

# **MY SUMMER OF 1960**

and the

## **Donner Ridge Fire Truckee, California**

by

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Well anyway, as I sit here some 56 years later I'm trying to recall my summer of 1960. Don't laugh it isn't funny. The story I am about to tell is all true to the best of my recollection. Misspelled words or sentence structure in the document is strictly for the amusement of the reader.

After my Mother had passed away on February 18, 1959 my dad sold our house in Sacramento and we moved to Portola, California. He worked for the Western Pacific Railroad.

During the summer of 1960, my 16th year, there were forest fires around Plumas County. I actually worked on 3 different fires. The first two I worked in the kitchen as a helper, washing pots and pans, peeling potatoes and onions ect. My only recollection of those first two fires is two guys died in a pick up truck because they were running the motor at night to keep warm, and the second fire a fellow died from a tree limb that fell on him (widow maker) as he was falling a tree. I also recall being stung by a bee. The third fire was the big one.

### **The Donner Ridge Fire**

On August 20, 1960, I was at the Portola City swimming pool. I heard of the fire near Truckee, and was contacted by a friend named Tommy Nelson. Tommy was older than me, 20 something or so. He was a logger working out of Portola.

Anyway, he said they were putting a team of tree fallers together to go to Truckee and work on the fire there. He asked me if I wanted to go as a "Fallers Aid" of course I said "yes".

There were two teams. Tommy Nelson and me, a logger named Pat, and another friend named Randy Welch who made up the remainder of our group. Randy wasn't a logger, his dad owned a lumber yard in Portola. Randy was in his 20s and had done a tour in the Army. He borrowed his dad's 4x4 Ford pick up and contracted with the Forest Service to haul what ever they wanted.

After Tommy told me to get ready I went home. I left my Dad a note advising him I would be gone for a few days. I gathered a jacket, hard hat, gloves and the like and shortly there after I was picked up by Randy and the crew.

We drove about 80 miles to Truckee and went directly to the Forest Service head quarters. After completing some paper work, a Ranger asked me how old I was, I replied with my best deep voice, "19 sir" he said ok!

We waited at the office for a short time and were directed to the fire camp. Randy was driving and by this time the sun had set. Driving on a dirt road in an unfamiliar setting we thought we were getting close to the camp, **wrong!** We drove right down into a recently burned area. The fire had gone thru earlier and trees were still burning. Determining that this is not the fire camp we turned around and made a hasty retreat out of the area.

Eventually we found the camp. We were all hungry. The folks in the kitchen provided us with sack lunches that consisted of two pieces of bread, one piece of bologna with butter spread wrapped in wax paper and an apple.

After eating, we went to the supply area and picked up "paper sleeping bags", one blanket. We found a place under a tree and slept on the ground. It was very cold that night but it didn't matter because I didn't get to sleep that long anyway.

As a "Fallers Aid" I was responsible for carrying all of our equipment that would be needed during the day. This included but was not limited to, Gas for the chainsaw, chain oil, wooden wedges, tools, 4 sack lunches, caned juice, spare chain for the saw, water for both Tommy and I, a double bit ax

and a shovel. To add to that I had a flashlight connected to my helmet which was powered by a 4 D cell battery pack. Tommy carried a Homelight 721 Chainsaw with (I believe) a 48inch bar, and a pack of cigarettes and lighter.

At the time, I was wearing a good pair of Levis. Tommy sat me down and cut the bottom cuff off them. He said it was a safety thing. He indicated this would allow the Levi cuff to tear if I snagged it on something, instead of going "ass over tea-kettle"

On Sunday morning we woke up about 3:00 AM. Still hungry, I went for breakfast, and picked up our sack lunches for the day. The only food the kitchen had was blueberry pie, that's it. The kitchen was not set up yet, but we had to leave. Randy was driving and we had a Ranger guiding us to our jumping off point. It was still dark when got there so we waited for daylight to arrive. After we dismounted the truck we sat down next to the dirt road.

Our job as Fallers was to cut down dead and dying trees known to loggers as "snags" I didn't know at the time but these are the most dangerous trees in the forest. One reason is the limbs are rotted. These limbs are known as "widow makers" because they have a tendency to fall on the Loggers trying to cut the tree down.

I can't recall who Pat's aid was, I just know I was working with Tommy. The Forest Ranger would mark the snags they wanted down with spray paint. After we located the snag, Tommy would cut it and I would assist

While Tommy was cutting the tree, I would place wooded wedges into the cut and slap it with the flat side of my ax. I would start with one wedge and after that was all the way in I would double up two wedges beat them into the tree, and so on.

As we sat on the ridge line, I was folding a handkerchief and tying it around my neck. One of the guys asked if I was going to rob a gas station or something. I indicated that it might help prevent smoke and ash getting into my lungs. "Ha Ha" was their reply. At first light the Ranger told us to follow him. We went down a trail and up another finally he marked a tree and we went to work.

As the day wore on we fell this tree and that tree, stopping only for a drink of water. We had worked our way around a large mountain and we were on a foot/game trail.

We stopped at a location where there were about 4 or 5 teams of Fallers. One team was falling a huge tall tree that had the base burnt out. It stood on three legs. The wind was blowing at a pretty good clip and the tree was swaying back and forth. The wind caused the tree to set back on the saw causing the chain to bind. The Faller would look up, as soon as the tree swayed back off the saw he would again start cutting again. Those guys were real pros.

This went on for some time, when I looked up the trail and saw the Ranger running in our direction. He said "we gotta get outa here, the fire jumped the line" one of the Fallers said "we are not leaving until this tree is down". I was ready to leave right then. We waited for what seemed 2 ½ hours but actually it was about 5 to 7 minutes. The tree fell with a thunderous roar. Not wanting to admire their handy work, about 15 of us left the downed tree at a double time trot. About as close to running as you could get without running.

As we were following the Ranger down the trail to the exit point, a group of Zuni Indian fire fighters came out of no where and fell in in front of us. There were about 30 of them and maybe 15 of us.

As we were running, we came to a fork in the trail. One trail going down the mountain and, the other went back up the mountain through the burn area. One of the older Loggers stopped and said "this trail to the right is going up the mountain that's the way out of here, not the way the Zunis are going". After a very short conversation, we turned right and went up the trail.

The only problem was the fire had "just" passed through and over our trail. The trees and brush were burning. I was running behind Tommy when my tin helmet popped off of my head, foolishly I jumped out of line to recover it and was soon trailing the pack. We ran for what seemed about a mile back up the mountain until we came to the top of the ridge and a dirt road. Everyone was panting and out of breath. I had my handkerchief across my face and looked at Pat pointed two fingers at him and said "hands up cuss word, cuss word".

I am not sure what time it was but we went to another area and continued cutting trees. It was well after dark by the time we got back to camp. I told Tommy "they better have some food or I'm leaving".

As we pulled into camp I noticed a long line of fire fighters and smelled steaks cooking. I dropped my pack at our little camp site and made for the chow line. I got in line behind this giant black gentleman and picked up a paper plate, when he said to me in a deep low voice "you gonna need two plates boy". I complied and picked up another plate. These were huge paper plates and the steak they put on it hung out over the edges. The other plate held mashed taters, gravy corn, salad, bread, peaches, that's all I remember about that.

It was great food; I stuffed myself and went to supply to pick up more equipment. I also grabbed another sleeping bag and blanket. I slept very well for about 3 or 4 hours and was woke up to go to work. Breakfast was great, and after that I prepared for the days work. Refilling our canteen and packing all equipment that I would need in the backpack.

Then the call came to "load up". We got in several trucks and once more headed to another area, on another ridge line in the dark to wait for the sun to come up. At first light our Ranger came up and said "follow me". I had heard that term before and it meant work.

We followed him for some time, finally arriving at our first tree. He stopped and pointed down the side of the mountain saying "See that gray snag it needs to come down". Tommy and I started down the side of the mountain.

We were all by ourselves. It appeared that there had been some spot fires in the area but they were out. Tommy started cutting the tree and I was slapping the wedges when Tommy yelled "This tree is on fire".

Trees can be on fire and you can't tell. The weakest point on the tree is the very top. As a fire crowns out it can skip over the top of trees igniting the tree or cinders can touch the very top and the tree will burn down through the core. Tommy kept cutting, and I noticed little wisp of smoke on the top. Tommy yelled "I'm getting a brand new Oregon Chipper Chain because of this".

Finally the tree started to fall, and as it began its decent there was a loud cracking noise, and then a louder pop. When the falling tree hit approximately 45 degree angle it split completely in half length wise then hit the ground. As it hit the ground large flames burst out the full length of both sides of the tree. I grabbed my shovel and threw about 3 shovels full of dirt on the flames but it did no good. Tommy said "Let s get outa here". As we were hauling butt up the hill a group of State Prison fire fighters came down towards the burning tree. One yelled "we just mopped this area up" We didn't take time to apologize as we were leaving the area, fast!

So everyday was about the same. Up at 3; 00 AM eat, jump in the truck and off we go to another area, another ridge line and more trees to fall. Then back to camp well after dark, eat and sleep.

Well, by now it was Wednesday. We worked all day and arrived in camp, after dark of course. Tommy mentioned we should head to Portola, shower and sleep in a bed for a night. Although it was over 80 miles back to Portola, all of us were ready to go. We had been sleeping in paper sleeping bags covered with Army blankets that smelled of mothballs and no showers.

Randy drove us to town and dropped me off at my house. I stripped off my filthy clothes and ran water for a bath. Of course my dad wasn't home it was only 1230 in the morning, but that's another story, so I won't dwell on it.

My legs were covered with soot and grime. My Levis had rubbed on my legs and all of the pors were packed with soot making little black dots all over my body.

I got in the bathtub (we had no shower) and washed my body watching the water turn gray. I drained the water and took another bath and the water was a lighter shade of gray, so I went to bed. The crew was to pick me up in about 2 hours so I set an alarm clock and got up in time to catch the ride back to Truckee. Catching cat naps on the way back when we arrived at the fire camp we had breakfast and prepared for the days work.

Tommy Nelson and I worked well together, he was a professional logger and I was a city kid with no adult supervision at home. He taught me allot about falling trees and safety in the woods.

Thursday morning it was bright and clear. As we waited for our assignment we were on a ridge line overlooking Donner Lake. When the sun came up we were watching someone being pulled by a speed boat water skiing. I must have thought "I bet that creep got full nights sleep"

Then the call came, "follow me" There is one thing I should mention. That Ranger always wore his baseball style hard hat on backwards, and he ran everywhere he went. Maybe it was because he was afraid of being hit in the head by a quart of chain oil thrown by a 16 year skinny kid from Portola. But, I don't think so. He was a pretty cool dude.

We got to our work area and started falling trees. As the day went on we caught up with a bunch of fire fighters setting back fires up the side of the mountain.

Taking this opportunity to sit and I was hungry, I moved off the trail. I moved up the mountain about 10 feet or so and found a perfect place to rest. It was a large granite boulder. I sat down with my back towards the back fires, and retrieved a sandwich out of the pack and started eating.

As I sat on the rock here comes Mr. Ranger trotting down the trail. Suddenly he stopped and with a frighten look he yelled at me to "get out of there" I didn't take the time to ask why or say something like your not the boss of me. I bailed off the rock and landed on the other side of the trail on the down side. I jumped behind a large cedar tree. A boulder about the size of a basketball, maybe a little bigger, bounced of the rock right where I had been setting. Then it shot past me, clearing the cedar tree by about 2 to 3 feet. I thanked the Ranger (for saving my life) and then looked for my half eaten sandwich.

Later on that day we met up with Randy and were enroute to another area. We were going down a steep hill that had been worked over by a Caterpillar. We could hear the Cat which was up the other side of the mountain. The truck got stuck in the powder and we were stranded. Tommy went to ask the Cat operator if he would come and pull us out, which he complied.

The operator said he had been there for over 24 hours and said he had nothing to eat. I gave him one of our sack lunches (Tommy's I think) and some juice (Tommy's also, I think). He was very thankful and devoured the food. We then left the immediate area and went over a couple of ridgelines

and commenced falling trees. We heard Borate Bombers in the area, but I never saw them. When we completed our work we headed back the same direction we came in. When we arrived at the Caterpillar site we noticed the tractor was all pink. The Caterpillar took a direct hit from a Borate bomber and the operator said it knocked him off the tractor.

The rest of the week was uneventful as far as I can remember. Then on Saturday night, we went back to the fire camp and had dinner. The Ranger told us we could draw our pay as our service was no longer needed. The fire had burned all the way to Nevada and started back paralleling its course when it was stopped.

So in conclusion, we had worked 104 hours in 7 days. My pay was around \$200.00 dollars. We had no clue as to the size of the fire. We were never briefed, and had no radios, cell phone, and news paper. We never saw the fire camp in daylight.

Earlier in the year, my old man had bought me a 1953 Plymouth. He said he paid \$300.00 for it. I paid him back \$150.00 and used the rest of the money for school clothes because September 15th was near. I was getting ready to start my 11th year of school. I bought 2 pair of Levis, socks, underwear, and a blue and gray Pendleton long sleeve shirt.

As a 16 year old kid I gained a total respect for all those guys on the fire and especially Randy, Tommy and Pat during that week. I don't know what happened to Tommy and Pat but I heard the Randy was killed operating a tractor somewhere near Portola. I sometimes wonder if the Forest Ranger is still running around the mountains yelling "follow me". He was a great guy and knew his stuff. I kinda think he is still up there somewhere, at least his spirit is.

My summer of 1960 was a series of life changing events for me. Memories of the Donner Ridge Fire August 20, 1960 will always be with me.