

After their bodies were recovered, Novotny and Williamson were buried in Highland Cemetery in Great Falls. Gunnarson and Allen were buried in the Choteau Cemetery, and Bierchen was buried in a Chicago cemetery. Only Williamson's grave had a headstone, purchased by his parents.

Through the years, the memory of this fire and those lost lives dimmed. Eye witnesses died, records were filed and forgotten and time marched on. Then, in 2003, Thornton, a reporter at the Choteau Acantha with a keen interest in natural resources reporting and history, discovered records of the Waldron Creek Fire. She spent hours squinting through microfilm of old newspapers in the Great Falls Public Library. She searched cemetery records, Census records and other documents from the time of the fire.

She rediscovered the men and on June 11, 2003, her story ran in the Acantha across two full pages with photos of the fire area taken by her husband Ralph and graphics and design done by Acantha publisher Jeff Martinsen, himself a former USFS smokejumper. The headline read: "Fire comes to the Forest; 5 firefighters, eager for any Depression-era job, die in '31 blaze."

In Missoula, Palmer, a smokejumper, read her story, and was captivated. "When I read Nancy's article about the fire, it really just kind of sparked a curiosity in me to try and find out more about the fire and particularly the five men who died on it." A professor with the University of Montana's School of Integrative Physiology and Athletic Training (part of the College of Health), Palmer was curious about the 20 men on the crew, and the five who broke off from the rest of the group, then paid for that decision with their lives.

He began researching the fire and eventually in 2015 published his book. Before that, however, he worked to make sure that headstones were purchased through donated funds for Novotny, Allen and Gunnarson. He could not provide a stone for Bierchen's grave because, while he was able to find the general area of the grave, he could not find a specific plot. He only knows that Bierchen's grave is near that of one of his nieces. Those headstones were installed and dedicated in August 2014.

He thanked Choteau Cemetery sexton Ross Depner for caring for the previously unmarked graves of Allen and Gunnarson, and said he is "just in debt to him for all the efforts he is making to keep those grave sites tidy."

The commemorative sign, reads: "Waldron Creek Fire. Looking south down the road to the ridge beyond, you see a bowl above Waldron Creek. Five men died near that bowl on August 25, 1931, while attempting to suppress the Waldron Creek Fire. Over many years, tragic events such as these led to changes in how firefighters are recruited and trained. May we always remember and honor these fallen men, as well as other fallen firefighters throughout time."

Garrett Depner told the Acantha the Old Men and Fire group provided the materials and wording for the sign, and he worked this spring to get it done, using the school's CNC plasma table to cut the letters out of a four by four foot sheet of 16-gauge steel, which was then painted black. "It was a very good, noble cause," Garrett said, adding that he and his dad are skiers and will periodically check on the sign to make sure it is wearing well and to take care of any repairs.

At the dedication, Palmer said there is "the chance then, with this signage, to close another loop with regard to getting these gentlemen the honor they deserve as service members to this country."

Thornton said, after the dedication, "I got a bit emotional listening to the speakers at the dedication ... I had been an Acantha reporter for just three years when I discovered the forgotten tragedy. ... The story resulted in Charles Palmer writing an entire book about it, deservedly so, and I am grateful that such a significant event in national forest history will become known to everyone who takes a trip into the mountains west of Choteau. A good job, well done."

Palmer was helped in his goal to recognize these men by the Rocky Mountain Ranger District and the Lewis and Clark National Forest administration and by members of the informal group of wildland firefighters who call themselves, Old Men and Fire, take on author Norman MacLean's seminal book on the Mann Gulch Fire, "Young Men and Fire."

Members of the group from Montana, Idaho, California and Nevada attended the sign dedication. Members Jim Cook and Tom Boatner spoke at the dedication.

Cook said, "We have one common bond amongst all of us — a real deep shared interest in wildland fire history. ... Our general purpose is to inspire others to look into wildland fire history because we think if you don't know where you came from, you really can't know where you're headed."

The group has created the 100 Fires Project, recounting the history of 100 fires from 1825 to present that were notable in the number of fatalities of personnel and that sparked changes in how the USFS and state agencies fight wildland fires. "Waldron Creek is one of those fires," he said.

"The second reason we are here is honoring the past." Cook said. "Another line of effort for our group is looking at old forgotten fires where the firefighters didn't have a memorial and working with local folks to try to put one up, and this is our first one. I'd like to close by recognizing everyone here for taking the time today to make one less forgotten fire."

Boatner said the group has visited sites of fires across the U.S. from the Hauser Fire in 1943 near the Mexican border to the 1910 fires in Idaho and Montana. The group's next project will be to create a memorial for the three U.S. soldiers and one California firefighter who were killed in the 1950s Politis II Fire in San Luis Obispo County, California.

"We'll continue to follow our interests looking at fire history with the idea of trying to commemorate people who have been forgotten in the wildland fire community," Boatner said.

"I just want to say thank you to a few people who have helped us out, and we have to start first with Nancy. Your original article — these men would have been forgotten except for that," he said.



*Jim Cook, left, and other members of the Old Men and Fire group attend the dedication of the Waldron Creek Fire memorial sign on May 28 in the Lewis and Clark National Forest.*

Acantha photo by Jeff Martinsen

Boatner also thanked former USFS fire manager Brad McBratney for bringing equipment to sink the post holes for the sign, the Rocky Mountain Ranger District personnel, Ross and Garrett Depner and Palmer for pursuing the story and the headstones.

Closing out the ceremony, Rocky Mountain District Ranger Mike Munoz thanked Palmer and Old Men and Fire for their work to get the sign created and installed. He also asked public lands managers to continue to work to reduce the risks associated with fighting wildland fires.

“One thing I want to note is in 1931, and this is in the book, these five men lost their lives and there were another 15 that same year that lost their lives in fire management, fire fighting. And it seems that somehow we’ve continued to maintain somewhere near an average of 20 fire personnel dying annually, killed on fires,” he said. “There’s things that these people would want us to learn.”

When the USFS started using prescribed natural fire and wildland fire use, it started looking at ways to help eliminate the chaos, to keep from taking unnecessary risk and only to do things that are effective, Munoz said. “There are still hazards that have to be overcome even in those situations, but I hope that somehow we maintain that into the future because it has made a difference,” he said.

One of his co-workers analyzed fatality data from fires in 1995-2015, and found that all firefighter deaths occurred on suppression events when firefighters were trying to put out the fires no matter what, Munoz said. In that same time, not one firefighter was killed on a prescribed natural fire, wildland fire use or through managing fires for benefits, he said.

“I think that we have to keep that in mind, these 95 years later, when we go out on fire assignments, and we take a look at how we are going to respond to a fire. Some of the key things I’d like to make sure we are doing is helping our younger folks, especially, realize that they have initial response,” Munoz said. “They have a chance to size up fires and make a choice about what they’re going to do, and not only think that they have to go in and so aggressively go after things that they would put themselves at risk, unnecessary risk. I’d like to make sure that we continue to honor these men — Allen, Bierchen, Gunnarson, Novotny and Williamson — with that in mind when we do take on fire assignments.”

Boatner said, “They are part of our history, and in this beautiful place we are remembering them 95 years later. Let’s have a moment of silence to show our respect for those five men and all of the other men and women who have given their lives firefighting over the years.”

