

Forester's Log: Adventures in Alaska

© Mary Stuever, June 2006

The Forester's Log is a monthly column written by forester Mary Stuever. Mary can be contacted at sse@nmia.com.

There are many ways I could have come to Nenana Alaska—barge, train, plane, canoe, parachute—but I came the most conventional way—by rental car. Nenana has a special magnetism that attracts a plethora of goods and people. The small village on the George Parks Highway is about an hour southwest of Fairbanks and situated at the confluence of the Nenana River and the broad Tanana River. Railroad tracks partially encircle the town and frequently host freight and passenger trains, the former providing interface with barges on the Tanana. An air strip at the south end of the town offers the fourth major form of transportation in and out of the community.

When I stopped that first night in Nenana to catch a few hours sleep by the side of the road, I had no idea this town's magnetism would exert its pull on me in the most unusual way. I had flown into Fairbanks on a Friday and was heading toward Denali National Park. The main purpose of my Alaskan visit was to moderate a panel at the 30th Annual Intertribal Timber Council Conference in Fairbanks. I planned to spend the weekends on either side of the workshop exploring the Last Frontier.

After rafting on the Nenana River and hiking in Denali National Park, I rendezvoused back in Fairbanks with several of my staff. The Tanana Chiefs Council headquartered in Fairbanks and representing many Alaskan Native Tribes throughout central Alaska were sponsoring the native-focused national forestry gathering. On Wednesday of the conference, my staff broke in two groups. While a small group of renegades took the day off to visit Denali National Park, most of our group participated in the conference-hosted field trip. After a morning of learning about black spruce, white spruce, and birch-aspen forest ecology, Nenana tribal leaders set out a beautiful lunch with tables on the Tanana River beach. Tribal children entertained us with traditional dancing and singing.

At our next forest stop above the town, several of us noticed a plume of smoke starting in the valley below. As our speakers talked of thinning, forest pests and the effects of global warming on boreal forests, we watched the smoke column grow. My Denali-bound employees who live for firefighting assignments called in to report that

their attempts to travel were thwarted by a closed highway, tall flames, and smokejumpers coming out of the sky.

Despite the excitement of watching the fire develop, my staff was more excited with the conference agenda. On Thursday, five of my staff presented papers relating to our work on Fort Apache Reservation in Arizona. All tribal forestry technicians, this was their first opportunity to speak at a national conference. With well crafted PowerPoint presentations and hours of practice and coordination, the speeches drew wonderful evaluations and generated thoughtful discussions.

Still we found ourselves awake through the bright, near summer solstice Alaskan night, mesmerized by the smoke column, now quite visible from Fairbanks. When I took my staff to the airport the next morning, one of them asked me to go by the Alaska Fire Center and purchase a fire sweatshirt for her.

That afternoon I wandered into the Parks Highway Fire Information Center that was still hastily being organized. The sole woman staffing the center had a cell phone headset and was rapidly answering multiple calls. Recognizing the chaotic rush that comes in the first days of a fire incident, I quickly volunteered to answer phones. I figured I was looking for adventure, and what would be more adventurous for a seasoned fire information officer from the Southwest than to spend an afternoon helping on a real Alaska wildfire? In an attempt to gain credibility, I whipped out my current "Red Card" identifying me as a Type 2 Information Officer. Recognized nationally by all interagency wildland firefighting agencies, the "red card," is carried by all trained and registered firefighters, and outlines the carrier's experience and qualifications.

The staff there looked at me in awe. Although other information officers were en-route from other parts of Alaska and "the lower 48," the current needs were immediate. A house had already burned near Nenana and the whole town was threatened. A voluntary evacuation was in place and the Alaskan Railroad was bussing passengers rather than risk running the train through the middle of a fast moving wildfire. Rather than volunteer for an afternoon, they wanted me to sign up and stay for a fire assignment. After few calls to my home unit in Arizona, I was officially one of the 551 firefighters that would respond to the incident.

That evening in Nenana, I attended a large community meeting and got my first briefing on the fire. Just as the university professors two days earlier had described, the homogenous stands of black spruce were burning intensely and fire was rapidly spreading. One home and some cabins had already burned. More were threatened. People with smoke-related health concerns were encouraged to leave the area. Tom Kurth, the Incident Commander, explained that the airstrip on the south end of town would provide a good fuel break to help firefighters defend the actual town area, but the outlying subdivisions and home sites were still quite vulnerable. Many residents had evacuated or were evacuating. That night the town lost power and another home burned.

I spent the next nine days working out of Nenana at the Incident Command Post. The operation was set up in a student dormitory, currently empty of students who summer in their bush-village homes. Although this was my first Alaska fire, my co-workers marveled at how unique it was to have a wildfire anywhere near a highway. Alaskan Information Officers are accustomed to less immediate media and public access, so my “lower-48” wisdom came in handy. The days were full, as changing winds threatened additional communities along the Parks Highway. I had a chance to learn about firefighting techniques utilizing trains, helicopters, river access, and slopping through the muskeg.

As I came to know residents and firefighters, my enchantment with Nenana grew. Although I found myself fantasizing about moving to the Great Land of Adventure, I was needed back in Arizona where fires were also burning. My planned week in Alaska had stretched past two weeks and I now had life-long friends all over the state. As I finished my assignment, I finally made the right connections to buy the sweatshirt I had originally been tasked with finding.



Mary Stuever and Smoke Columns



Parks Highway Fire South of Fairbanks