

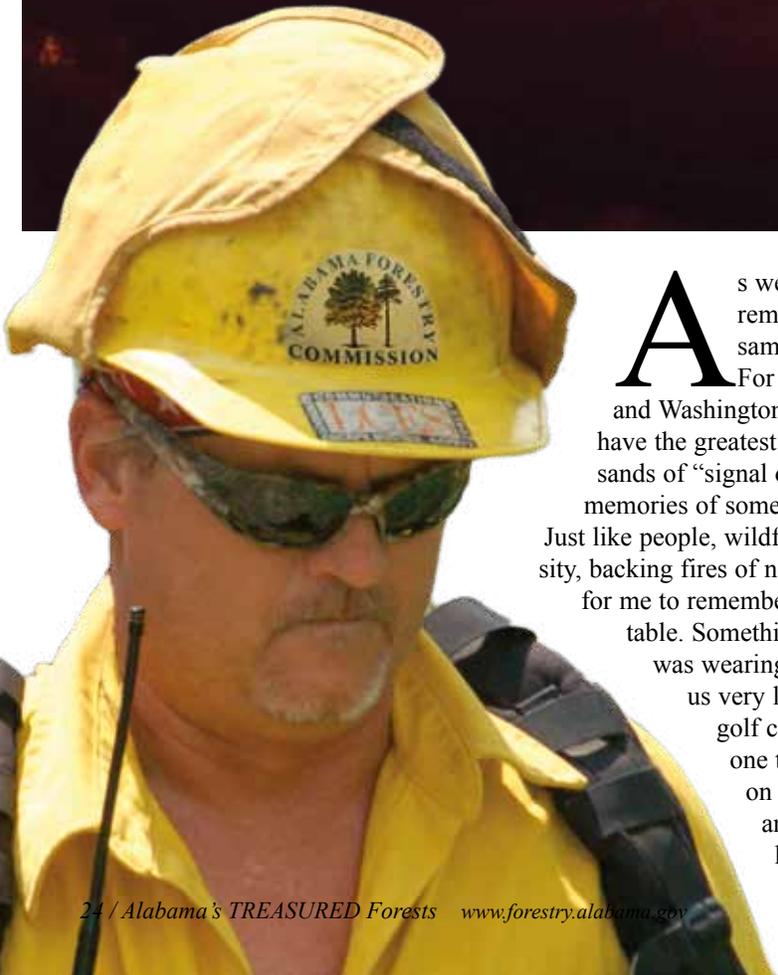


A Firefighter's Journal:

Wildfires Encou



*By Ronnie Grider, Forestry
Alabama Fores*



As we travel life's road, we meet all kinds of people. Some will be remembered for a lifetime, while others will be forgotten tomorrow. The same can be said by wildland firefighters of the fires they encounter. For 25 years, I have been responding to wildfires in Mobile, Baldwin, and Washington counties. These three counties in southwest Alabama historically have the greatest number of wildfires in the state. After suppressing literally thousands of "signal ones" [agency call sign for wildfires], I thought I'd share a few memories of some wildfires I have encountered.

Just like people, wildfires come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities. Most are low intensity, backing fires of no great significance. Over time, these types of fires become difficult for me to remember unless something significant happens that makes the day unforgettable. Something such as having a homeowner talk to me about the fire while he was wearing only half a shirt and nothing else – that particular fire didn't take us very long to suppress. Or the time we were working a small fire next to a golf course where nude women were riding around in golf carts. Now that one took a little longer to control. It's also hard to forget nearly stepping on a pile of Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes! A 5-foot female snake and a 4-foot male rattler, coiled and breeding, make a pile, right? And how about seeing a mother alligator protect her babies in a small

Dow Road Fire

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Gethsemane Road Fire



Photo by John Goff

Possum Road Fire (Gulf State Park)



Specialist Mobile County,
County Commission

pool of water located in a drought-stricken swamp. All were safe and sound after the fire passed over.

Other wildfires are remembered because they are repeated annually. They involve the same property, the same circumstances, and the same landowners, year after year. Those same landowners who “have no idea how this fire got started” or have “just got back from town” when questioned about the fire located on their property. Imagine that.

Quite a few fires are purely accidental. Many involve kids . . . kids playing with matches – be honest; we’ve all done that . . . kids shooting fireworks – we’ve all done that . . . and kids dumping ashes that are still hot from their parents’ fireplace – I’ve done that. A good many more involve adults . . . adults and lawnmowers . . . adults and hay balers . . . adults and catalytic converters. I once went to a fire where a young guy with a new job (it was his first day) and a new pick-up truck (it only had 90 miles on it) got stuck in a mud hole, surrounded by cogongrass. His truck didn’t make it; I’m not sure about his job. For those who have never actually seen cogongrass burn . . . imagine a dry,

cured, solid field of hay that is waste deep and it has been set on fire. Now triple its intensity and you can understand why folks say cogongrass burns like gasoline. That’s actually what it’s compared to, GASOLINE!

Nature also gets its share of the blame for wildfire ignition . . . lightning from a dry front passing through . . . high winds causing power lines to arc. Or how about this? A meteor crashing to earth, right next to a burn barrel that was adjacent to the wood line . . . this is what the “eyewitness” homeowner described when questioned about the fire. There’s no “cause” code [ignition classification] for that!

Incidentally, there is a cause code for trains. Trains start fires in the most remote places . . . places without roads . . . places so isolated that you have to hike in with fire rakes, shovels, and backpack pumps, and you hike out with the stench of burnt creosote in your lungs. Burning cross ties have a unique odor. Tire fires, fires on illegal dumps, fires near chemical plants or open sewers . . . these all offer quite a diverse range of fragrances.

(Continued on page 26)

Wildfires I Have Encountered

(Continued from page 25)

Negligence and unlawful burning account for many wildfires. People burning without a permit or inadequate control lines have led to some of our larger “campaign” fires. People who leave burn piles unattended, and folks using dug-out pits and burn barrels for household trash will eventually get a visit from their local volunteer fire department (VFD), the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC), law enforcement, or all three.

Then there’s arson, and plenty of it. Whether it’s spite, disgruntled neighbors, unethical hunters, domestic disputes, or pyromania, these criminals cost our landowners and citizens plenty of tax dollars each fire season. Most use a cigarette lighter to do their business. A few prefer the “slow match” tactic, wrapping a lit cigarette with kitchen matches so that when they ignite, the arsonist is long gone. Retired AFC Law Enforcement Officer Jim Wade was a master at finding such devices. Whatever method they use, they all seem to prefer multiple *sets*. I have been on scene with 23 separate sets. The responsible individuals were arrested and punished accordingly.

A short list of some of the more memorable wildfires would have to include the following:

Lonnie Walker Road Fire – Just beginning my AFC career, I was brand new to the job. Seeing that *crown fire*, co-worker Aaron Hunt looked at me and said, “This is the kind of fire I like.” It took three days and a great deal of “*potato patching*” to get a handle on this 2,000-acre fire. I learned a lot not only about fire behavior, but my fellow employees and myself as well on this fire.

Possum Road Fire (Gulf State Park) – When I crossed the Cochrane Bridge, I could see this smoke column from 70 miles away. It looked like a thunderstorm rolling in off the Gulf.

Big Creek Swamp Fire – After three days of working a fire front so hot and intense, I knew I should spend more time in Sunday School.

Dow Road Fire – Co-worker Chet Hatchet was working that wide track when the air turned orange and *fire devils* sprinted across a four-lane road and its median.

Marine Lab Road fires – Several thousand acres, several different years, lasting several days each time . . . some of the largest fires in Alabama were located on this “*rotten*” ground.

Mobile County Property fire – Less than 100 acres, this fire was burning in a wetland that was anything but wet. The noise from canes popping and water plants hissing as steam escaped was so loud and intense, it sounded like a 747 taxiing for take-off.

Todd Acres Fire – Co-worker Steve Carr and I chased *spot fires* and *slop-overs* for two days on this wildfire that turned a mature stand of evergreen live oaks to white ash. It was unbelievable.

Yosemite National Park – Our crew spent 14 days in the Sierra Nevada Mountains doing *mop-up* on wildfire at one of the most beautiful places on earth . . . those giant trees and El Capitan, my oh my.

Idaho 1994 – While protecting a remote ranch on the Salmon River, our crew was cut off from base camp by falling *snags* (“*widow makers*”) and had to *spike out* for four days. We cut a lot of line, lost a lot of sweat, and had no shower for four days.

Gethsemane Road Fire – East Texas was so arid in 2011, the creeks were drying up, and the beavers looked dazed and confused with no running water to dam up. Our strike team carried out the initial attack on this thunderous blaze that started as two arson fires converged into one massive inferno. It made a run and devoured 1,400 acres in about five hours. As it turns out, this is the kind of fire I like, too.

These wildfire memories are mine and they are true. I hope you enjoyed reading about them. I wonder what next fire season has in store? ☘

Firefighter Terminology

- ▶ crown fire – a wildfire that advances from top to top of trees or shrubs more or less independent of a surface fire
- ▶ fire devils – spinning tornado-like whirlwinds of flame throwing sparks and embers
- ▶ mop-up – tactic of working along lines already established, putting out any small lingering fires by digging up or burying hot spots with sand while spraying and stirring in water, or mixing dirt with embers then spreading them out until no heat can be felt
- ▶ potato patching – technique where control lines are plowed in parallel rows, adjacent to the spreading fire
- ▶ rotten ground – soft, wet area where it is very difficult if not impossible to drive firefighting equipment
- ▶ sets – fires started by arsonists
- ▶ slop-overs – escaping embers causing flame-ups and fires to spread outside the boundaries of a control line
- ▶ snags (“widow makers”) – hazardous dead trees that are still standing, or branches/treetops that are poorly or no longer attached to tree, but still tangled overhead
- ▶ spike out – set up a remote “spike” camp, usually near a fire line and lacking the logistical support provided at a larger base camp
- ▶ spot fires – fires igniting ahead of an advancing flame front