

“We’re All Kinda Crazy”: Smokejumpers and Western Forests¹

Adam M. Sowards, University of Idaho

My last jump I hit a rock the size of that fireplace, hit it with both feet, rolled off and dropped about 6 feet on my head, my knee still hurts. . . . You’re really concentrating to get down there and be safe and not break your leg or back or anything. When you do you just feel this elation, “Wow, I’m alive.” I think we’re all kinda crazy, maybe even neurotic. . . . Then the next thing is, “Okay, I’m okay, my partner’s okay, now let’s get to that fire. They’ve dropped your bags and all. Then you start to work the hard work, sometimes it goes two or three days without much rest.

—Stan Tate²

Introduction

Stan Tate got it right: They were all kind of crazy. They jumped out of airplanes and then fought forest fires. And they loved it. Oral histories with nearly thirty smokejumpers and forest firefighters from Idaho, most who jumped between the 1940s and the 1960s, reveal the centrality of the experience to their lives.³ It was a period of intense work in often fabulous natural settings usually at a time in men’s lives when they were becoming independent adults. No wonder their years jumping became a touchstone in their lives; no wonder regular reunions kept these men in touch as many as six decades after the experience.

But this collection of oral histories illustrates more than the individualized experiences of a few men and their adventurous work. It explains the process of smokejumping, a notable strategy in the U.S. Forest Service’s firefighting arsenal. Moreover and uniquely, the oral histories offer a window into the values these workers had about the work they did, the environments in which they did that

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the gracious and helpful support of Alan MacEachern and Ryan O’Connor. Troy Reeves provided not only the oral histories but several critical readings of the manuscript; without him, this article would never have been written. Steve Pyne and two anonymous readers provided generous and helpful comments.

² All oral histories conducted by Troy Reeves with transcripts available from the Idaho State Historical Society, Boise, Idaho. Citations will identify the name of the interviewee, the date of the interview, and the page of the transcript. Stan Tate (July 19, 2000), 22-23. Emphasis added.

³ The vast majority of these oral histories were conducted with smokejumpers. A few interview subjects, however, did not jump but were backcountry firefighters whose experiences are still germane to this discussion.

work, and the policies underpinning it. Although historians have examined fire history from environmental and policy perspectives, seldom have the experience of wildland firefighters been subject to historical analysis. The distinctiveness of smokejumpers' experiences and voices illuminate the unique life of the fireline, while their perspectives on fire policy demonstrate a range of evolving opinions.

This, too, is partially a history of place. The Northern Rockies in Idaho have been site to iconic forest fires and critical innovations in fighting forest fires. Understanding this place through the historical prism of firefighting grounds the region's history physically and experientially, a central task for environmental history. This article specifically examines smokejumpers who worked primarily out of a U.S. Forest Service (USFS) base in McCall, Idaho. Compared with the base in Missoula, Montana, McCall remains fairly anonymous in the historical record. Accordingly, bringing a larger context to Idaho firefighting shines light on this important and neglected place.

This work places smokejumping within its larger historical perspective. The smokejumping program emerged in 1939 at a time of unusual convergence. Technological innovation and available personnel allowed this pioneering program to become an exemplar of initial attack strategies. Furthermore, it developed during the Forest Service's total suppression management paradigm.⁴ Smokejumping has survived relatively unchanged for more than half a century even while foresters' understanding of forest ecosystems has transformed and fire management strategies have similarly evolved because of changing public values and scientific priorities. Consequently, jumpers looked back through a lens of significant environmental and policy changes that colored their views of their work and the forests. For instance, the greater number of large forest fires in recent decades, often called "project fires" by smokejumpers, made many jumpers glorify their own work in suppressing fires, while the rejection of the total suppression approach to fire management could be a profoundly confusing, even nonsensical, change to some jumpers. Indeed, the new policies and practices of the fire community did much to influence these jumpers' accounts, producing nostalgia about their work and the supposed simpler, easier, and better methods before environmental regulations and policy permutations. And nostalgia was but a short step from resentment or feelings that their work had been devalued.

Besides rooting this account in place and time, this work also implicitly comments on historical methods. While firefighting and the Forest Service have been studied through environmental history methods, existing work has remained focused on institutional practices and environmental consequences. Broad policy

⁴ The most complete analysis of fire history and policy in the United States is Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997 [1982]); for the history of the Northern Rockies and the suppression strategies forged there, see 242-94.

developments, big personalities, and ecological calamities thus dominate fire and USFS historiography.⁵ Mining oral histories reveals a different view of fighting the flames for the Forest Service; it is akin to labor history, an on-the-ground perspective that illuminates practices, experiences, and attitudes of the firefighters themselves. Accordingly, it pays attention to the social context of the smokejumpers, their backgrounds and attitudes toward the forests, and their ideas about the policies they carried out.⁶ A clear meaning that emerges from this collection is the strong sense of camaraderie developed in training and on the fireline. This sense of fellowship deepened smokejumpers' connections to each other and strengthened their sense of their work's value, again contributing to a well-honed wistfulness evident in their recollections.

In addition, this essay contributes to the historical literature through several thematic elements of environmental history and pushes them in new directions. Historians have begun paying attention to the different ways people know nature. More than a decade ago, historian Richard White highlighted the different ways laborers experienced nature compared with those who primarily recreated in nature.⁷ Building on this insight, this essay examines how smokejumpers understood the landscape in which they worked, as well as their understanding of their role in managing the forest's ecological functioning. This approach helps identify whether there may be a disconnection between official policy statements and practices and the workers who carried them out. In this respect, this essay builds on the tradition in environmental history of showing how relationships between elites and non-elites play out on the landscape.⁸

⁵ The best Forest Service histories are, Paul W. Hirt, *A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests since World War Two* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); James G. Lewis, *The Forest Service and the Greatest Good: A Centennial History* (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 2005); Pyne, *Fire in America*; and Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History*, centennial edition (Durham, NC, and Seattle: Forest History Society and University of Washington Press, 2004).

⁶ The late Hal K. Rothman called for this sort of social history of the Forest Service in Rothman, ed., *"I'll Never Fight Fire with My Bare Hands Again": Recollections of the First Forest Rangers of the Inland Northwest* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 1-13, 265-68. Information on the oral history project is found in Idaho State Historical Society, "Smokejumping and Forest Fire Fighting Oral History Project," <http://www.idahohistory.net/smokejumper.html> <accessed 28 October 2009>. Throughout the piece, the question in the background is how can oral history methodologically help environmental historians?

⁷ Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist, or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995): 171-85.

⁸ Example of this are found in Louis Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Benjamin Heber Johnson, "Subsistence, Class, and Conservation at the Birth of Superior National Forest," *Environmental History* 4 (January 1999): 80-99.

Finally, this piece focuses on the reciprocal relationship of people and place—how place affected people, and vice versa—a key theme of environmental history.

Smokejumpers tended to come to their work with experience in the out-of-doors. Being in nature, often in a recreational way (e.g., hunting or camping), generated in these men a deep love for forests.⁹ They shared an attraction to working in the outdoors, the adventure it entailed, and the camaraderie generated in the crucible of dangerous work. The jumpers believed this experience changed their lives, and some continued to work within the Forest Service and moved up into managerial positions. Those with longer experiences in fire tended to transcend the total suppression paradigm and developed a deeper understanding of both ecological principles and the delicate balancing act of policy initiatives. In this respect, the article brings to light an important distinction: those who jumped for a few years were less reflective or questioning about USFS fire policy and were apt to view prescribed burning or any policy that was not total suppression with skepticism, while those with a longer experience with fire developed a greater appreciation for nuance in fire policy and the more select, limited role for suppression and smokejumping. In the end, these oral histories give voice to these woods' workers and give light to the differences between policy and practice.

The Policy Context

Since 1910, much of the history of the Forest Service can be translated into a succession of efforts to get firefighters on fires as soon as possible—the sooner, the smaller the fire.

— Norman Maclean¹⁰

Whether they realized it or not, smokejumpers working out of McCall, Idaho, labored in a storied region. Through the majority of the twentieth century, the fire history in the northern Rockies reflected critical fire problems, and the Forest Service's institutional responses there pioneered strategies to be applied throughout the national forest system. This region, then, was a trailblazer in USFS fire policy, with roots reaching back to 1910.

The forests of mountainous Idaho evolved with a fiery presence; its geography and history required it. Climate means thunderstorms frequently occur in summer and fall as westerly winds smash into the rising mountains. Lightning strikes in Idaho's pine and fir forests kindled fires frequently for centuries, and some species required fire's heat to germinate. As one smokejumper observed,

⁹ More recently, women have become smokejumpers. Among the earliest generations, though, jumpers were all male.

¹⁰ Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 19, 23.

“nature intended everything to burn and regenerate the forest.”¹¹ In the *longue durée* through most of Idaho’s mountain landscapes, anthropogenic fire remained fairly uncommon because of the region’s rugged terrain and small indigenous population. When Euroamericans arrived in the nineteenth century, new sources of ignition remade fire’s geography in the northern Rockies. Railroads pierced the mountain forests and industrial mining operations occasionally spewed sparks and ignited fires.

Nineteen-ten took things to another scale and launched a formidable policy approach.¹² Spring drought turned the forests of northern Idaho and western Montana into ready kindling. Lightning strikes in late August set the region off into a frenzy of fire, burning three million acres, the majority of which were in national forests. On these public lands, the fledgling U.S. Forest Service sought to prove its worth. Although foresters had already been debating whether fire might play a legitimate role in managing certain forests in particular circumstances, the memory of the 1910 Big Blowup’s destruction burned deeply in USFS administrators’ minds. Using fire as part of forest management seemed patently absurd to any forester who had seen the region aflame. Accordingly and quite understandably, in the aftermath they pursued a total suppression policy toward fire, a policy that continued for decades as an unambiguous approach to fires on public lands.¹³

Twenty-five years later, the Forest Service articulated its control policy even more clearly in response to another Idaho fire. Known as the 10 A.M. policy, it became the stated mission to control *every* fire by 10 A.M. the following day. If that was not achieved, firefighters would work to stop it by 10 A.M. the next day. And on and on *ad infinitum*. The 10 A.M. policy was inspired by the 1934 Selway fire in Idaho’s central backcountry, a fire that blazed for six weeks and took 5,000 firefighters to control. But in reality, “control” was elusive. The USFS had spent two and a half decades pursuing suppression and building up a control infrastructure (e.g., lookouts, roads) only to be all but overwhelmed by the Selway blazes. Rather than reconsider the suppression paradigm, Forest Service officials enshrined it further with the 10 A.M., a catch-all national pursuit that remained the overriding policy until the 1970s. There was a political, if not ecological, clarity to such a policy. And when it changed, some saw policies as “a little fuzzy” by comparison.¹⁴

¹¹ Roger (Rod) Davidson (September 20, 2000), 35.

¹² The history and geography of the 1910 fires come from Pyne, *Fire in America*, 242-59; and Pyne, *Year of the Fires: The Story of the Great Fires of 1910* (New York: Viking, 2001).

¹³ *Ibid.*; Maclean describes a USFS ranger associated with the Mann Gulch tragedy as having “1910-on-the-brain”—a useful description for how the USFS generally proceeded following the Big Blowup. See *Young Men and Fire*, 78.

¹⁴ Pyne, *Fire in America*, 275-87. Pyne notes that Elers Koch, a veteran forester in the region, did reconsider total suppression in the Selway aftermath and articulated an alternative wilderness

Into such a place and time came the latest innovation in forest fire control: smokejumpers. The 10 A.M. policy became feasible during the 1930s only because the Great Depression chased unemployed men into the woods to work with conservation programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, so they were on hand to provide labor on the fire lines. New Deal programs also furnished the emergency financial backing to pay for such labor.¹⁵ In 1939, the USFS first used smokejumpers. When World War II drew millions of young men out of the woods and into the armed services, the experiment would have withered except the Forest Service used conscientious objectors to fill in the gap. After the war, surplus technology further allowed backcountry firefighting via parachuting firefighters. Such a tactic provided a glamorous addition to the USFS' firefighting repertoire. Smokejumping worked particularly well for initial attacks in remote backcountry regions, on small fires that could be contained quickly while still small and controllable by small crews typically of two to eight. The program became quite popular and an important public face to the Forest Service's overall firefighting program.¹⁶

Smokejumping came to McCall, Idaho, then, because of the convergence of geographical, historical, and political factors. McCall rested at the edge of a vast, rugged, forested landscape largely protected from agricultural and industrial developments so that when lightning or human ignition touched down there would be fires. As a small Idaho mountain town, McCall also inherited a proximity to historic fires that prompted national policies. Furthermore, the smokejumping program arose at a moment of excess personnel, followed shortly by surplus equipment from the Second World War. Armed with a clear mission, sufficient laborers, and available technology, the Forest Service pursued its total suppression management strategy aggressively, using young men dropped out of planes.

For many smokejumpers, the 10:00 A.M. policy remained the touchstone. Elmer Huston's remark was representative: "That was a good policy, they tried to maintain control of the fire by ten o'clock the following day. And if they went

vision. See 278-81. The "fuzzy" comment comes from Woody Williams (April 5, 2001), 10. Changes in humidity in late morning contributed some ecological reasoning to the 10 A.M. policy, but an institutional sense of control was overriding.

¹⁵ Ibid., 272-87. A similar development occurred in the National Park Service; see Hal K. Rothman, *Blazing Heritage: A History of Wildland Fire in the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53-73. Tellingly, Rothman titles his chapter on the 1930s "A Decade of Transformation."

¹⁶ For conscientious objectors, see Matthews, *Smoke Jumping on the Western Fire Line*. For a general history of the smokejumping program, see Pyne, *Fire in America*, 370-76. An institutional history is found in U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Region, "History of Smokejumping" (Missoula, MT: May 1, 1972). Another useful account is Stan Cohen, *A Pictorial History of Smokejumping* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1983).

through one day, they expected to have it controlled the next day at ten o'clock. . . It gave you something to work for, to get that goal met, you know.” Huston precisely captured not only the policy’s intent but its simple brilliance—there was absolute clarity about the ends. Initial attacks, like those in which smokejumpers specialized, saved money because they minimized fire size and thus cost. Woody Williams, who spent his entire career with the Forest Service in firefighting and fire management, appreciated such benefits of the 10:00 A.M. policy: “But really, the emphasis in my part of the world was cost-effective suppression action where you minimize total costs. And total costs being the sum of suppression costs and resource loss.” Early suppression meant smaller fires and more savings. However, Williams recognized that the 10:00 A.M. policy goal did not—could not—apply everywhere. As Jim Larkin stated, “it wasn’t realistic but it was a policy.”¹⁷ Like so much in resource management, the 10:00 A.M. policy represented an ideal that could not be perfectly implemented on the land. It also represented an ideal conception of nature, a nature that could be controlled by human hands and institutional mandates.

But nature, humans, and institutions change. Though the 10:00 A.M. policy lasted for more than three decades, by the 1960s and 1970s budgets could not keep pace with suppression and firefighting costs, and too many fires still escaped into big burns. Factors external to the Forest Service also urged fire policy into new directions. Many Americans had become passionate defenders of wilderness and wild processes. From this perspective, fires were natural; suppressing them was unnatural and thus wrong. Meanwhile, ecological understanding improved so that foresters recognized that some species and some forest types depended on fires. With public values and scientific knowledge changing, the Forest Service had to adjust its total suppression approach, and the 10:00 A.M. policy was a casualty.¹⁸

A constellation of policies arose to take its places, a suite of ever-shifting and ambiguous approaches that often frustrated or mystified smokejumpers. Prescribed burning became an important tool for the Forest Service. Such burning entailed preemptively firing a landscape, provided that the conditions allowed for a relatively safe fire; “[b]etter fires of choice than fires of chance,” according to fire expert Stephen J. Pyne.¹⁹ Although “there is always some risk in any

¹⁷ Elmer & Wilma Huston (August 14, 2000), 35. For more on the 10:00 A.M. policy, see also Roger (Rod) Davidson (September 20, 2000), 28; Reid Jackson (March 8, 2002), 23-24; Ted Koskella (May 17, 2000), 13; Woody Williams (March 23, 2001), 31; Jim Larkin (April 26, 2000), 21.

¹⁸ See Pyne, *Fire in America*, passim; *Tending Fire*, 57-60. The National Park Service’s fire policy changed before the Forest Service managed to reform its approach. See Pyne, *Tending Fire: Coping with America’s Wildland Fires* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004), 58; Rothman, *Blazing Heritage*; Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 256.

¹⁹ Pyne, *Tending Fire*, 103.

proscribed [sic] fire program,” as Woody Williams pointed out, the approach can reduce fuel build ups and can burn in more predictable conditions. Williams favored prescribed burning as a part of an overall firefighting strategy, but in addition to the inherent risks, he identified the potential problems concerning threats to people and property, as well as air quality. In the end, he and others wondered whether, given the broader constraints, a prescribed burning program could be carried out on the scale necessary for it to be beneficial.²⁰ At an extreme, Bud Filler, a timber businessman, unequivocally proclaimed: “I would say probably as a conclusion, I’ve never seen a good fire. I don’t know why they have controlled fires.”²¹ As such comments demonstrate, prescribed burning occupied an ambiguous place for smokejumpers and the broader fire community; it was no panacea.

More controversial was the let-burn policy, especially as it related to wilderness areas and modern environmentalism. As Pyne has pointed out, throughout most of human history, let burn was the common practice; only recently did governments marshal great resources to snuff out fires. The changing values that accompanied the rise of environmentalism and the ascendance of ecology in forest management often emphasized letting nature run its course. In wildlands, then, agencies let fires burn if administrators determined that conditions would not make the fire endanger life or property. Simpler said than done, of course – and far less straightforward than the 10:00 A.M. policy.²²

Smokejumpers whose careers largely preceded these shifts in fire management culture often disliked the more nuanced policy and bristled at the restrictions required by the 1964 Wilderness Act (such as the ban on motors, including chainsaws, within wilderness boundaries) or the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (such as the requirement for environmental impact statements). Take Elmer Huston as an example. He felt that without chainsaws Forest Service workers were unable to attack or get to fires as aggressively in central Idaho’s wilderness areas. “[T]hey are losing lots of money there,” Huston argued. “Because they are not keeping the trails up—because if they could use them chainsaws back in that wilderness area, and they would not hurt a thing, not a thing. But they say well, people do not want to hear them, or it scares the game. That is a bunch of bologna. I would like to hear a chainsaw out there, if I could

²⁰ Woody Williams (April 5, 2001), 3-4, quotation from 8. Harold Eshelman believed prescribed burning was a useful tool, but worried about escaped fires. See Eshelman (March 8, 2001), 23-24. John Krebs also worried about smoke and expressed a general concern about deliberately introducing fire to the landscape. Krebs (March 14, 2001), 25-26. Ted Koskella liked prescribed burning, but saw foresters as getting carried away with it, and argued for moderation. Koskella (May 17, 2000), 13.

²¹ Bud Filler (February 3, 2000), 24.

²² Pyne, *Tending Fire*, esp. 70-85.

walk up and down a trail, you know.”²³ Huston’s value system clearly held little space for wilderness. He also expressed a longing for a past golden age when firefighting was simpler, less rule-bound, similar to Leo Cromwell. Recalling years past with fondness, Cromwell felt smokejumpers in his day “put a lot of fire out without having a lot of classes on how to do it and just using common sense.” With the new rules instituted as part of the environmental law revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, it became more difficult and less fun to fight fires, Cromwell thought: “It was a lot more fun when you could just get the job done, and that was to put the fire out. Well now you have to be careful how you cut your stumps, or you can not cut certain trees and certain things. And some of it seems a little bit ridiculous to me now. And . . . I know they have the reasons, but I liked it a lot better, I liked it the most in the ‘60s.”²⁴ To be sure, remembering the past with such nostalgia is a common enough human tendency. Managing fire and associated resources obviously became far more complicated since Cromwell’s time. The policy, scientific, and ecological contexts all changed since the 1960s. Some jumpers, such as Harold Eshelman, did not see it simply in those terms, however: “I do not know if they have the dedication, people are as dedicated as they used to” be.²⁵ It was easy to criticize recent efforts at forest fire management, which was—is—a hugely complex situation created by decades of mismanagement. There were—there are—no panaceas.²⁶ To see the problems as a mere lack of dedication is sheer reductionism. Sentiments like those of Eshelman’s and Cromwell’s represent a central theme of these oral histories. They symbolize, on the one hand, a love of their past work and sense of its importance, and, on the other hand, how subsequent changes to the management priorities under which they labored prompted a sense of resentment. Nostalgia and resentment were two sides of the same coin. The smokejumpers interpreted their time through the powerful and influential prism of policy changes.

Changing natural resource laws and policies always reflected new social and political values, as well as new understandings of ecosystem science. Perhaps not surprisingly, most smokejumpers were not interested in analyzing those subtleties. Primary in their minds were the sheer differences between the regime under which they fought fires in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—total suppression—and what they saw around them during the interviews in the 1990s and 2000s—a sometimes-bewildering array of policies and practices, none of

²³ Elmer and Wilma Huston (August 14, 2000), 40. See also 54 for a continuation of Huston’s criticism of current policies.

²⁴ Leo Cromwell (December 12, 2000), 24-25.

²⁵ Harold Eshelman (April 10, 2001), 22. Huston made similar comments; Elmer and Wilma Huston (August 14, 2000), 54.

²⁶ The best example of these issues describes the analogous situation in Oregon’s Blue Mountains. See Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995). Also, Pyne, *Tending Fire*, passim.

which seemed to be working as forests burned spectacularly almost every summer. As the Forest Service began to let some fires burn or even to set fires, some smokejumpers might be forgiven for thinking the agency had lost its way. After all, what had been their *raison d'être*—putting out all fires as soon as possible in the deep Idaho backcountry—no longer held as the prime objective of forest firefighting. It is easy to see why veteran smokejumpers might think their efforts, their hard work, had been devalued. It had taken a lot of work and experience to get into that position.

Jumpers' Background

Smokejumping required special qualities. Not everyone is willing or able to fight backcountry fires, a potentially dangerous occupation to be sure. Personal backgrounds thus are revealing. Many of those jumpers who spent time in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in McCall fighting fires after dropping 1,500 feet from airplanes came from families where fathers or uncles or brothers spent time working outdoors for the Forest Service or some other natural resource agency. Or, the jumpers had themselves worked in other parts of forestry.²⁷ In addition, smokejumpers knew or grew to know the land and appreciate its beauty. Many, like Harold Eshelman, grew up in Idaho and recreated in the outdoors. Eshelman remembered, “We were always an outdoors family. We loved going out camping, fishing, hunting, and all that kind of stuff. We were out there all the time.”²⁸ Such activities familiarized these men, when they were children and youths, with the value of western forests for non-extractive purposes. For several smokejumpers, the landscapes of northern or central Idaho were overwhelming in their beauty. One jumper initially worked on the blister rust eradication campaign in northern Idaho, a particularly boring job in the western woods, but he found it “great country, really beautiful, virgin stands, humongous red Cedar trees, and clear water and air and all of that.” Such a setting compensated for the tedium of his work. Primitive and wild country simply was impressive and a good place to spend time.²⁹

²⁷ For instance, Ken Hessel (March 29, 2001), 1; Elmer and Wilma Huston (August 14, 2000), 2, 6-7; John Krebs (March 14, 2001), 1; Woody Williams (March 23, 2001), 1-2; Tommy “Shep” Johnson (May 1, 2001), 1; Ted Koskella (May 17, 2000), 1, 5; Donald Reed (July 26, 2000), 1.

²⁸ Harold Eshelman (March 8, 2001), 6. For other outdoor experiences, see also Leo Cromwell (December 6, 2000), 2; Woody Williams (March 23, 2001), 8; Reid Jackson (March 8, 2002), 4; Ted Koskella (May 17, 2000), 25; Dale Matlack (June 26, 2000), 1; Larry P. Moore (January 31, 2001), 12.

²⁹ H. Gene Crosby (December 14, 2000), 4; and Crosby (December 20, 2000), 3. Also, Larry P. Moore (January 4, 2001), 4, who came from Oklahoma and found Idaho’s “[b]eautiful mountains and clear creeks” far superior to Oklahoma’s offerings. Similar examples include Jeff Fereday (June 28, 2001), 17; Ken Hessel (May 1, 2001), 30; Woody Williams, (March 23, 2001), 3.

For those who came from other, flatter places, like John Krebs from the Midwest, Idaho's mountains had particular allure: "I fell in love with the country immediately[. F]rom the plains at Kansas to the mountains of Idaho is quite an experience." Indeed, Krebs who had planned to join the seminary figured, "the Lord did not want me there, especially after showing me these mountains."³⁰ H. Gene Crosby concurred: "I think you are surrounded by God [in the forest], you cannot get away from his creation. . . . If you spent enough time out in the woods and out in nature, the mountains, you just have to realize that there are certain truths that kind of fit when you put them all together."³¹ These types of spiritual reflections, of course, represent a long line of cultural responses to American nature and also suggested that enjoying remote, beautiful places was nearly a prerequisite for the job.³² Although being strong, physically fit, and somewhat crazy certainly helped. A Forest Service official history of smokejumping even explained that early on parachutists were "regarded (and with some justification) as crackpots, publicity-loving daredevils, or just plain crazy."³³

Collectively, smokejumpers had similar backgrounds and landscape or recreational preferences. They also necessarily were willing to take risks in their work. Together, these commonalities and more made the camaraderie they developed occur more naturally and quickly during training and subsequent work. The social environment of smokejumpers contributed significantly to the routine and experience of the work.

Smokejumping Training

We would get a fire, get it out, pretty much get back in, and go out again.

- Elmer Huston³⁴

³⁰ John Krebs (March 14, 2001), 1, 7.

³¹ H. Gene Crosby (December 20, 2000), 29. No one offered a better discussion of God in the forests than Stan Tate, an ordained minister. See all of his interviews: (July 19, 2000), (September 22, 2000), (October 27, 2000), (March 13, 2001), (June 29, 2001), (September 27, 2001), (February 28, 2002); also Stan Tate, *Jumping Skyward* (Heron, MT: Cabinet Crest Books, 1995), his thinly fictionalized memoir.

³² Cultural responses to nature like these have been examined in numerous books. Two relevant introductions are Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, fourth ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

³³ Roger (Rod) Davidson (June 27, 2000), 3; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Region, *History of Smokejumping* (Missoula: May 1, 1972), 2; this history includes a year-by-year summary of highlights for the region. Norman Maclean made similar points about smokejumpers' backgrounds: "So basically they had to be young, tough, and in one way or another from the back country." See Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 26.

³⁴ Elmer and Wilma Huston (August 14, 2000), 47.

The smokejumping routine was simple, as Elmer Huston's succinct description suggests. And although there have been many technological evolutions and policy changes since smokejumping began, as Woody Williams remarked, "the basic job [of firefighting] has not changed any over the last 50 years."³⁵ However, there were several stages to backcountry firefighting generally and even more for smokejumping in particular. These smokejumpers' comments, then, are deceptively simple.³⁶

Smokejumper training was rigorous, mentally and physically. As much as half the training occurred in the classroom. Jumpers learned about the fire triangle—heat, oxygen, and fuel—and how eliminating any one of those three would subdue a fire. Staff taught about weather patterns and fire behavior to assist jumpers when out on the fire line.³⁷ Most jumpers remembered the physical training far more than the book learning, though. Robert Montoya claimed the "physical training was so bad that I wanted to go home." Jumpers ran everywhere, he remembered, and they were punished for mistakes by being made to do fifty push-ups. Calisthenics and other physical activities hardened jumpers' bodies. One piece of equipment stood out to most jumpers who described it as the torture rack. This simple device stabilized jumpers' legs while individuals leaned backward, upside down until their heads touched the ground. It strengthened several muscles, increased flexibility, and proved very hard on knees (and was eventually discontinued). Especially in the earlier years, jumpers were broken in by working in the woods, sawing and chopping logs, "the best conditioning that we could have got," according to A. Glen "Ace" Nielsen. Even though Montoya, like many others, arrived at training in McCall believing he was fit, he soon discovered how much better his physical conditioning could be. By his first fire jump, Montoya recalled, "I was in excellent physical condition," and Bernie Nielsen noted "physically, we were really in our prime." This initial training transformed young men into both knowledgeable and physically-hardened firefighters.³⁸

³⁵ Woody Williams (March 23, 2001), 18. Williams was not a smokejumper but an experienced forest firefighter.

³⁶ Virtually all the oral histories describe the training and routine of smokejumping in similar ways across time. The following section is based broadly on those accounts. Citations are limited to particular passages only.

³⁷ Bud Filler (February 3, 2000), 20; H. Gene Crosby (December 14, 2000), 13.

³⁸ Robert Montoya (December 6, 2000), 5-6; A. Glen "Ace" Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 6; Bernie Nielsen (October 19, 1999), 20. Photos of the "torture rack" are found in Cohen, *A Pictorial History of Smokejumping*, 123; other training photographs from 117-30. The physical transformation of young men as part of an environmental transformation on the land is treated well in Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 77-113; Bryant Simon, "'New Men in Body and Soul': The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Transformation

After classroom education and physical conditioning, it was time to jump. New recruits initially practiced jumping from towers thirty feet high. They also practiced landing by rolling off the back of pickup trucks driving slowly around the airfield to simulate hitting the ground from the air. Eventually, they took to the air. Roger (Rod) Davidson remembered that by the time of jumpers' first training jumps, they were well prepared. "I am not sure I paid much attention to my first training jump," Davidson said, "because it was sort of go up and fall out, and you were all trained."³⁹ Davidson's casual recollection implicitly praises the high-quality training he received and made jumping seem easy. Similarly, in his classic book on smokejumping, *Young Men and Fire*, Norman Maclean captured the beauty and coordination of parachuting to a fire:

Jumping is one of the few jobs in the world that leads to just one moment when you must be just highly selected pieces of yourself that fit exactly the pieces of your training, your pieces of equipment having been made with those pieces of yourself and your training in mind. Each of the crew is sitting between the other's legs, and all this is leading to a single act performed between heaven and earth by you alone, all your pieces having to be for this one moment just one piece. If you are alive at the end of the act, it has taken about a minute—less, if you are not alive. The jump is that kind of beauty when everything has to be in perfect unison in order for men to commit themselves to what once done cannot be recalled and at best can be only slightly modified. It becomes the perfectly coordinated effort when a *woof* is heard on earth as the parachute explodes open within five seconds after the jumper steps into the sky.⁴⁰

In Maclean's telling, the jump is intricately orchestrated, a thing of beauty where training, equipment, and individual ability coincide to produce the perfect act.

Despite Davidson's nonchalance and Maclean's poetic musing, others seemed to pay far greater attention to their initial jumps, and the memories seared into their minds in not altogether fond ways. Most of McCall's smokejumpers faced their first jumps with some trepidation. Several jumpers specifically mentioned the intermingling of fear and excitement, apprehension and

of Male Bodies and the Body Politic," in *Seeing Nature through Gender*, ed. Virginia J. Scharff (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003): 80-102.

³⁹ Roger (Rod) Davidson (June 27, 2000), 15.

⁴⁰ Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 47.

eagerness.⁴¹ The fear could get the better part of even trained smokejumpers. Ken Hessel recalled one experienced parachutist who “got in the door to jump, ex-[A]irborne, had done it before. And he looked down there at those trees and said, ‘I’m not going.’” This particular veteran stopped his smokejumping career before it got started, afraid of jumping into a forest. Another smokejumper, Tommy “Shep” Johnson, faced initial reticence. A friend suggested to him, “I can get you on with the [F]orest [S]ervice with the smokejumpers.” But Johnson declined: “[Y]ou’re crazy! There’s no way that I’d jump out of an airplane.” Johnson conquered that fear and between 1956 and 1962 made more than 100 jumps for the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.⁴²

Despite the training, which calmed most jumpers, others still struggled. Reid Jackson remembered that some “fellows get a nervous stomach and they cannot hold their meal down. There was a Dramamine and that type of stuff, Tums for the tummy. We had one fellow that all you had to do was say, ‘Suit up,’ and [h]e would start to throw up. A fellow that is affected that way really should not be jumping.” Describing a similar situation, Bernie Nielsen recollected “one guy that always got sick in the airplane. I can particularly remember this one jump we made where he was in the door with his foot on the step getting ready to jump when the spotter said ‘go’ and he got sick right there. He barfed all over the step and we had to all go through it as we got out [chuckles]. He said later that the nice thing about those mesh masks on your helmets—they save the big pieces [laughter]. That smell is really tough up there in an airplane when you have to sit there awhile.” Fortunately, such extreme physical reactions were rare, but made for great, long-lasting stories.⁴³

Nevertheless, smokejumpers who kept their meals down still faced challenges. Larry P. Moore sat at a McCall bar one evening after his first two training jumps talking with other rookies – or “Ned Newmans,” as they were called. Moore marveled aloud at how “once you take a step out of that door, everything is dark until the chute opens and then everything, you can see again.” An old-timer sitting in the tavern overheard the discussion and set them straight: “Well, you cowards, you are closing your eyes.” The next time out, Moore concentrated on keeping his eyes open, and, sure enough, he could see. To shore up his courage, “Shep” Johnson described what surely was a common coping mechanism: drinking beer. As his first jump got closer and closer, “the more beer you drank at night.” Johnson also would drive out of town to contemplate his

⁴¹ H. Gene Crosby (December 14, 2000), 20; Jeff Fereday (September 12, 2001), 23; A. Glen “Ace” Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 8; Bernie Nielsen (October 19, 1999), 5; Reid Jackson (March 8, 2002), 9.

⁴² Ken Hessel (May 1, 2001), 3; Tommy “Shep” Johnson (May 1, 2001), 3, service history on 4.

⁴³ Reid Jackson (March 8, 2002), 8-9; Bernie Nielsen (January 19, 1999), 4, editorial notations in transcript.

upcoming jump: “But until after the first jump, I was scared to death. Then things after the first one kind of got easier, easier, and easier.” While Johnson steeled himself with liquid courage and solitary contemplation, Bernie Nielsen may have made his first jump only out of fear of what others would say. “I guess the reason I made that first jump was I didn’t want anybody to think I was scared,” Nielsen remembered. It was no easy task: “[F]or me I totally blacked-out from the time I left the plane until my parachute opened.” In time, however, Nielsen became accustomed to the jump sensations, and “after a few more jumps then you start to become aware you are falling through the air until your parachute opens. Then it’s a nice ride to the ground from there.” Nielsen’s experience was instructive. From blacking out to enjoying the ride, smokejumpers grew into their jumping experience.⁴⁴

These stories show just how difficult it was to prepare for this job, before smokejumpers even got to the fire. Training taxed their physical and mental capacities, while preparing their minds and transforming their bodies. As jump time neared, smokejumpers geared themselves up for the inevitable challenge of leaping from a plane. Those first jumps produced increasingly strong physical responses: closing eyes, vomiting, blacking out. But successful jumpers learned to quiet, if not fully vanquish, their fears. The jump itself was typically the most dramatic part of smokejumpers’ routine. It certainly is the part that captured the imagination of the public.⁴⁵ However, after clearing the plane’s door and floating down through the air supported by thin parachutes, smokejumpers still faced hazardous tasks. Jumpers were, after all, primarily firefighters.

Firefighting Itself

The smokejumping program was designed for initial attack in backcountry areas to stop fires from spreading. In the absence of roads, airplanes offered the quickest and sometimes only practicable way of getting firefighters to fires quickly enough to stamp out small burns before they blew up into big, less controllable ones, sometimes called project fires. As Bernie Nielsen stated, “We were the first people to get to a fire. That was really the purpose of smokejumpers because they could get us there quickly and usually stop the fire before it got big.” Jim Larkin also recognized this purpose: “The only way that you can keep fires

⁴⁴ Larry P. Moore (January 4, 2001), 9; Tommy “Shep” Johnson (May 30, 2001), 16; Bernie Nielsen (October 19, 1999), 3.

⁴⁵ Pyne notes the popularity of smokejumpers in *Fire in America*, 371. Hal K. Rothman concurs in *Blazing Heritage*, 78-80. Robert Montoya was fighting fire on the ground when he saw smokejumpers circling above and then jumping. He reported, “I was in awe.” Montoya (December 6, 2000), 4.

small, the only way that you can control them literally is hard, fast, rapid initial attack.”⁴⁶

Before battling the blazes, jumpers had to land. If the ground was especially rocky or there were few openings, jumpers aimed for the trees. As Bud Filler reported, “tree landings, if you hit the trees right, are pretty soft. It’s a soft landing and you don’t hit the ground.” Some smokejumpers developed a reputation for preferring tree landings. “Ace” Nielsen enjoyed such a name, especially when he managed to hit the single tree, a dead snag, in the middle of an open meadow. Such renown was long-lasting and spread throughout the region, because jumpers were a tight-knit group. Soft landings were important, because a wrong landing could easily break an ankle as Leo Cromwell experienced when he “went into the side of the cliff and just snapped my leg off my ankle right above my ankle[.] I broke both bones to the fibula, just snapped them off.” Although Cromwell’s injury sounds quite traumatic, ankle and back injuries were fairly common to jumpers, demonstrating again that smokejumpers faced threatening work environments.⁴⁷

Once on the fire, jumpers’ jobs were straightforward, as some jumpers remembered. Firefighting was “not a terribly sophisticated activity,” Jeff Fereday maintained. “[I]t’s physical, it’s mental, it’s reaction time, it’s somewhat athletic I guess you’d say.” Throughout their work, they kept, in J. Charles “Hawk” Blanton’s words, a “pretty substantial appreciation for what a fire could do.” That respect was warranted, as H. Gene Crosby recollected: “[W]e had some really adventurous times. . . . Mostly scary, it was scary. In fact, it was all scary [chuckles].” Dale Matlack remembered flames two to three times as high as the trees that were burning and, in an understated remark, called fires “pretty unpredictable.”⁴⁸ Fighting forest fires clearly had inherent risks, yet the oral histories focus consistently—perhaps surprisingly—on the more routine work itself.

Firefighting in the woods might not have seemed “terribly sophisticated,” but smokejumpers did rely on more than brute force. They understood and applied their knowledge of fire dynamics. “Oxygen, fuel, and heat. All it takes is three things to have a fire,” said Harold Eshelman. “You have got to have fuel, you got to have heat, and you have got to have oxygen for the fire to burn. You take away any one of them, and your fire is a lot more vulnerable for you to control it. And it is going to be out.” Recognizing these elemental relationships, jumpers set out to

⁴⁶ Bernie Nielsen (October 19, 1999), 16; Jim Larkin (August 24, 2000), 3. Larkin made similar comments in Jim Larkin (April 26, 2000), 24.

⁴⁷ Bud Filler (February 3, 2000), 7; A. Glen “Ace” Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 10-12; Leo Cromwell (December 6, 2000), 13.

⁴⁸ Jeff Fereday (November 7, 2001), 19; J. Charles “Hawk” Blanton (October 21, 1999), 38; H. Gene Crosby (December 14, 2000), 19-20; Dale Matlack (June 26, 2000), 9, quotation from 10.

rearrange them. “Fires . . . are all predicated on how much fuels are feeding it,” Rod Davidson explained further. “So you want to divorce the fire from the primary source of fuel, get away from the fuel.” To do so, jumpers most commonly dug a fire line using a shovel or a pulaski, a practical tool designed by an Idaho hero from the 1910 fires that combined into one tool an axe and a hoe. Jeff Fereday described fire lines as “building essentially what amounts to a trail down to mineral soil of anywhere from a foot to maybe five or even more feet wide.” And Davidson continued, “You make sure that everything in the fire that is burning [is out] through the use of dirt, shovel scraping, or anything, to make sure the fire is out.” Jumpers reconfigured fuel loads on these small fires by throwing dirt on the fire and scraping the ground down to unburnable bedrock around a perimeter to prevent flames from spreading.⁴⁹

Smokejumpers deployed other practices to fight fire. A common strategy was to set a controlled burn in advance of the fire so that the main fire when it arrived would not have sufficient fuel to burn. Depending on size and location, such a controlled burn was called a burnout (typically small and close to the fire line) or a backfire (normally a larger preemptive strike on a broad scale).⁵⁰ However, using fire to fight fire was not without critics. Ken Hessel claimed that agencies “burn up more resources with backfires than the fire would naturally take itself if they left it alone, and that’s a fact.”⁵¹ Bud Filler was even more emphatic: “We never lit a backfire. We were instructed not to light a backfire. . . . I don’t think a backfire is good. I think there’s [sic] places for it maybe in California in grassy brush, but I don’t think a backfire is good in Idaho. I’ve never been on a fire where I think a backfire is good. . . . That was our theory about backfires because you build a backfire and now you have two fires instead of one fire. . . . As a general thing I don’t think backfires work very well.”⁵² These comments demonstrate a dogmatic approach to firefighting that was not necessarily shared by Forest Service administrators or even all smokejumpers. Others simply worried about the inherent danger that a backfire could get away

⁴⁹ Harold Eshelman (March 8, 2001), 22-23; Roger (Rod) Davidson (June 27, 2000), 37; Jeff Fereday (July 6, 2001), 13. Virtually all jumpers were asked about equipment, and virtually all sang the praises of the pulaski as the premier firefighting tool. For its history, see Pyne, *Year of the Fires*, 275-79. Many of the oral histories also explained making a fire line. Rod Davidson’s description is one of the best; Davidson, (June 27, 2000), 37. Jeff Fereday also included effective descriptions of various methods of firefighting; see Fereday (July 6, 2001), 13-18. See also, A. Glen “Ace” Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 19.

⁵⁰ Jeff Fereday (July 6, 2001), 13-14. John Krebs describes this approach in Krebs (September 26, 2001), 9. Prescribed fires were another, indirect tool. Managers would purposefully set fires to reduce fuel loads and hopefully prevent larger fires later. John Krebs describes this approach well; see Krebs, (March 14, 2001), 11-13. Also, see Pyne, *Fire in America*, passim; and Pyne, *Tending Fire*, passim.

⁵¹ Ken Hessel (May 1, 2001), 14-15.

⁵² Bud Filler (February 3, 2000), 28-29.

from the firefighters, an obvious drawback and risk.⁵³ Despite these criticisms, burning fuel away to assist in firefighting remains an important tool in fire management.

At the foundation, fighting forest fires required subtle knowledge and adaptable application. Although smokejumpers trained hard early in the season and knew basically what to do, learning the “art to fighting fire” came from experience, as Robert Montoya recalled. The USFS “usually try to jump an old guy and a new one.” While in the airplane before the jump and on the line working, there was “constant training, constant,” with an ongoing mentorship between experienced and inexperienced jumpers. “[Y]ou just relied on the experience and expertise of the older jumpers until you obtained some expertise yourself,” reiterated Larry P. Moore. No training at USFS centers in McCall or Missoula could replace on-the-ground work, a truth articulated by Harold Eshelman: “[T]here is a certain amount of book [learning], but most of it is practical experience.”⁵⁴

After jumping, confronting the fire, learning the ropes, and putting the fire out or yielding to larger ground crews, smokejumpers left the fire. Firefighters were not supposed to leave the fire until there were no hotspots for 24 hours.⁵⁵ Cleaning up, or mopping up to use the firefighters’ vernacular, was particularly boring and “really tedious work,” according to Gene McVey.⁵⁶ After the last smoke and mopping up, jumpers began the packout.

Packouts took several forms, depending on the location of the fire. Often a packer with a muletrain would meet the jumpers in the backcountry, although some recalled that such assistance came less than half the time. The mules would lug the gear and then it was, Bernie Nielsen recalled, “just a walk in the park.” This “walk in the park” did not always materialize, though. Larry P. Moore recalled one fire where the “packer could not find us,” and so they walked until midnight, made camp, and hitched a ride with a logging truck the next day. Reid Jackson once took two days on a saddle horse to get off a fire, demonstrating the real distance smokejumpers traveled by air to get to the smokes. Meanwhile, on a fire northeast of McCall, Bud Filler could not hitch a ride or use pack animals. Instead, he faced “about a 14 mile pack with the full packs and there was no trail. We were going through timber just about all the way. . . . That was a memorable pack because it was through timber and a lot of dead fall so you had to be very

⁵³ Harold Eshelman (March 8, 2001), 23.

⁵⁴ Robert Montoya (December 6, 2000); Larry P. Moore (January 4, 2001), 10; Harold Eshelman (March 8, 2001), 12. For more on training, see also, H. Gene Crosby (December 14, 2000), 14.

⁵⁵ A. Glen “Ace” Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 21; Harold Eshelman (March 8, 2001), 7; Ted Koskell (May 17, 2000), 2.

⁵⁶ Gene McVey (July 5 and 12, 2000), 22. McVey worked on a Hot Shot crew, not as a smokejumper.

careful of walking around the dead fall because the packs are so heavy they can flip you really easy.” Similarly, Gene Crosby remembered one packout that was through “very steep, dense timber and almost solid Alder and vine type Maples that, [they] were not rigid, you could not step on one without it whipping up and swatting you, it was difficult to make our way through.”⁵⁷

Consequently, even after jumping from an airplane and battling a forest fire, jumpers still faced hardship and possible injury. After one fire in Hells Canyon, on the Idaho-Oregon border, Ken Hessel climbed cliffs, forded the Snake River, stayed out with no food for more than thirty hours, and only covered nine miles before finally getting out with help from some old miners.⁵⁸ Less dramatically, smokejumpers might follow a trail to a road to be picked up by a truck or go to a nearby landing strip and await a plane.⁵⁹ After catching their ride, in whatever form, smokejumpers headed back to McCall and began the process again.

The Meaning of Smokejumping

For the jumpers, the work was rewarding and the experience connected to larger life lessons. Perhaps Woody Williams expressed it best: “First, it is a challenge, there is a lot of knowledge and understanding required to do the job, to do it properly. There is a challenge unknown that you are going to be working in the outdoor environment, you are going to see a lot of beautiful country and scenery during the course of a fire suppression, you are going to develop a lot of camaraderie with people you are working with, and it is a very enjoyable experience for just a lot of the people that are involved in it.”⁶⁰ Williams’ remark encapsulates a common attitude among forest firefighters; there was an excitement about the challenge, a love of the backcountry, and a deep social connection with other jumpers.

Smokejumpers fondly recollected their time in the forest. Smokejumping was far more than a summer job: years as jumpers marked a passage into manhood. To Stan Tate, smokejumping was “kind of a manly thing to do,” and Robert Montoya felt the experience turned “him into a man.” This emerging masculinity melded into camaraderie suggestive of the way soldiers bonded in the crucible of battle. Bernie Nielsen, a veteran and a jumper, found the experiences

⁵⁷ For muletrains, see Donald R. Reed (July 26, 2000), 9. A. Glen “Ace” Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 9, claimed packstrings came less than half the time. Bernie Nielsen (October 19, 1999), 7; Larry P. Moore (January 4, 2001), 17-18, quotation from 17; Reid Jackson (March 8, 2002), 13; Bud Filler (February 3, 2000), 16; H. Gene Crosby (December 20, 2000), 14.

⁵⁸ Ken Hessel (March 29, 2001), 28-32.

⁵⁹ For instance, see H. Gene Crosby (December 20, 2000), 13-14.

⁶⁰ Woody Williams (March 23, 2001), 3-4.

similar, because “being a little hazardous gives you a real good feeling to be around these people.” His brother, “Ace” Nielsen, observed a similar dynamic: “I think there was a bonding that probably came about because it’s a rather unique way of making a living that’s different. There’s a bonding like there would be in the military, if you were in combat in the military with a bunch a guys.” Dozens of other jumpers also discussed this camaraderie and sense of brotherhood. Bud Filler claimed that smokejumpers “stick together forever.”⁶¹

Smokejumping prompted other life lessons, too. Closely related to the sense of brotherhood the smokejumpers above noted was developing trust and teamwork, qualities necessary for success in many aspects of life. “It is important to trust people,” said Rod Davidson, “and certainly I think the smokejumpers were a great avenue for building mutual respect and mutual trust.” That trust became all the more important because lives were often at stake.⁶²

In such a heated environment, backcountry firefighters were forced to face fear, be brave, and act decisively—sometimes beyond what they had believed they could do. Gene McVey “learned a lot about bravery and what is really important in life” while firefighting, a common perspective. When Jeff Fereday reflected on what he learned as a smokejumper, he highlighted an additional set of life lessons: “decision-making, leadership, and collaboration I think were probably the three things that come back to me. I guess also just reinforcement with regard to your physical place in the world, your ability to actually do things with your body that you might not think you could have done—it was very much a confidence builder as to what a human being can do if he really has to and if he’s disciplined enough to be in shape to rise to that occasion when the occasion presents itself.”⁶³ Fereday’s sense of accomplishment, of ability in tough situations, could certainly have been reproduced in some other jobs, but not many.

For smokejumpers like Fereday, the time spent firefighting represented a critical moment in their lives. The friendships made and the lessons learned gave smokejumpers a sense of belonging and meaning to their work and their lives. It

⁶¹ Stan Tate (June 29, 2001), 8; Robert Montoya (December 6, 2000), 18. Bernie Nielsen (October 19, 1999), 21; A. Glen “Ace” Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 15. A comprehensive citation for the point about camaraderie in the oral history collection would be daunting; however, some examples include: Jeff Fereday (November 20, 2001), 18-19; Tommy “Shep” Johnson (May 30, 2001), 16; Bud Filler (February 3, 2000), 10; Leo Cromwell (December 6, 2000), 35; Woody Williams (March 23, 2001), 19; Reid Jackson (March 8, 2002), 9, 27; Tommy “Shep” Johnson (May 30, 2001), 31, 33. The idea of brotherhood in combat is, of course, ubiquitous in military history literature. For a popular example, see Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). Maclean compared smokejumpers to both the Marines and fraternal organizations. See *Young Men and Fire*, 27.

⁶² Roger (Rod) Davidson (June 27, 2000), 46. For the importance of trust, see also Ken Hessel (May 1, 2001), 16.

⁶³ Gene McVey (July 5 and 12, 2000), 15; Jeff Fereday (November 20, 2001), 23.

is clear that smokejumping was more than a job; it was a powerful rite of passage and set men's lives onto new paths.

Conclusion

I wish I could do it all over again. It's been a great life.

- Jim Larkin⁶⁴

In his 2001 oral history, "Ace" Nielsen, a veteran Navy pilot and Idaho smokejumper, reflected on his experiences: "I had the privilege of getting to know the backcountry, seeing some places that otherwise you just read about, even today. . . . I look back and think what a privilege it was to get that experience."⁶⁵ Gene McVey also remembered his firefighting days fondly:

I learned that physical ability is not always very important. The emotions and adrenalin and luck can have an awful lot to do with life. I learned that I am as good as anybody else, or just about anybody. I learned that the beauty of nature in every aspect of life is really enhanced by that experience. I have a very strong connection with the land when I was little and after my dad died that connection was broken to some extent. The intense interaction with nature and observation of all the fire which a large fire entails really brought down my focus more. That is something I still go back to in my mind at times. Even though it can be frightening, it is very beautiful. I feel a connection with that aspect of nature as much as the much more gentler one.⁶⁶

Nielsen spoke for virtually all the jumpers: they loved the environments in which they lived and worked and counted this experience as a true privilege. And McVey spoke for many who found something profound and life-changing in that time in the forest. These feelings and others like them represent critical insight into smokejumping, perspectives that have heretofore been hidden from the historical record.

Smokejumpers came to their work with experience in the outdoors. They bonded closely, as men, through intensive training and the often dangerous work of fighting forest fires in Idaho's backcountry. That crucible seared the experiences—and the stories—into their minds in particular ways. Their smokejumping years were remembered as some of the best of their lives. But

⁶⁴ Jim Larkin (August 24, 2000), 26.

⁶⁵ A. Glen "Ace" Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 4.

⁶⁶ Gene McVey (July 5 and 12, 2000), 23.

gazing backward also made them see forest firefighting today in a new light. Since environmental and policy circumstances have transformed firefighting procedures, many saw their work as somehow devalued. Consequently, they asserted the superiority of their work and approach to smokejumping and firefighting, a nostalgic praise of their own efforts and a resentful criticism of the changes since their days in the woods.

So powerful were the memories of smokejumping and of particular fires, Glen “Ace” Nielsen claimed, “It’s easy to remember everything.”⁶⁷ Of course, historians recognize that oral histories—like all histories—do not reveal an unvarnished, objective, faithful rendering of the past as it occurred. Nevertheless, these oral histories reveal a unique aspect to smokejumping history. They show the feelings and unique experiences of a set of natural resource workers in their own inimitable voices.

⁶⁷ A. Glen “Ace” Nielsen (April 12, 2001), 10.