

# Fire on the Rogue

By Ken Jackson

I remember it like it was yesterday.

It was the summer of 1970. After a season on the Middle Fork, I had returned (demoted for barefoot behavior unbecoming an ARTA guide) to the Rogue as head cook for the ARTA crew. As July progressed the fire danger increased in southwest Oregon and, in the height of the season, we had a fire experience which had no equal at the time.

It was the fifth or sixth trip of the season in late July. Our crew was very much in the routine mode: 30 passengers, seven boats, five days. If I remember right the crew was: HB Hugh Winfield, Don Banducci, Jon Neumann, John Seppi, Jeff Fowler, I can't remember, and me. We camped at Whisky Creek the first night and began to get to know our pax.

After the first night's dinner was finished, it was time for the crew to relax a bit after the grind of getting the trip launched and running Rainey Falls, so we always had a camp fire, told river stories, and bonded with the folks.

As the comfort of that first evening began to settle in, everyone noticed a red glow in the sunset down river. Communications back then weren't what they are today, so we had no forewarning that the unusually dry summer had spawned its first forest fire.

By the early light of the morning, as I built a cooking fire and made the coffee, I couldn't help but notice the billowing smoke glowing in the west from what appeared to be a good sized forest fire. Not to worry, it didn't look very close, so we just enjoyed our breakfast, loaded the boats (new Green Rivers), and headed off downstream.

Day two of a Rogue trip is really pleasant after the first day's chaos of putting in, running Rainey Falls (I have six trips over the falls, each worse than the one before!), and getting the first dinner served. A few easy rapids, the narrowing canyon inviting visions of what lies ahead, and the second night's camp at Quail Creek is a welcoming scene of tranquility.

As we unloaded the boats at Quail, the evening wind shift brought a whiff of smoke into the camp, the first we had experienced the entire day. Over the next hour, the smoke increased to the point that we were concerned about which way the fire was moving.

We all know that canyon winds tend to move upstream during the day, then reverses to downstream as the air cools in the evening. This knowledge led us to believe that the fire was well upstream of Quail Creek and shouldn't be a concern. But, beliefs and reality often collide and, before the boats were completely unloaded, we noticed a deep red glow beyond the ridge directly across the river, and a marked increase in the smoke settling into our part of the canyon.

There was an hour or so of daylight left and, knowing the river well, we decided that we might be better off floating down to Mule Creek for the night. No rapids ahead, don't tie anything on, let's just get out of this smoke. We had no idea that we were already surrounded by the fire.

As we rounded the first bend in the river below Quail Creek we saw the fire coming over the top of the ridge to the left. Dozens of old growth Douglas Firs were crowning, like giant roman candles. The fire raced downhill towards us faster than we could believe. We were pushing down river as hard as we could, but, at one point, the fire jumped the river over our heads, and started up the other side. It was unbearably hot, with violent winds raining burning pieces of the forest down upon us.

Chunks of burning bark the size of dinner plates! I remember my sense of growing panic and Herculean strength as I pushed downstream, and I wondered at the power of nature that was about to eat me up.

And then it was over! Fifteen minutes max. The air cleared and cooled, and each of us experienced that feeling of complete release that follows a dreadful moment.

The smoke retreated upstream, behind us, and all was well with the world! As head cook, responsible for feeding 37 people in the waning daylight, I had not a care. This group had literally stood the test of fire, and, if dinner was a little late, what the hell- we had survived!

So, we pushed on down from Quail Creek to Mule Creek. Now, even though the mouth of Mule Creek is a spectacular location in and of itself, it was never used much as a camp by floaters due to its proximity to Marial Lodge. Steeped in history, the Lodge has been an historical fixture, and a favorite of those in the know, for a hundred years. But, it will never suit the purposes of a wilderness float trip. Thus, the fine sandbar at the mouth of the creek was rarely used by float trips. And, as we guessed, nobody was there when we pulled in just at sunset.

Now, I'll tell you without blushing that I was a pro at the tender age of 20 years. I had no more concern about making dinner for 37 after dark than I had about my next roll in the hay; no problem. Besides, we had a well bonded crew that lined up to empty the boats, set up the kitchen, open the wine, and revel in the incredible adventure of this remarkable day. A late dinner was not an issue.

As we were cooperatively setting up the camp, the Forest Service helicopter came. It landed 50 yards up Mule Creek in a tornado of wind blown sand. As the rotor wound down, a man jumped out, dressed in what looked like an astronaut's suit; orange coveralls, helmet strung with dangling cords, gloves, flashlight.

"Did you know that the fire jumped the river (Well, yeah, we were in it!)? It crowned over the north ridge and started moving up Mule Creek, but the wind has reversed, and it's coming down the creek now. It's about 4 miles upstream and moving fast. The Lodge has been evacuated. You have to get out of here!"

"Well, you've only got a four seat chopper and 30 minutes of daylight", I said, " how you gonna get us all out?"

"Yer on your own", said he, as he bolted for the copter. It lifted off, moving up the creek, and in that direction we all saw the billowing clouds of smoke, still slightly tinged red from what remained of the setting sun.

Those of you who know the Rogue will understand the conundrum. Mule Creek is the last piece of flat ground until a marginal camp below Staircase rapids. In between Mule Creek and Staircase is the formidable Mule Creek Canyon and, the white water highlight of the Rogue River, Blossom Bar Rapids.

Our choice was to either stay at Mule Creek camp and possibly burn up, or run the Canyon (including the overly famous Coffee Pot), Blossom Bar Rapids, and Staircase, IN PITCH DARK!

Shit, this has suddenly turned out to be not a fun day! It's 9 pm, nearly dark, and a quick glance at the smoke up Mule Creek confirmed that, besides being hungry, we were in trouble. The wind was blowing down creek, carrying with it lots of smoke and not a small amount of burning embers. In a matter of seconds, with the heli wop wopping in the background, we were loading the boats again, this time rigging for a rough ride.

It turns out (and is, perhaps, the reason I'm the one who gets to write this tale) that, although each of the crew had a couple of trips down the Rogue, this was my 10<sup>th</sup> trip. Thus, logically to everyone but me, I got elected to be lead boat for this suicide run. We took a few moments to draw pictures in the wet sand of the rapids ahead. I took particular care to describe Blossom in detail.

Now, for those who have not been there, Mule Creek Canyon is very dramatic visually but, except in the highest flows, pretty much a no brainer to run. Keep off the walls using the cushions, bow first with shipped oars into the Coffee Pot, bounce around for a moment or two, and out you go!

There was still a glimmer of twilight remaining when we all joined up at the bottom of Coffee Pot. Enough light that when someone hollered you would swear that you could still see them. Whatever amount of dwindling light remained then, by the time we drifted through the flat water below Mule Creek Canyon and heard the roar of Blossom Bar, there was no, none, zero, nada, light left. It was pitch black!

Gathered together in the calm water, we boatmen (we weren't called "guides" back then) discussed whether or not we should look at the rapid. Here, the Head Cook, in a display of intellectual prowess that would catapult him into fame and fortune later on the Middle Fork of the Salmon, made the defining statement of his career.

"Why climb up that cliff in the dark to look at something you ain't gonna see anyway? Just run the son of a bitch with your ears. Look for the glow from the white water. You'll know where you are by that. I'm hungry, let's get to camp!"

I guess Blossom Bar is famous enough by now that every pebble has a name. But back then only the Picket Fence meant enough to anyone to give it a name. And we all knew where it was. The entry into the rapid is a slot far left, requiring a steady pull to the right, away from the Fence, which runs almost 90 degrees from the current. If you make the first critical pulls you can slow down in the eddy behind the boulders on the right of the slot, and set up for the drop through the chute.

So, we knew to pull away from the Fence, and we could HEAR the water pouring through the big boulders to the right of the channel, and we could see the glowing foam. Once passed the Fence, we did a hard left pivot, then pulled hard left to miss the boulder in the center below the slot.

We are still in the middle of the rapid at this point, but here the pace slows quickly. Slows enough that anyone familiar with it can run it in the dark. Slower water, a few boulders to get around, then a short flat before Staircase.

Staircase is a modest rapid, standing waves with a slight left turn at the bottom. There is an eddy river left with a small beach, and a camp poised on several levels above the landing.

Here we made our second nights camp. At 11pm I served a pot of Knorr soup, crackers, and cheese for dinner. That was the end of an 18 hour day for this head cook.

Well, almost. At 3:30am (I looked at my watch) I awoke in excruciating pain. Tearing off my sleeping bag and, with flashlight in hand, I discovered a tick burrowing into my sensitive "nether parts". In a fog of delirium from the previous days ordeal, I managed to find my roach clip and, following the practice perfected on my dogs of pinching the bastard in the clip and turning one and a half turns contrary clockwise, I removed the offending c\*cksucker (literally) "en toto". Then back to sleep for a couple of hours.

It was a river day that I will never forget.