

Mutiny On Boulder Mountain

The gentleman that wrote this story - now 80 years young – came in to the Forest Service office during our recent "February Fire" and mentioned to me that he'd had "quite an experience as a young boy" in fighting a fire. In fact, he said, he'd written a story about it. I told him I'd love to read it and lo and behold a few weeks later he brought it to me. It was neatly typed albeit a few grammatical errors - so I retyped it word-for-word, error-for-error, so that I could share it. Hope you enjoy!!

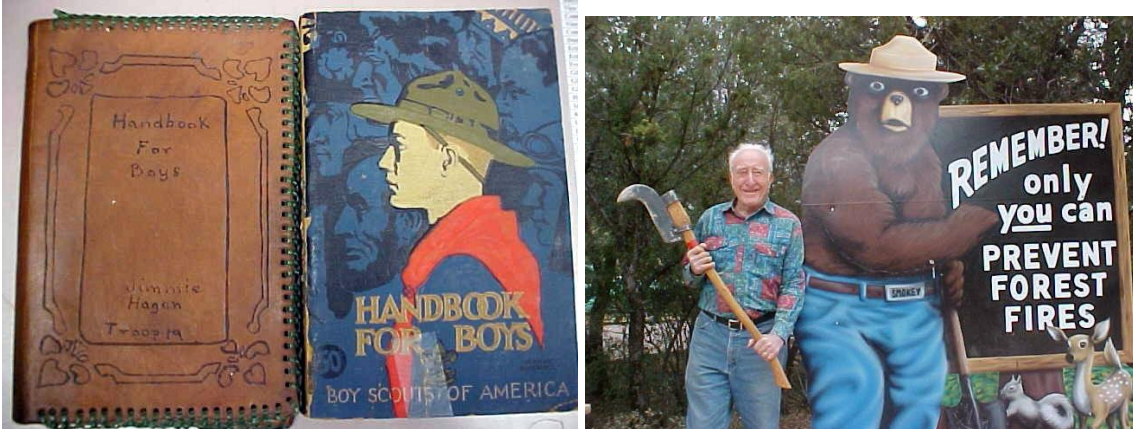
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Mr. Hagen at 17 Years Old



Mr. Hagen's Eagle Scout Handbook and on 032906 with brush hook at 80 Years Young

Mutiny On Boulder Mountain
By James M. Hagen

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The year was 1943 and the United States was at war. With this, the Second World War in full bloom, manpower on the home front was short on strong, able-bodied men. Women, old men and young boys filled the gap left by our men in the armed forces. This was well expressed by a song popular on the radio and the jukeboxes. It was “They’re Either Too Young or Too Old” and the lyrics went like this:

*They’re either too young or too old,
They’re either too gray or too grassy green;
The pickin’s are poor and the crop is lean.
What’s good is in the army, what’s left will never harm me;
I’m finding it easy to stay good as gold –
They’re either too young or too old.
Tomorrow I go hiking with an Eagle Scout unless
I get a call from grandpa for a snappy game of chess.
I’ve looked the field over and lo and behold –
They’re either too young or too old.*

I was one of those Eagle Scouts, sixteen years old, and was spending the summer on the staff of Boy Scout Camp Geronimo. In those days, Camp Geronimo was located across the road from Kohl’s Ranch on Tonto Creek. In later years the camp was moved to its present location off the fire control road under the Mogollon Rim. A friend and fellow scout, John Shipley and I were in charge of the handicraft lodge where many of the scouts would spend time doing craft kits or making articles from leather. Moccasins and tooled belts were the favorites. The aroma of the fresh leather purchased from Porter’s Saddle Shop in Phoenix added to the pleasantries of the craft shop environment.

At the end of a hot summer day we gathered for dinner in the dining hall. Dinner was not yet over when some Forest Service personnel came and asked for all young men 16 years or older to stand. Whatever this was, it sounded very serious. I stood, as well as 10 other young men, mostly staff members. “What’s up?” was my immediate thought as it probably was with the others. However there was no time for questions and answers – only time to listen and respond.

“Come with us” were the orders issued and we found ourselves recruited as fire fighters. We had no knowledge of the fire fighting and were literally conscripted into service. However we were excited at the prospect of a great adventure. With no time for packing, planning, or other preparations we were herded into the back of a stake body truck and sent speeding southward through the dust of the Bush Highway, the predecessor to today’s Highway 87. The Bush Highway was unpaved, narrow, and always a difficult hazardous route to travel. The destination, as yet unknown to us, was Sunflower. Our driver, called Punjab, was a big burly Eastern Indian who drove the winding roads with a

vengeance. When we went through the Sycamore Creek area we had to get down low on the truck bed to avoid being whipped by branches of the Sycamore trees that hung over the very narrow road.

Sunflower was about half way to Phoenix and usually just a pit stop for something cold to drink. Just before this wide spot in the road called Sunflower, we pulled off the side at the Sunflower ranger station. By now it was dark and the ranger suggested we get some sleep before starting out for the fire front. Most of us had grabbed our sleeping bags to bring along, but this would be the last good night's sleep we would get for nearly two weeks.

Morning came before daylight when we were awakened and given our fire-fighting tools and marching orders. The fire was on Boulder Mountain, southeast of Sunflower. In the early dawn we could see the smoke nearly five miles away. We would have to "hoof it" to the fire line.

Each of us was given a fire-fighting tool that would be our constant companion: axe, rake, hoe, etc. I received a tool new to me and that most people have never seen or heard about – a brush hook. This tool is a hybrid between an axe and a scythe. It has a heavy head with a long sharp curved blade and is used to clear brush. Whatever tool you had pretty much determined what tasks you would be assigned. I learned that just a few hours of using a brush hook would tire out even a strong man.

An older man said, "come" and we followed him, leaving everything behind except the clothes on our back and our one fire-fighting tool – for me it was the brush hook. It was rough climbing and a long hike up the mountain to get to the fire line, especially carrying a heavy tool. We would sorely miss our sleeping bags. Communications were utterly lacking, so our parents, siblings and friends would not know about our "adventure" until it was over. There were no news helicopters or journalists to even let the rest of the world know that there was a fire. We were going off into the wild unknown.

As we approached the fire there was a noise that was ominous and almost frightening. It sounded like the roar of a gigantic waterfall such as Niagara. We asked our leader "What's that noise?" and he explained that it was the fire devouring everything in its path of destruction. The roar never let up – only intensified at times. The thrill of adventure now took on a more serious if not more exciting tone.

Our eleven young inexperienced but energetic scouts were joined by ten seasoned and experienced much older men, making twenty-one of us to fight a fire that had already burned more than 1000 thousand acres of cedars, scrub oak, mesquite, and manzanita and was completely out of control. The fire was burning westward on the north side of Boulder Mountain which has a series of north/south ridges leading to the valley below. Each ridge top would be a potential place where a firebreak might stop the fire's advance.

John Shipley and I had known each other for many years. We worked closely together on the fire line just like we had worked together many times before. We were good

friends but opposites in personality. John was laid-back and a fun-loving, joking type person where I tended to be more quiet and serious. We complemented each other and worked well together. Laboring in close proximity on the fire line was a good bonding experience. The first day's assignment was to build a firebreak down a long north/south ridge to the west of the fire. This would consume all of what was left of the day. The work was difficult, but we tackled the job with enthusiasm. Much of the brush was manzanita that could not be hoed, chopped, axed or otherwise moved, not even with the brush hook. Consequently the firebreak had to detour around such obstacles.

Late in the evening as we quit for lack of visibility we moved out of the danger area onto a high point away from the fire. We watched that night as the fire crossed the bottom of the canyon. At that point it roared like a (jet plane) up the hill toward our firebreak. Reaching the hilltop, the flames leaped hundreds of feet into the air scattering sparks everywhere. We watched in amazement and wonder at the awesome force of this firestorm. The power, the fury, and the thunderous noise were like unto nothing any of us had ever experienced. (Multi-engine jet aircraft were yet in the future).

Then the fire jumped the line and started its slower burn down the side of the next canyon. Our job for the next day would be to once again build a firebreak down another ridge ahead of the fire. At this point you might be asking "Where were the Hotshots, the water-drop helicopters, the slurry bombers, the bulldozers?" They didn't exist. Fires were fought the hard way: with hand tools and hard labor. We wondered if there wasn't a better way. The thrill of adventure was gone. It was now just a hot, dusty, smoky and backbreaking full-time task.

A t-shirt and Levis were our fire fighting uniform. These might have been fine down in the valley, but now, here on this mountaintop, the night air became very bold. How could you get any sleep when you had goose bumps and your teeth were chattering? Not one of us had a jacket or even a warm shirt. One of the old-timers showed us how to sleep warmly. Making a bed of hot coals and covering it with dirt provided the warmth in a unique way to survive the night. However, you had to be careful not to toss in your bed or you would stir up the coals. More than one "ouch" was heard in the night.

What about food and water? A light aircraft, flown out of Phoenix by A.L Moore and Sons Mortuary, and part of the Civil Air Patrol, attempted to drop us food, tools, and water. We got the food OK, but the tools floated down by parachute into a distant canyon and we never found them. The water was a perfect drop, pointed right at our location. When the parachute opened, it ripped the handle off the water canister, which then came down like a bomb, exploding in our midst. So much for our hopes for good clean water.

Our food was army K-rations. These consisted of a wax-sealed box that contained a small can of pre-cooked prepared food, a few hard "dog biscuits" and a bar of high-melting point chocolate. "Beggars can't be choosers" and we were glad for our two or three K-rations each day. The chocolate was as precious as gold.

Every day someone took our one pack mule and went to a distant horse-watering trough to bring back our drinking water. It was brackish but we drank it. Our first casualty was a scout that fell off the mule into a cactus. He got cactus spines under his skin that could not be removed without surgery. He was sent out and now twenty of us continued on. We felt sorry for him, but later realized that he was the lucky one.

The second day was a repeat of the first: work a 16 hour day hoeing, raking, axing and whacking down bushes and small trees to make a not-very-wide break down a very long ridge. Then before dark retreating to a safe spot to watch the fire advance and jump our fire break. Feelings of hopelessness were gradually creeping into our minds, but we approached each day with determination to conquer this ugly beast.

The rugged, rocky terrain took its toll on us in many ways; wounds from cactus and sharp brush; sprains from stumbling over rocks, and sunburn from long hot days with no shade. Our confidence and morale were approaching the breaking point. By about the 6th day of all this my boot soles had come loose and were clacking with every step like a pair of flippers. But live with it – there was not even such a thing as duct tape to mend them. We wore the same clothes for the duration of the fire. With barely enough water to drink, there was no water to wash with or to brush our teeth even if we had possessed a toothbrush. Older men could not shave and their beards were a trap for dust and the soot from the fire. Those few who had hats had a distinct white band across their foreheads just above the black of their faces. We had become quite a motley crew.

The work went on and each day was a repeat of the previous one: spending all day building a fire break; then watching as the fire would jump the break and head toward the next ridge. This was extremely frustrating and heartbreaking. It made the whole situation seem futile.

One of the older men was our leader and he handed out the work assignments. On one day there were a couple of spot fires outside the main fire area. John Shipley and I were assigned to get these quickly put out before they could spread. We made a good team and the task was soon done. That was exciting and rewarding, but even more exciting was the huge diamond back rattlesnake that we came across. He was all of 6 feet in length and 3 or 4 inches in diameter; the largest rattler either of us had ever seen. We wanted to kill him for the skin and rattles, but he escaped into a cavern under a large rock shelf. Rather foolishly, we tried to pull him out with a long yucca stalk, but couldn't. We poked and prodded but he was deeply entrenched in his rocky retreat. Also we needed to leave and get back to the main fire line. This was neither the first nor the last rattler we would see on the mountain.

Another day when water was almost gone our leader showed us how to find water by digging a deep hole in the sand of an arroyo near green vegetation. He dug the hole and found moisture that, given time, (probably hours) would seep into the hole and provide enough water for survival. We were too busy to wait for the water to seep in, but the knowledge that it was there was comforting.

By about day 7 or 8 there were ten young men who were tired, hungry, thirsty and ragged. The blistering days, hard work, and frigid nights were taking their toll on morale of the troops. It didn't seem to bother the older men, but the rest of us were "mumbling in the beards that we didn't have". With food and water further rationed, the water hardly fit to drink, and the fire more than 20 men could possibly stop, there was mutinous talk among our band of scouts. We desperately wanted to leave and go back to civilization. Our talk included how we might slip away, how we might get back the 60 miles or so to camp Geronimo, and what fate would await us if we did this. Walk the plank? Face a firing squad? By comparing our situation with that of our friends in the armed forces, we managed to squelch that urge to mutiny. Certainly we had it good compared to soldiers in combat, or at least so we rationalized.

On about the 8th day, wonder of wonders, the Forest Service came driving up the mountain in 4 wheel drive trucks with food, water and over a hundred Indians from New Mexico to join the effort. Instead of the bugle calls and the shout "The cavalry are coming"" it was truck horns blowing and "Indians to the rescue!" That night they prepared us a feast. Huge steaks broiled over a bed of coals, fried potatoes, corn, biscuits, fresh water, coffee, and all you could eat. Nothing could ever have tasted better. Our thanksgiving for this was surely as great as that of the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. We too were out numbered by the Indians and were thankful for their presence.

With a rejuvenated crew of 20 and over 100 reinforcements the fire was contained in the next two days. It had burned nearly 20,000 acres before being stopped. A crew of happy men and boys left the area rejoicing in a difficult mission accomplished.

At \$1 per hour, ten scouts went home a bit richer materially, but much richer for the experience on the fire line. The mutiny never occurred, nor was it mentioned aloud outside our group of young men, and we were thankful for that and for the lessons learned – lessons that would last a lifetime: firefighting techniques, the value of hard work, the spirit of cooperation, patience, persistence, endurance, and survival skills. These cannot be bought at any price. The reward for our efforts was the satisfaction of accomplishing a seemingly impossible task under extremely difficult situations.