

THE OUACHITA PINNACLE FIRE

The Ouachita Pinnacle fire started on April 9, 1970. This was the biggest fire that I had been on up until this time. I was the new District Ranger on the Jessieville District of the Ouachita National Forest. I was trying to get my feet on the ground after moving the family to Arkansas from Virginia. I barely knew the people on the district. Alvis Owen was the Forest Supervisor and Jim Brewer was the Deputy Forest Supervisor. We had a few fires so far that spring, but nothing of any size. Deputy Forest Supervisor Brewer came to the District to get acquainted. We were out driving around in Jim's car. We stopped by a small fire that had happened the previous day and looked at some timber work and the kind of things you do on that kind of trip.

We were driving east on State Highway 298 (the Possum Kingdom Road) when Claud Clare, the aerial observer for the east side of the Forest reported a fire south of Ouachita Pinnacle. It was a pretty good fire day. The wind was blowing and you could feel that the humidity was low. The fire was nearby so Jim and I headed that way. We took a left on a well used log road and finally drove out into an opening at the base of the mountain where we could see what was going on. The fire was burning in an area where timber was recently cut. The saw timber had been cut and only the pulpwood was left to be cut. There was a lot of logging slash where the fire was burning. It was really cooking.

Soon Dan Cates, our TMA, along with and Don Swigger our Lead Timber Technician arrived at our location. Ab Newkirk arrived with the fire plow. Claud Claire, the aerial observer, reported that the fire was spotting. Spotting is a situation where little fires are starting in front of the main fire. This makes control extremely difficult. Dan and I got our heads together and decided that we had better try to cut the fire off from the mountain. We thought it would be worth a try and would stop the second-guessing at a fire review, if it came to that. Dan put the plan into operation. It didn't take long before he called me on the radio and said that the fire was way beyond them and approaching the base of the mountain. We decided to regroup and come up with another plan.

About that time the fire made a run up one of the spur ridges on the mountain. It was something to see. Flames were over 100 ft. long and it was moving fast. Jim said, "Do you think we have a project fire here". A project fire is a fire that has lots of fire fighters where a formal organization is needed or risk total chaos. I agreed that this was a project fire. Dan and

I figured that the first place we could attack it would be Rd 107, a mile and a half away at the top of the mountain. We had an old plane-a-metric map on which we plotted our strategy. Topo maps were not available for that part of the District in 1970. We decided that we would set up our fire headquarters on Rd 107 near State Highway 7 as that would be the place all fire fighters would have to pass going to the fire. I had our timber marking crew wait at the road intersection with Hwy 7 and 107 to direct people in to the fire headquarters. Dan would take our present resources to the top of the mountain on an old woods road. He would prepare to burn out Road 107 and start locating the ridges that we would bring the bulldozer fire lines down to surround the fire. I would go to our fire HQ at the beginning of Road 107 and get things organized.

Jim drove the car and I got my fire line handbook out and ordered resources for a 3-sector fire over Jim's mobile radio. There were no prepackaged resources like overhead teams, crews etc. in those days so I had to order them position by position. We arrived at the HQ. Fire Fighters were arriving at the headquarters. Don Swigger suggested we send Bill Johnson and Bunt McEarl to the top of the mountain to be with Dan as they had lots of fire experience and knew the country. They had been at the road intersection directing people in to the fire. Alvis Owen, the Forest Supervisor, arrived at the HQ on his way to the fire. We had four big dozers coming. Sam LaFever was the Service Chief and was signing up the dozers as they arrived. Jim was advising me on who could do what in the fire organization. The Forest had gone through a simulator exercise back in the fall and most of Jim's knowledge was coming from that.

Meanwhile, at the top of the mountain, Dan was getting things sorted out; Bill and Bunt were scouting to find the right ridges to take the lines down. Alvis had arrived at the location where we planned to hold the fire. Had been driving at top speed back and forth on Rd 107 where we planned to stop the fire, checking things out. Alvis drove at top speed in those days wherever he went. A few air tankers had arrived and were dropping on different parts of the fire to slow the spread. Dan was having the road fired as the fire approached.

We got a couple of big dozers to the top of the mountain and ready to go. Dan was ready to send dozers off on the East Side. Bunt had found the right ridge and said to send the dozers on down. Alvis called me on the radio and said, "They are on the wrong ridge". Lots of things were going through my head about that time. Was I about to mess up? Was the Supervisor right? Was I going to remain the Fire Boss on this fire? Was I going to remain the

District Ranger on the Jessieville District? Bunt had sounded pretty confident on his last radio message that he was on the right ridge. I said, "Send them off".

About 1800 you could feel the humidity rise. Dan had most of the road fired out by then and it was holding. There was still lots of fire out there and a lot of line to build. Overhead that was to spend the night had arrived. Some people had been at the headquarters for a while and weren't doing much. The problem was that they didn't know what to do and had little or no fire experience. Our fire HQ was in tick city. Someone was spraying my pants with ticks-off. I hadn't noticed the ticks. I released those folks that weren't busy, which cut down on some of the confusion. We got the Sector Bosses headed to the fire line.

Darkness arrived. The Sector Boss on the east flank called me on the radio and asked to be relieved. He had just arrived on the line. I sure didn't want a Sector Boss on the line that didn't want to be there. Dan released him and I sent him home. Bob McClain from Mt Ida became the Sector Boss for that sector. A lot of our Dozer Bosses were engineers from the Supervisors Office with no fire experience. One told me later that the worst night of his career was leading a dozer off of that mountain.

Joe Swindle brought a Job Corps Crew out to the fire and held the west flank with his crew and 2 dozers. We had over 100 people committed by nightfall. By dawn we had a line around the Ouachita Pinnacle Fire. Two days of mop up and it was history.

I sure learned a lot on that fire. Alvis said that it was the first fire that had been organized on the Ouachita for quite a while. He said that we had done a good job. It turned out that an old pulpwood loader had started the fire.

The Ouachita Trail now runs where the Ouachita Pinnacle Fire once burned. Most of the area west of the Big Bear Shelter to Road 107 was in the fire area. Fire scars are visible at the base of many of the surviving trees. One area was burned down to bare soil and rock. In this place Mother Nature and the US Forest Service teamed up to start a new stand of trees. The last time I hiked through that area they were 20 feet tall. I'll bet they are more than twice that height now.

By John Archer. Thought to have been written 2011.