

Home & Heart



Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze

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It had been about three days since the lightning started wildfires in the mountains all along the Salmon River in California. Forest Service fire crews and management teams with their support equipment were arriving daily, almost hourly. I had never experienced anything like this before. My world was on fire.

I was spending all my daytime hours in our radio room. The scanner gave me an ear for listening to the Forest Service radio traffic. I used the CB for community news—both transmitting and receiving. I also relayed messages and made calls with our telephone/radio system on the two meter ham radio. At night, I was able to use the 75 meter ham radio for emergency relays through Western Public Service System, a ham net.

After the “Pork Chop Incident” (see *HP92*), Bob-O and his crew of locals went to work falling dead snags, clearing brush, and digging fire lines around the homes of people whose cabins were threatened by the fires.

Home Alone

Philbo had not been able to return to the Godfrey drainage yet to see if he had a cabin left. He kept trying to get up the road on his motorcycle, with a chain saw strapped to his back. Burning trees and debris fallen across the road stopped him. For a day and a half, he kept trying to get up the road every couple of hours. Finally he was able to cut through the still burning debris and get to the old Godfrey Ranch site.

He could tell as he rode up that Cedar and Mahaj’s house had survived the fire storm. Next he saw that his own cabin was still standing. He rounded the corner and climbed the hill to his charred front yard.

As he went into the cabin to get some changes of clothes, he noticed wisps of smoke rising from his porch

steps. He bent down and took a closer look. His wooden steps were smoldering and glowing with embers! Because there was no other liquid available, he used what he had on hand, or should I say “in hand.” Persistence and practicality saved his home.

Other families in the Godfrey were not so lucky. Cedar’s and Philbo’s were the only homes left there. He had to deliver the sad news to his neighbors when he came down the mountain.

Matthews Creek Fire

The afternoon of the lightning, a down strike had hit about a mile down river, on our side. It was right across the river from Matthews Creek Campground. Some poor man was camping there at the time. He had a CB radio, so he kept coming on the road channel and giving everyone updates on “his” fire. “This is Bill at Mathers Campground. The flames are about 30 feet high,” he’d say, “and now it’s spread to five trees.” He never did get the name of the campground straight.

By the next morning, he had had enough. “This is Bill at Mathers Campground. That fire is getting bigger and I’m leaving. Good luck.” “Bill’s” fire was hard to get to and wasn’t an immediate threat, so it was left on its own. Slowly it crept towards us.

A couple of days later, Bob-O was home, and up on the mountain behind our cabin. Philbo was with him. All day long, I could hear the roar and lull of their chain saws. Falling the dead snags on the mountainside above us was what we could do to help our situation.

As the fire loomed closer, Donkey Puncher and Spider came up from the Little More mine up Matthews Creek. They helped me move a lot of our possessions out onto the bare rocks of the old Starveout mine’s tailing piles. I put my most valuable possessions in my car, ready to drive away if I needed to.

Salmon River Irregulars

Bob-O was gone during the day, working with his crew up and down the river. One evening, we got a call on the CB. “Bob-O, this is Hap. Can I come across your bridge?” Bob-O picked up the mic and said, “Sure, Hap, come on over.”

Hap was a local Scott Valley man who had made the Forest Service his profession. He had come to tell Bob-O that the Forest Service was going to hire his whole crew. Bob-O would still be in charge, and they would continue to do just what they had been doing on their own. Only now they would be paid and could eat in the fire camp whenever they wanted to.

The local residents who were already fighting fire quickly organized into the Salmon River Irregulars.

Three of us became the communications network—Awful Otto at the Prospect mine outside of Cecilville, Betty Ann at Knownothing Creek, and me at Starveout mine, halfway between Cecilville and Forks. All others were under Bob-O, with subcrews under Creek, Philbo, and Bob Beaver. The subcrews worked at structure protection mostly. This went a long way to heal the rift between the Forest Service and the locals. I've always suspected Hap pushed for it. No fool was he.

Forks Hose & Ladder

Larry, John, and Rex were hired separately as a water truck and crew. They put two large tanks on Larry's flatbed and became the "Forks Hose and Ladder." They didn't get any sleep the first three days, but they helped secure several structures. When the Forest Service's Texas Tanker guys arrived, they didn't have the right equipment to fill their tankers out of the river. So the Forks boys would fill their truck from the river and then go fill the official tankers.

At one point, Larry and John were headed up to Lloyd's on Knownothing Creek when they relayed their position on channel 18. Larry's wife, Nixie, came right back sternly, as if talking to one of her children, "Larry, you promise me you won't go over that bridge!" Larry mumbled something back in reply.

Two days later, I was a guide for a pump delivery at Lloyd's and I had occasion to cross that very bridge. Lodgepole pine logs spanned the creek, with 2 by 4s kind of nailed to the edges so you wouldn't slide off into the creek. It was only about eight feet wide and had a distinct lean to it. I was nervous going over it in a pickup.

Bob-O was up early and gone till late every day. We heard and talked to each other a lot on the radios, but it was all fire business then. So, when the Forest Service sent a fire crew across our bridge and up the mountain behind us, Bob-O was gone. They spent two days digging fire line to protect us from the fire that had started across the river from Matthews Creek Campground. It worked.

On the Road

After the first few weeks, I was able to get out of the radio shack occasionally—mostly to guide equipment here and there. I was returning from one of these forays when, there between the 24 mile marker and the 25 (we lived at the 25), a smoke jumper stopped me to ask where he was. He was supposed to be at "Drop Point 20" at Indian Creek (that was at the 23¹/₂ mile marker). I was glad he was supposed to be farther away.

A weather phenomenon, called an inversion layer, began keeping all the smoke down close to the ground, so we lived in what was tantamount to a pea soup fog.

Because of it, a National Guardsman drove an empty deuce and a half (2¹/₂ ton truck) off a tight curve by Methodist Creek (at about the 22¹/₂ mile marker). He died, but at least there were no passengers. They were using these Army camo dump trucks with benches in them as personnel carriers, with no radios to call mile markers.

Bob-O and I went to a meeting at the Petersburg Fire Station outside of Cecilville one evening and had a fuse blow in my Volvo. We were left with no headlights, just running lights and one brake light. We breezed by the Sheriff's roadblock at the Cecilville intersection, shouting out the windows that we knew the road and could make it home with flashlights.

Bless him, he didn't believe us and sent the next rig through the roadblock to follow us home and light the way. It was a Forest Service guy in an official green pickup. He did it, even though he was supposed to be somewhere else.

We either ate Red Cross food (cold bagged lunches) or went to Cecilville for dinner. Snipes Resort was now a fire camp kitchen and you could eat a fresh hot meal there. Most times, we were too tired to go that far. I just wanted to sleep for a week where there were no radios. I told myself I wouldn't clean the house or wash the dishes till I knew if the cabin was going to burn down. I couldn't stick it through though.

Not Safe Yet

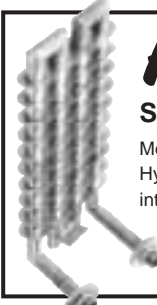
The wind picked up and was blowing steadily. It blew the smoke away, so air support for fighting fires was started. I would go out every half hour or so and scan the ridge tops for smoke or flame. We were just hoping that it would rain and this would all end. That, however, was not to be.

Access

Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze continues to have one adventure after another at her home in Northernmost California. c/o *Home Power* magazine, PO Box 520, Ashland, OR 97520

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