

RINGSIDE SEATS BY RADIO

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Sometimes we wish that the public could get the feel of what happens on our fire lines. Listeners might become prevention crusaders if they could get the story, hot from the fire line by radio. It can be done. The author describes one such broadcast from the Sims fire in Oregon in 1935 and suggests alternatives.

The Oregonian, KGW and KEX, ran a wire into our station, KBAA, at our Forest Service radio laboratory in Portland; that is, they connected their transmitter with our receiver at KBAA. We broadcast from the fire line over our regular equipment, using an M set; a pick-up was made in our Portland laboratory, and fed into the special wire to KGW, where it was rebroadcast on the station's regular frequency. This arrangement could only be made where the commercial stations were willing to go to the trouble and expense of such a hookup, and even then, the rebroadcast system is not too good in the summer. The two transmitters amplify the noise, and fading is experienced, etc.

A far better arrangement would be to inform the public of the frequency of our Forest Service transmitters, and endeavor to have them pick up the broadcasts directly. Of course we would lose considerable, both in coverage and in publicity, by using this latter method.

It was necessary to have one of our radio engineers at our Portland station handle the rebroadcast; that is, to monitor and see that everything was functioning properly. I would hesitate to attempt such a broadcast unless I had competent men such as our own radio personnel to handle it.

A word about the actual broadcast itself might not be amiss. In the first place, I believe it would be inadvisable to attempt to broadcast from all fires. I believe that a broadcast would only be justified where either the fire was of extraordinary proportions, or was of immediate importance to a large number of people. The Sims fire was a particularly good one on which to base a broadcast. Perhaps it will serve as an example.

The Sims fire was incendiary; it was on the watershed of the university town of Eugene, which, by the way, owns its own power plant. The nearby McKenzie River has been publicized for years from the standpoint of fishing and recreation. That made the setup one which would demand immediate attention from a rather large audience, since everyone in Eugene or who might have been interested in the McKenzie would feel that they were suffering a personal loss.

The broadcasts from the fire line itself are extremely difficult: first, because they have to be somewhat extemporaneous; even at the best only a rough outline of the broadcast can be prepared in advance. It is essential that the man broadcasting have a good command of words, a good sense of the dramatic, and considerable imagination. He must find for each broadcast at least one human interest episode, and this of course means that he must recognize these when he finds them, or be able to elaborate on some small episode which actually has happened. On the Sims fire, when one of the fire fighters was killed, the regrettable affair was dramatized by stating that his mother would probably receive the news of his death by way of the broadcast. This was literally true, since there was no opportunity to communicate with her before the broadcast went on the air.

I believe it would be disastrous to attempt broadcasts through local radio stations unless the fires were real spot news. There is a possibility, however, of publicity through informing the public that by listening on a certain frequency at a certain time, they may be able to pick up the Forest Service sets operating on the fire line, and then use a few minutes of the day to relate events and give a description of what is happening on the fire front.

Designers and developers of fire plows tend to think in terms of great weight and power because, perhaps, of failure to begin by asking four questions, the answers to which should serve as the starting point for invention.

1. What is a fire line for?
2. How wide must a fire line be?
3. How deep must it be?
4. How important is the weight of the tool and the tractor required to pull it?—ROY HEADLEY.