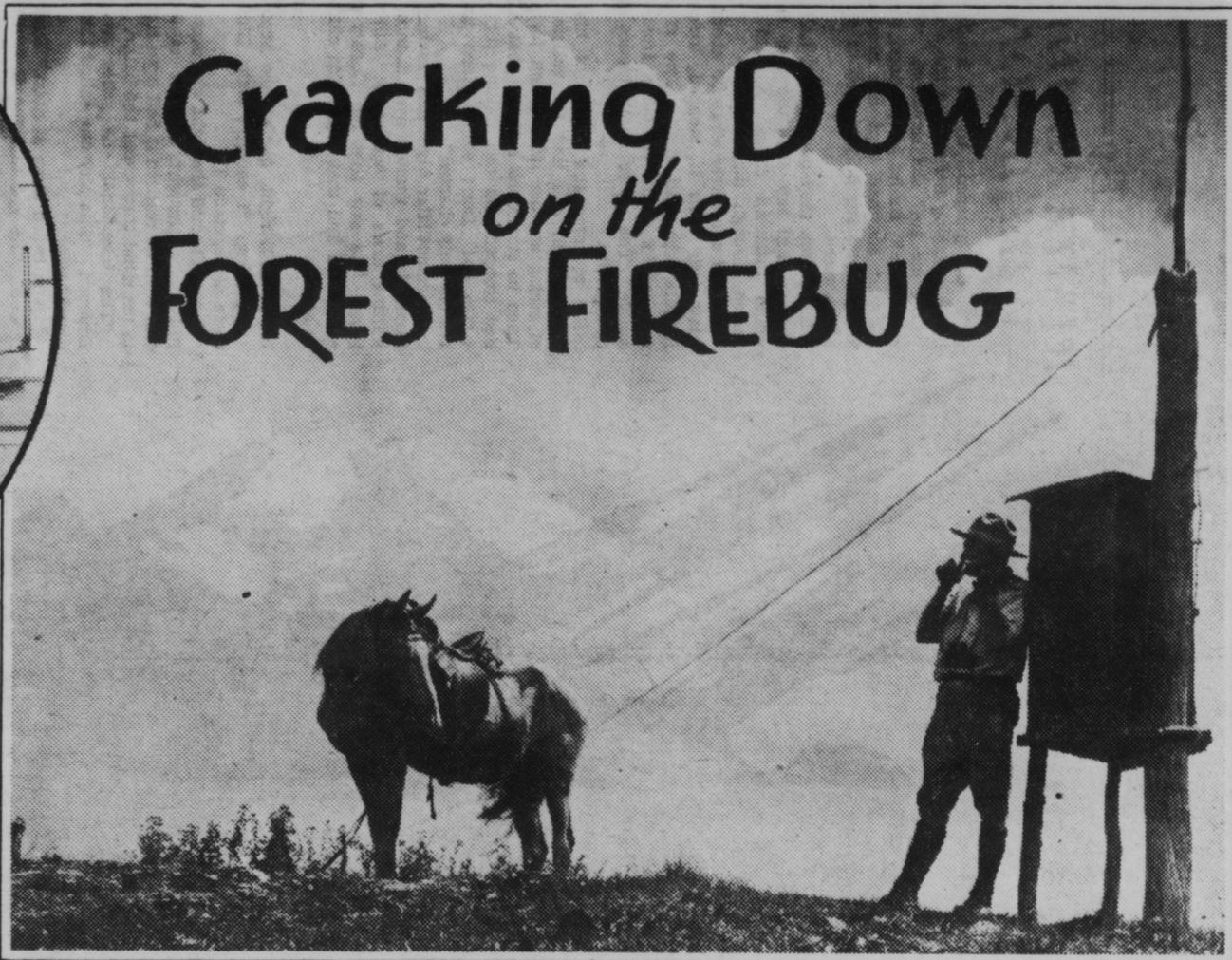




A lookout in a lofty tower (above) telephones headquarters the location of a fire starting in Ocala National Forest, Florida, while another (right) reports a blaze from his post in Pisgah National Forest, North Carolina.



# Cracking Down on the FOREST FIREBUG

**A**LMOST every year Uncle Sam takes it on the chin to the tune of \$50,000,000 in loss of valuable timber caused by fire. A lot of these fires are the results of "natural causes."

But the "firebug," the misguided individual who purposely starts a forest fire for one of several reasons, is one of the principal headaches of the United States Forest Service whose job it is to protect the 200,000,000 acres of potential lumber that is scattered throughout America.

Against the menace of the firebug is pitted the trained personnel of the U. S. Forest Service—men who know their jobs as well as the cleverest federal detective or city sleuth who ever tracked a murderer or kidnaper.

According to David Godwin, associate chief of the fire fighting division of the service, practically every individual who sets ablaze timber that is guarded by Uncle Sam's rangers is caught in the end. This statement does not necessarily apply to private forest lands not under direct supervision of the Forest Service, but it is definitely true of timber owned by the government.

How do these "G-men of the Forest" operate? For answer, let us turn to the confidential files of the United States Forest Service:

Forest Ranger Robert Kloppenburg, on duty in Santa Barbara National Forest, California, got a phone call one afternoon from a filling station owner on a highway in the Cuyama valley, near the forest's boundary. The caller had seen a man setting a fire in the woods not far from the highway.

Kloppenburg took a crew to the scene in a truck and had the fire out in 20 minutes. Before the men had caught their breath, the smoke of another fire was seen two miles away. They hur-

ried off to check that—and a third was discovered farther down the valley. In all, they discovered and put out five fires that afternoon.

**B**UT the filling station man had seen the firebug and had taken the license number of his car. The rangers, furthermore, had found identical tire tracks at the scene of each blaze. An alarm was broadcast, and before night the police had arrested the fugitive. A few weeks later he was tried, convicted and sentenced to a stiff term in the federal prison at McNeil Island.

Not always is the ranger's detective work that simple. A long and bitter legal battle was waged by the forest service before Firebugs George Nutter and Denny Jacobs were brought to justice. These two men were finally convicted of starting one of the most destructive fires that ever hit northern California—a blaze which destroyed 31,000,000 board feet of marketable yellow and sugar pine, and seriously threatened the timber bordering Yosemite National Park and the famous Mariposa trees.

It took 790 hard-pressed men to get that fire under control, and many of them were kept on the scene for nearly a month extinguishing smoldering brush fires which the great blaze left in its wake.

But if it took a month to lick the fire, it took very much longer to lick the firebugs. The job was finally done by Fire Chief Wofford and U. S. Attorney Pierson M. Hall and Hall's as-

sistant, Jack Irwin.

Suspicion was first centered around Nutter, a cattle rancher of the vicinity, and Jacobs, an Indian, when it was learned that the ranch owner had moved a number of his cattle from the burned area BEFORE the fire started.

Furthermore, Nutter had been known to have started fires on his own land before, for purposes of collecting insurance. In short, the man had a reputation as a "burner." Jacobs hung around Nutter's ranch considerably, did a little work for him occasionally, was pretty much of a drunkard, and had a poor reputation in the community.

Fire Chief Wofford got busy, and pertinent information began to turn up. The pair were arrested six months later and confined in the Madera County jail. There they were questioned under a lie-detector loaned by the Berkeley police. They still denied their guilt, but A. H. Bledsoe, experienced operator of the lie-detector, was convinced the two men were lying.

**A**LMOST two years after the fire started, Nutter and Jacobs were convicted and got stiff sentences at hard labor in the federal road camp in Arizona, to be followed by a stretch in the Madera County jail.

Oddly enough, the firebug seems to be most active in time of depression. For large-scale forest fires do make jobs—temporary ones—and a fire will be deliberately started so that men will be pressed into service as fire-fighters.

Some years ago a veritable epidemic of forest fires took place in Idaho. The fires took place at regular intervals, along a more or less straight path across the forest country; and presently it was noticed that a fire would not sooner be discovered than rattle-trap autos full of men would begin driving up and parking.

These men would alight and stand about until the harassed fire wardens drafted them into service. Then, for a few days or a week, they would have jobs—30 or 40 cents an hour and three squares a day.

It was deduced that these were unemployed casual laborers of the kind who drift all across the ranch and farm country of the west. The depression had made jobs scarce. These drifters—or some of them, at least—had hit on the idea of creating work for themselves by setting fires.

The governor of Idaho had the situation called to his attention, that summer, and he promptly declared martial law in seven counties, with National Guardsmen patrolling the roads and allowing no one to enter without a pass. And as soon as that was done, it is said, the "epidemic" of forest fires came to an end!

Incidentally, the work of the CCC boys in cutting down fire losses should be mentioned. They have nothing to do with firebug-detection, but they have a lot to do with stopping fires once they are started.



How a forest fire starts: a tiny blaze in dry leaves and twigs.



If the alarm is given in time, the Forest Ranger puts the fire out with a portable water pack.



Here is the end product of a forest fire—blackened trunks in a Washington forest where mighty trees stood an hour before.