

# Home & Heart



Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze

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**L**iving in the mountains, inside the Klamath National Forest, I had my first experience with wildfire. At the time, I was very glad to live in such a close-knit community. I've found that when tragedy and hardship strike, everyday people become heroes. Your neighbors can become your lifeline.

## Guardian Angel

Every year around the end of May, Nancy Culbertson would arrive for her summer stint at the Eddy Gulch fire lookout. Nancy (wo)manned the Eddy Gulch lookout for 31 years before she retired. After settling in and dusting off, she would warm up the old CB radio and call out on channel 18, the contact/road channel, "This is Nancy at Eddy Gulch looking for a radio check."

Replies would come from both the south and north forks of the Salmon River. "You're coming in clear at the Jughead. Welcome back, Nancy."

"It's good to hear your voice, Nancy. We got you at Indian Creek."

"Hey Nancy, your signal is strong at the Prospect."

"We got you at Starveout, Nancy. Looks like it's gonna be a long, hot one."

"Hi Nancy, this is Main House. Welcome back."

"You're good at Matthews Creek, Nancy."

Nancy would answer each reply. We all felt safer with Nancy ensconced at Eddy Gulch looking out over us all. She knew us and she knew her territory.

## Down Strike at Starveout

On a September afternoon in 1987, Bob-O left to take his brushing crew on a job in Happy Camp. Happy Camp is a small mountain town about 20 miles away as the hawk flies, but over two hours by car. He would be gone a week or so. A couple hours after he left, we had

a terrific thunderstorm. No rain to speak of—just booming, roof-tin-rattling thunder and lightning. The huge dark clouds disgorging sound and fury were the kind that firefighters call "Cumulus overtimus."

Bob-O's son Allen was young, eight or so, and he was nervous about the thunder. I sat down with him and started to read a story. I did it as much for me as for him. Then I heard a police radio. I got up. How could I be hearing a police radio? Our cabin was at the same level as the main river road, but across the river. I went into the front yard. A green Forest Service truck was stopped in the road opposite our cabin. Several men were in it with the windows down, and I was hearing their radio.

I started down the trail to the suspension bridge, three planks wide, that crossed the river to the road. As I climbed the smaller trail up to the pavement, the truck pulled away. Allen had come with me, not wanting to stay alone in the cabin. Since we had left the cabin, all our attention had been focused on the truck out on the road. As we turned back to the cabin, the sight of the huge black plume of smoke on the mountain behind the cabin was shocking.

I thought I'd better go see what was actually happening on the mountain and just how close it was to us. I gave Allen the choice of waiting for me at the cabin or getting on his bicycle and riding three-quarters of a mile up river to the Jughead Mine and waiting with Herr Rise and Shine and his wife until I came and got him. He chose to go. I instructed him to let them know what I was doing and that I would call them on the radio when I got back to the cabin. I took his bike across the bridge for him and he left.

I grabbed the first pair of boots I saw and laced them on. I ran outside and the only fire tool I could find was a McLeod with its two middle teeth broken off. Bob-O had all the other tools because one of the jobs his crew did was dig fire lines. I started up the mountainside, taking the trail to our water ditch. This was an old flume ditch originally made and used for mining. We used it to run our microhydro and to fill our penstock for the house water system.

When I got to the ditch, the dog took off up the ditch, thinking I was going to clean it. I let her go; I didn't need the distraction of a dog. I jumped the ditch and headed uphill. At one point, I could tell the fire was to my right around the side hill. I moved through the loose duff and rocks as fast as I could on the steep incline.

As I rounded the side hill, I saw it. At least six, 30 foot trees were fully in flame. I expected the flame, but I was surprised by the noise. Fire is loud—frighteningly loud. I

stopped in my tracks and tried to think clearly. I looked down at my feet to avoid looking at the fire, in an effort to calm myself. That's when I noticed the boots I had donned in such a hurry were Maine hunting shoes with rubber soles. Duh! I thought, that was dumb. I decided that I should try to clear a fire line around the trees.

I knew when Bob-O's crew dug fire line, it was "bare dirt, three feet wide." I walked to within 20 feet of the burning trees. I started clearing the duff with the broken McLeod. The mountainside was so steep that the burning duff under the trees was tumbling down the incline and smouldering lower down. The heat from the fire made my skin feel like I was sunburned, and I was sweating from fear and effort. I had a sudden thought. My brain said, "Mom doesn't want you here." I realized then that I was an amateur trying to do a professional's job. I didn't know what the hell I was doing, and the best thing I could do was leave. I did. To save time, I got down on my butt and slid down the mountainside to the trail at the water ditch. From there, I ran down to the cabin.

### **Lightning on the Mountain**

I got to the cabin and the radio was busy. There had been down strikes all up and down the river. I tried to call Nancy to tell her about mine. She didn't answer. Otto from Prospect Mine called me back and told me that he could tell from his scanner she was way too busy on the Forest Service radio to respond to me. My strike had been reported by the truck I had seen out on the road. All I could do was wait.

About two hours (a century) later, a Forest Service crew of three guys, one chainsaw, and McLeods came across our bridge and climbed the mountain to the fire. They stayed there all night working on it. I saw them leave at about six in the morning. I asked if it was out. No, they said, but it was contained and should go out by itself. They had been called to another hot spot and had to go. I sent Allen to school on the bus with Norma, our bus driver, as usual. His mother picked him up after school, and took him off the river to his Aunt's for the duration of the fire.

### **Fire in the Air**

California, Oregon, and Washington were hit by thousands of lightning strikes that day. Ours was not the only forest on fire. I sat in the radio shack and turned on the scanner so I could also listen to the Forest Service radio frequencies. That morning, our friends at Godfrey Ranch were threatened by a fire traveling toward them along the same route as the Hog Fire of ten years earlier.

I listened to the fire crews going into the Godfrey area to do hand work, while a water tanker went up to douse

the houses there with water. Our friend Mahaj was at her house alone. Her husband Cedar played in a band and had been out to a gig in Scott Valley the night before. As soon as he got on the river, Cedar called from Cecilville on the radio. Was Godfrey Road clear of fire, or should he take the Bacon Rind Road, over Blue Ridge to get home? I was able to relay that Godfrey Road was open. I had heard this reported on the scanner. When Cedar got home, he learned that all eight homes located on the old Godfrey Ranch were being evacuated.

Someone reported the evacuation order over the CB. Neighbors from Matthews Creek, Main House, Blue Ridge, and the river called back. They were all heading out with their pickups to help the Godfrey families save what they could. I got on the CB and said I had Bob-O's pickup and I would come too. Fran, from Main House, called back and said, "Kathleen, you have to stay home. You have the only phone around here. Call this number and get hold of Tommy and Martha. They're visiting Martha's sister in New York. Tell them their house is going to burn down and find out what we should save. David is on his way over from Blue Ridge with his truck."

I picked up the microphone on our radio telephone and called the number. I told the person who answered the phone that I was a friend of Tommy and Martha's and I urgently needed to talk to one of them. Tommy got on the line. "Hey Kathleen," he says, "What's up?"

I took a deep breath, "Tommy, there were a lot of lightning strikes last night. A fire is moving towards Godfrey. Tommy, I am so sorry, your house is going to burn. What do you want out of it? David is on his way over with his truck."

A stunned silence, then, "You're kidding."

I started crying. "I would never kid about this, Tommy. I'm so sorry."

I heard his urgent aside to someone in the room. "Quick, get Martha. Now!" To me, "Tell me what's happening."

I filled him in on the fires I knew about. Martha got on another line and listened to my report. She said, "Tell David that in the closet under the staircase is a suitcase with all our papers and pictures in it. That's where Tommy's father's violin is too. We'll leave today to come home." We hung up and I relayed the message to David, who got their precious belongings out.

Tommy and Martha had previously lost their first house to a wildfire. That's why Martha was so prepared, with all her important possessions in one place, easy to find, and easy to move.

### Fire Storm

Just about two hours later, a fire storm swept through the Godfrey. It happened faster than anyone expected. I could hear the Forest Service crews on the scanner, near panic in their voices, "Get everyone out! Get them out! Get them out now!"

Someone said, "Mahaj has turned around; she's heading back!"

"Stop her, stop her!"

"She's a hard one to stop!"

"Block the road with your truck! She can't go back in!"

A minute later, "It's okay; we turned her around. She's leaving."

The fire storm was so hot and fast that it baked the apples on Mahaj's trees, but left them hanging. The grass underneath the trees was unburned. Six homes burned. Two were saved by the tanker truck dousing them with water right before they left.

Tommy and Martha lost their home; Cedar and Mahaj's was saved. I asked Mahaj later what she turned back for. She had put a sprinkler on top of a drum of gasoline and had forgotten to turn it on.

A young man from the North Fork was packing supplies by mule into a remote fire lookout several ridges over in the Marble Mountains. He later reported seeing the fire storm swallowing the forest from that distance. He could see the trees actually exploding from the heat before the flames hit them.

### Shacking Up

I sat in the radio shack with all our different radios on. I listened to the scanner for Forest Service news and the CB for community news given and taken. I also relayed messages and made calls with our phone/radio system on the 2-meter ham radio. At night, I used the 75-meter ham radio for emergency relays through Western Public Service System, a ham net. Now I knew I wouldn't and couldn't leave the radio shack. It was early afternoon on the second day of the fires.

*[Next issue: The story continues as Bob-O and his brushing crew are roused out of their sleeping bags very early in the morning...]*

### Access

Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze just received her General class ham ticket from the FCC at her home in Northernmost California. She remains KB6MPI. c/o *Home Power* magazine, PO Box 520, Ashland, OR 97520 • kathleen.jarschke-schultze@homepower.com

