

From the Frying Pan Into the Fire
August 2000
By Jim Akenson©2000

Hello from the Akensons!

If you have not heard anything, you all are probably wondering what became of us. We experienced quite a bit of fire action between Aug. 10 and Aug. 21. We'll outline the events in a daily summary...hitting on the main points and periods of intense action.

August 10: Arranged for an evacuation from here of a NOLS backpack group that encountered the Diamond Pt. fire in mid Big Creek. Seventeen people and Chris McDaniel (summer maintenance person here) were flown out to Salmon via Islander (twin engine) and 206. In the evening a dry lightning storm started a tree on fire at Rush Point, 5 miles west of Taylor Ranch.

August 11: We hosted the Root Ranch crew (4 people, 23 horses/mules) as they were evacuating from Root Ranch to their base at the Flying B on the Middle Fork. The Flossie fire was only 4 miles from Root Ranch.

August 12: Worked with the student interns, Jeremy, Sam, and Ken getting the fire pump, hoses, and yard sprinklers set up for fire fighting. We could see a large column of smoke coming off Big Creek Ridge just 3 miles upstream. Called Dick Bottger at noon then Ed Krumpe in the evening to alert the University of fire danger around Taylor Ranch. Ray Arnold flew out Sam and Jeremy in the early afternoon, then in the late afternoon when the smoke thinned he flew out Ken. By evening we could see flames on a ridge upstream, so we had Ray come in before dark (third flight) and take out a plane load of personal valuables and ranch records. Outfitter Steve Zettel, and his crew took down their camp and evacuated from Cabin Creek, arriving here at 11:30 pm. Holly fed them and they slept in the bunkhouse and cookhouse (the last uses of these buildings).

August 13: Saw off Steve's crew. They decided to swing back up to Cabin Creek and then on up to Whiskey Springs to cut camp firewood. We went to work cutting brush from around buildings and maximizing sprinkler set up. Very smoky this morning, could only see a 1/4 mile until 2:30pm when the wind started to blow. By 3:00 pm a large dark cloud loomed to the west. We could hear a dull roaring noise. We saddled stock rapidly (1 horse, 4 mules), I called Pete Amell (USFS-fire) and informed him we were in imminent danger. He said the smoke jumper plane had to turn back due to strong winds, so the smoke jumpers would switch to helicopters to get to Taylor Ranch. I told him we could not wait long and were likely headed out...to the Middle Fork. Tried to call Arnold Aviation (491), couldn't raise them. Finally reached Sharon at Yellowpine Bar and told her we were headed to the Flying B, 22 miles via trail. At 3:30 flames appeared above the airstrip, the fire now sounded like a freight train. Flames jumped in half mile leaps: to Horse Mtn, then the Cliff Creek benches, then the airstrip. We turned on the fire pump and set up the hose aimed at the Taylor Cabin. We only had time to load up 2 pannier bags with ranch valuables and some crackers. We took off and looked back at the inferno approaching the Taylor Cabin. We travelled at a fast mule walk, ready to trot or gallop if need be. At Dunce Creek, 4 miles downstream we heard a helicopter over Taylor Ranch. We were grateful, depressed, scared all at once. On the Middle Fork we passed by (at 30 feet) a stubborn sow black bear that treed her cubs right off the trail, she finally yielded to us. At Wilson Creek, at 9 pm we encountered a float party, Rocky Mtn. River Tours, that generously fed us dinner, loaned us sleeping bags and pads and compassionately listened to our story. Past governor Cecil Andrus was part of the float party. He was very concerned about Taylor Ranch, particularly since he had been instrumental in initiating the National Guard helicopter lift of the Lanham Lab cabin from Cabin Creek to Taylor Ranch 10 years ago. We did not know that the smoke jumpers were at Taylor Ranch, so we told the group we thought that most of the ranch had burned.

August 14: Rode to the Flying B by noon. Mike and Scott from the Flying B met us at Jack Creek, 3 miles from the B. They said many on the radio were concerned about us. At that time the word was that 6 cabins had burned at Taylor Ranch. We were quite sad on this leg of the trip. Got settled in at the B, told the evacuation story, and called Arnold's to pass the word along of our safety. Three cabins had burned. Began clearing brush around the Flying B and helping Manager Rick Dorony take fire protection measures against the Shellrock Fires and Short Creek Fire.

August 16-17: Continued fire prevention (more brush clearing), ate like kings, and watched huge smoke columns build in 5 directions. On the 17th we could see flames on a ridge 3 miles north of the B. Fire concern increased over previous days. Holly hiked up the opposite hill and could see fire in upper Brush Creek, west and above the Flying B. We visited with Rick about an emergency fire plan. He then called a ranch meeting to explain the details. We had 2 FS fire fighters, Doug Graves and Mike Helm stationed at the B. Two other fire fighters, Bill and Bryan, were at the Bernard Guard Station cabins, plus 2 FS packers, Jim and Russ, were also at Bernard to bring out 5 head of FS stock. Several helicopter flights came and went bringing in fire supplies....hoses, water pumps etc. We all sensed that something would happen in a few days.

August 18: The smoke cleared fairly early. I saddled our mules and packed Forest Service hoses, a water pump, fuel, and people from the Flying B to Bernard Guard Station. Rick left at 3 am on horseback to find the 14 head of ranch stock missing up Brush Creek. He returned mid morning with 11 head...and 3 still missing. Rick rode with me to Bernard Airstrip to pick up groceries left there for the B, and to get Chris McDaniel who we had flown in to help us travel back to Taylor Ranch in case the trails were bad. Chris and I volunteered to pack floater gear on our mules from Bernard to the B when smoke closed in on the Bernard Airstrip, so a twin engine Islander could evacuate 20 people from the float party. Ominous mushroom clouds of smoke were developing to the north (Short Creek Fire) and southwest (Shellrock Fires). Holly and the Flying B crew began hosing down the buildings. Returned to the B and put the stock in a pasture by the hay barn. Doug reported at 3:30 pm that the Middle Fork Peak Lookout said that the Shellrock Fire was 6 miles SW and coming our way...rapidly. We began the emergency plan. Holly drove Vickie, Hope and their 4 dogs 3/4 mile to a green horse pasture where we had just moved the 55 head of Flying B horses & mules. Chris and I prepared drip torches for back burning at Doug and Mike's advice. Rick, Mike, Scott, and John manned the fire hose stations. Rick asked about our stock, and I recalled not cutting the fence...so I ran like mad and cut the fence along the stream. Cricket saw me cut the fence then sprinted back to the others...where they disappeared into the darkness (at 4 pm). I remember hearing the "freight train sound", louder than on Big Creek. Marian left the lodge and ran by me en route to the river. I saw Ron and Joanne pass by, also headed for the river. I ran back to the shop to leash the dogs and try to get them to the river also. I ran into Rick and Scott and ducked into the shop...with great door opening difficulty. The wind was intense, debris was pelting the shop and it sounded like a hurricane. All we could do was stay put. Marian and Joanne were in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River under the bridge when they watched the wind lift the suspension bridge off its footings and slam it back into the edge of the piling, buckling the 12 inch "I" beams. They drifted downstream in the current to an island as the fire burned the riparian shrubs on the bank where they had been. Marian had burns on her eyelids from the intense heat, despite ducking under the water. The Shellrock Fire was burning all around the Flying B and the Short Creek Fire was burning all around the pasture where Holly, Hope and Vickie were stationed, then the fires joined and roared up the east side of the Middle Fork. As the front of the firestorm passed over us at 4:30 pm the smoke cloud above us was so thick that it was completely dark except for the flames on hillsides all around us. Holly saw a large orange glow from fire radiating into the sky above the Flying B. It did not look like anyone could have survived. We decided when it let up to locate people. About 10 minutes later it let up. Rick and Scott went to the river and got a head count of 8. I found Doug at the water pump, trying desperately to make it work...which he got going by clearing debris from the suction device. Everyone returned from the river, including George who had delivered people to Bernard on the 4 wheeler. We began fighting the fires at or around most of the structures. This went on for 90 minutes or so. I saw that Chris was swinging an arm and dragging a leg...but still trying to run a hose. Firefighter Mike, who was with Chris when the firestorm hit was cupping his hands over his ears...which were obviously burned and

coated with sand. Chris said that they raced the fire front, jumped 2 fences and then were overtaken by wind and flames and blown into a hawthorn tree and covered by debris. They had the worst injuries. We all had very sore eyes and lungs from blowing sand and dense smoke. Holly got a backcountry radio going in the yard and with some difficulty we communicated to Carol Arnold and Flying B General Manager Bill Guth. A helicopter came in and evacuated Mike for burn treatment. I checked on our stock...that had run down to the airstrip. Penny was limping with many lacerations on her chest from blasting through a barbed wire fence. The other mules and Bo were OK with lesser cuts. After dark the place was lit up all night by the glow from the 3,600 bales of hay burning in the roofless barn and trees still burning on ridges in all directions. The cabin Holly and I had been staying in burned to the ground...including my wallet, our few clothes, and borrowed clothes. We were all just thankful to be alive!! We gathered in the lodge and talked late into the night.

August 19-20: Walked around looking at the aftermath at the Flying B and surrounding wilderness...what a mess! Trees fell on several buildings, one building collapsed, roofs blew off 3 buildings, 3 buildings burned. The riparian, grassland, sagebrush, and forests are 99% burned. Bill Guth flew in and we photographed the destruction for the insurance adjuster. The big suspension bridge over the Middle Fork had been twisted and broken in half by the firestorm. We estimated the winds could have been 100 miles per hour. When the fire burned past the Flying B it went 7 miles in 22 minutes! The fires we fled from Taylor Ranch were now merged with these fires to be the 170,000 acre Diamond Point Fire, and only one drainage from the 170,000 acre Clear Creek Fire. We found a lot of dead wildlife. I had to dispatch a fawn deer with awful burns. Squirrel and bird remains were numerous. We were all struggling with depression from the scenes. We spent 2 long days cleaning up debris around the cabins. Mica hurt her leg...while swimming, and needed to see a vet.

August 21: Chris and I hit the trail. We had to ford the Middle Fork since the bridge is out. The going was better than expected. Had to clear brush and rocks in burned areas but no big trees. We expected one of our bigger challenges would be getting the mules to cross the Bighorn Bridge on lower Big Creek that had been wrapped with fire proof foil. To our surprise, Daisy led the string across the foil with only minor difficulty. Riding up Big Creek was ghostly with many trees and stumps burning and smoldering on the south side of the stream. We made the 22 miles in 7 hours. Ray Arnold flew Holly and Mica to Cascade through the smoke. Mica had surgery on her hock. Chris and I were greeted at the ranch by firefighters Mike, Ryan, and Edward. They had the place in good shape, considering. We were happy to see the tack shed still standing! The building loss was the cookhouse, bunkhouse, tent & frame, and 2 woodpiles. The 12 smokejumpers that saved this place did a great job! It is an amazing landscape...charred and black. The fire burned very hot around Taylor Ranch. When Holly flew in on August 24 she saw that most of the Big Creek canyon had burned on both sides, from Beaver Creek to below Taylor Ranch. A majority of winter range was burned. The "sagebrush flat" does not have a single shrub remaining. Thus begins a new chapter in our lives at Taylor Ranch...."post fire".

---Jim and Holly