

FIGHTING FIRES IN MOUNTAINS

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unable to get out to civilization. On reaching the cabin one night he found the place stripped of everything stealable.

Forced To Disrobe

Some days later he encountered a mountain lad in the bank at Franklin, wearing the socks that had disappeared, along with his other clothing from the cabin. In the presence of a group of the lad's friends the ranger forced him to take off the socks, and threatened him with prosecution if he were ever caught in the forest again.

Before this occurrence, ill feeling had existed between the boy's family and the forest officials, for the boy's father had been suspected in the past of hog stealing, timber trespass, violating the grazing regulations, and killing game on the forest out of season. Setting fire to a national forest as revenge for the accusation against his son would have meant nothing in his mountain life.

The famous 1922 fire broke out a week before Thanksgiving on the south face of the divide between Coleman and Tallulah rivers on the Georgia side of the state line, and driven by a bitter November gale, swept northward toward the Blue Ridge and North Carolina.

Fire Discovered

Setser, fire guard at that time on Standing Indian, six miles to the north, discovered the first smoke about 9 o'clock that Thursday morning. Jumping to the phone he jangled the ringer viciously, and quickly aroused the ranger at headquarters, 25 miles away, across the wilderness.

"Hit's on the south face of Little Bald, Mr. Brown," he explained, when he had reported the fire, and continued, "hit'll climb fast, because the wind's drivin' right with her."

"Any chance of stopping it at Beech Creek until we can get in?" snapped Brown's voice apprehensively.

"I'm affered not. Hit's sweepin' straight up, and ef it can't be headed on top of the ridge hit'll cross into Nantahala by night," returned Gilmer, "hit's goin' to be a bad fire. Everything's as dry as a bone, and them laurels down in there'll burn like tinder. Whoever did it couldn't hev picked a worse time nor place!"

"Well, do what you can until we reach you, which will be sometime tonight. I'll bring in all the men I can get, and spread the word in the county. Luck to you, old man, and watch out for evidence," admonished Brown, parting.

Off To Battle

In five minutes Gilmer was off, on foot, with pitchfork, axe, and emergency rations, out the brushy, rock-strewn ridge top toward the distant flames. And alone he held the

fire from crossing the divide into the magnificent timber on the North Carolina side.

It was a bitter battle, and Gilmer came out of it a hero. First he lost his coat, burned where he had hung it in a sapling. For, in spite of the cold—the thermometer was 10 degrees above zero—he became dripping wet with perspiration from his desperate exertions. Then he stumbled and fell on his pitchfork, and one of the tines rammed through the calf of his leg, causing a painful wound. Yet, minus his coat, and inquired as he was, Gilmer held the top of the range against the flames that roared up from the south until help arrived.

Puncheon Gap, in the Blue Ridge, between Little Bald and Beach Creek Knob, as the first point threatened, Beech Cove below the gap on the south side was a caldron out of which the flames roared upward, and licked out on the slopes of the two mountains. A government trail, following roughly the crest of the range, meandered into the gap and then off around the north face of the Bald. This trail gave Gilmer a line to work from. Raking the leaves out of it, he started his backfire. But the wind was strong, and instead of carrying the backfire toward the main flames it grabbed up burning leaves and snags, and carried them spinning off into the unburned timber behind him, so that between rushing to stamp out these newly-set spots, raking the trail, and trying to drive the backfire down the slope, Gilmer had his hands full.

Help Reaches Him

His lone battle lasted until shortly after nightfall, when Brown, the ranger, with eight men, reached him.

"Wheoo-hoo — Hey! Gilmer!!" Above the crackle of the flames from his backfire, and drone of the wind in the bare limbs, Brown's voice floated down to him on the slope.

"Yeoo-hoo! — Yeoo-ho, Yeoo-ho!" Joyously, exultantly, and albeit thankfully, he shrieked up into the blackness above him. Down hyre I an, down this way!!

"Oh! So there you are huh? Come on up and be sociable! What're you doing, keepin' warm?" came, back Brown's voice.

No further invitation was needed to induce Gilmer to leave his lonely post, and in a few minutes he had climbed into the gap and joined the little group of grim mountaineers who had journeyed all day, first by auto and then for 15 miles on foot to come to his assistance.

Planning The Fight

While coffee was brewed, and canned beans and bread eaten, plans were laid for the battle. To the west flowed Tallulah river, deep in its gorge, seven miles away. To their east, across Little Bald, was Cole-

man river at approximately the same distance away. Ten miles to the south the two flowed together, forming the apex to a triangle, and the fire was confined within it. The two river would take care of three sides of the fire, for the wind was right to prevent it, jumping them. It was 15 miles long, to connect those two rivers. The task looked hopeless, but these were toil-hardened men that started the fight that night. They divided into two crews, and with Gilmer in charge of one and Brown leading the other, lines were started east and west, which, after three days and nights of continuous fighting, connected the two rivers and hemmed the fire.

More help, of course, eventually reached the scene. Loggers, farmers from the surrounding valleys, and even moonshiners from their wilderness stills. The forest supervisor and his assistant, with two carloads of men from Franklin, reached the scene the second day. Thereafter the supervisor directed the battle, and shifted men to emergency points. Pack load after pack load of grub was hauled in on mules. Temporary camps were established on the line, and food prepared for the battlers. Runners kept the various crews in touch with one another.

Fifty-Five Hours

Gilmer, lips cracked, face slashed, and leg swelling more and more, stayed on the line through 55 grueling hours, leading, driving, exhorting, goading the wearied fighters under him to greater effort; till finally the supervisor ordered him to "get back to your lookout, and stay there," when, with tears in his eyes, he literally dragged himself up through the forest to the lookout. But rest was not yet to be his.

What a view the point gave! Gorgeous, ranges, peaks in rugged panorama, fading into a hazed horizon, gray with smoke. To the south every detail of the battle in the wilderness could be followed, for Standing Indian towers above it all. From river to river stretched two lines of billowing smoke, one marking the front of the oncoming fire, the other the screen of the backfire.

Gilmer couldn't rest. At the cabin with him was S. M. Shanklin, deputy supervisor of the forest, acting as dispatcher for the new fighters that struggled in, wearied from the long hike. As new men arrived they were fed, allowed to rest a short time, and then despatched to the fire. And with each crew departing for the front, Gilmer plead to be allowed to go.

Wanted To Go Back

"I'm all right, Mr. Shanklin," he would plead, "I ain't a bit tired."
"You aren't?" sarcastically. "Why, man, there's no use killing yourself! You couldn't hike to Beech Gap without cashing in. There'll be enough

stink on us from Washington about this fire now, without topping it off with a dead fire guard. Lie down on that cot and rest yourself, and quit mashing your nose on that window. You might bust the glass out, and it's cold enough in here already."

It was characteristic of Gilmer that he never argued, but this was a time unusual, and he kept pleading. To add to Shanklin's worries, Ralph Moore, lookout on Whispering Bald, 25 miles to the north, and another fire eater, craved to get into the battle. Time after time the phone would ring, and Ralph's voice would hum in over the line.

"How's she goin' by now, Mr. Shanklin?" he'd ask eagerly.

"Nothing new," Ralph, replied the deputy supervisor, disgustedly, "they will have her out by morning."

"I'd orter be in thar," for the fiftieth time, it seemed to Shanklin, Ralph persisted, "hit mought break over some place."

"There are 20 men watching for that," returned Shanklin, "you're doing more good watching that end of the forest than you could ever do here. What if fire should break out on Burningtown, and all of us back here?"

"Not a chance uv that, Mr. Shanklin. They ain't nobody left back this way to set fire. Everybody's in thar with you but th' babies and granmothers, an' I been expectin' to hear uv them goin' too, any time. I'm gonna freeze to death ef yer don't let me in thar whar I kin git warm!"

"Run around the top and get warm then, you're not coming in here," and Shanklin abruptly slammed the receiver down.

Record All Shot

"Damn you fellows," he said, turning to Gilmer, "I never saw such firebugs in my life. Ralph hasn't any more sense about taking care of himself than you have. You can't do it all."

"Hit's the first bad blaze I've had since I been up here, Mr. Shanklin," said Gilmer, worriedly, "I bin kinder proud uv the record for the last three years, but she's shot now," and he mournfully turned back to his window to watch the smoke.

"Well you're not responsible, boy. It's just one of those things that can't be helped. You've done all that was humanly possible for you to do, and more than anybody else could have done, and there's no use crying over spilt milk, so rest yourself. There are plenty of men to take care of it now," and he turned back to the stove where coffee was brewing.

Shanklin, himself, has told some of the story, especially such parts as Gilmer leaves out.

"The fool never did tell me about his leg," so Shanklin says, "Just after night a part of the crew from Coleman river came up, worn out.

Their fire was under control and plenty of men had been left to watch for breakovers. We could see that the other bunch was about to reach Tallulah by the backfire flames springing up down on the slopes of Sealy, near the river. It looked like the battle was over.

Bug At Work Again

"Well sir, it just goes to show that you never can tell. Who'd have thought that that scoundrel would still be in the country, much less still craving to burn. But he was, I actually saw the new fire set, down there in the gorge, across the Tallulah. First a flame no bigger than a lantern light, and then she spread. I thought Gilmer would go wild. It was the first time I'd ever seen him sure enough mad. There wasn't any stopping him, and nothing to do but let him take those worn out men and go. I'd have gone myself, but he wouldn't hear of it. Pointed out that I didn't know the way by the lead ridge short cut, and he could get there an hour before I could."

"So I let him go. The boys objected, and I couldn't blame them. Forty-eight hours on the line with just snatches of rest and very little food. But they went."

"I could watch every move they made. Saw them reach the fire in an hour and begin their backfires, on the upper side. Watched the flames from their backfire, creeping down the sides of the main fire, and finally must not have been strong down in there because they were fighting close. It wasn't more than an hour after they had surrounded the fire before everything was burned out and nothing showed but a few red spots where logs were still smouldering."

Snow Kills Blaze

"Gilmer and his crew got back just before daylight. Next day it warmed up and snowed, killing out the blazing logs and trees, and we took the whole works off and went back to civilization. Gilmer stayed at his lookout tower the rest of the season. We let him have his way."

Gilmer, now promoted, and occupying comfortable quarters at Wilson Lick Hanger station, is still wondering about the socks. The man was never caught, but Brown did get his socks back.—Charlotte Observer.

RHEUMATISM

While in France with the American Army I obtained a French prescription for the treatment of Rheumatism and Neuritis. I have given this to thousands with wonderful results. The prescription cost me nothing. I ask nothing for it. I will mail it if you will send me your address. A postal will bring it. Write today. PAUL CASE, Dept C-628 Brockton, Mass.

AN APPRECIATION AND AN ANNOUNCEMENT

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We have long felt the need for a Main Street show room, a more central location than our main business house at the corner of Phillips and Palmer Streets. We have now secured such a location, and are occupying it this week. Our new show room is in Hotel Franklin Building, adjoining the hotel lobby, and presents an appearance of which we are justly proud. A new plate glass front has been put in, large show windows installed, and the building generally remodeled and refinished. In this new location we will at all times have on display a beautiful assortment of high grade furniture and house furnishings. One of the partners in our firm will be in charge of the Main Street show room, and will welcome you at any time you find it convenient to call.

In the meantime we will continue our Undertaking Parlors at our main building at the corner of Phillips and Palmer Streets. Also a large stock of furniture, house furnishings, rugs, draperies, dishes, stoves, Frigidaires, and other merchandise usual to a first class furniture store, will be carried here at all times.

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