

JOLLY MOUNTAIN FIRE

As the wildfire advanced, Teanaway range riders saddled up to get their cattle

by Jim Fossett | jfm@nkctribune.com

TEANAWAY – As flames from the Jolly Mountain Wildfire marched toward the Teanaway there was a trigger point when it was clear cattlemen **Gary Fudacz** and **Sam Kayser** had to get busy. Fudacz had 75 cattle in the West Fork. Kayser had 200 in the North Fork. Both were able to enter closed areas because of Rep. Tom Dent's legislation allowing cattlemen to do so.

One calf short

On Wednesday, Aug. 23, when Fudacz got the call, the wildfire had grown to 1,208 acres. "A fellow from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) got in touch with me and said I had four days to get my cows out before the fire reached to the edge of my leased land."

It was a good time to move. Nine days from the time he got that phone call the fire exploded to 11,496 acres.

"**Jamie Zueger**, a range rider who lives in the Teanaway, gave me a hand.

"We moved through the smoke to find them and then herded them to my mother's place in the Middle Fork. We put them in a fenced area and I started hauling hay to feed them, but that got expensive, so on Tuesday, Aug. 29, **Ron** and **Scott Montgomery** trucked them to a field across from **Vi Burke's** place on Teanaway Road.

"My Uncle **Andrew Chicklinsky** started my family's cattle business in 1947 and this is the first time we've had to move cows because of a wildfire. In my backyard this is the biggest wildfire in my lifetime.

"Was I worried? Some. We got all but 11, but they showed up later. We came up one calf short, but we don't know what happened to it. Possibly the fire got it. Maybe a predator got it. Maybe it's still out there somewhere. You never know. It was a February calf, born early, so it went out to the range looking good.

"In the 30 years we've been grazing cattle, this is

acres. In that time the state mobilized the Jolly Mountain Wildfire, the cities of Roslyn and Cle Elum declared Municipal States of Emergency and the sheriff called for the first evacuations in the Teanaway and elsewhere.

"Sam came out with his dogs and riders on Sept. 4 and kept going every day until Sept. 8 moving cows we found to the safe havens I mentioned."

Johnson said though it was cat-and-mouse operation he managed to locate cows on the Bench Road above and between 29 Pines Campground and Camp Lake, at Camp Lake and at Jungle Creek and Liars Prairie. He found others between Stafford Creek and 29 Pines Campground, in the lower Jungle Creek area, and in Shirk canyon.

He said **Rick Haberman**, the owner of Perkins Restaurant in Ellensburg, and **Scott** and **Sandy Gress** were three of the riders who rode with Kayser.

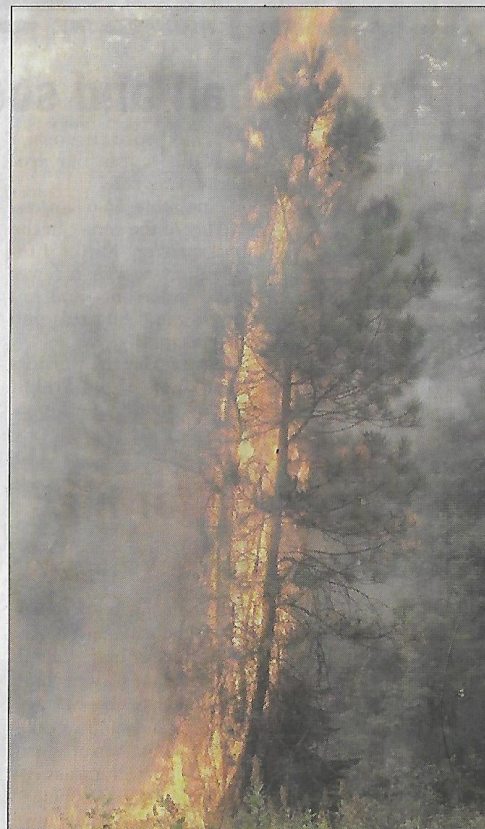
"When I was out there I really didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if we'd be facing wide-eyed stampeding cows or what. The truth is I found them grazing peacefully ten feet away from spot fires. When a spot fire moved, they just (waltzed) to another place. The horses weren't bothered at all. They just rode through it."

Johnson said in places, with spot fires on both sides of a road, the heat was intense.

"When the ambient temperature hit 80 or 90 degrees the heat from the fire moved it up to 130 or so. It was very hot.

"I saw grass burns of two different types. In grazed areas the flames were low and seemed to nudge along lethargically until they extinguished. The un-grazed grassy areas made for perfect ladder fuels. I saw several trees torch. Over the few days out there I saw a lot of blackened ground.

"On the south side of Camp Lake to the top of the ridge it went up like a torch. It hadn't been logged or



THIS GRASS FIRE (below) tracked to the torching tree you see here. Fire managers say this is a textbook case of how ladder fuels behave. Johnson took this photo in the lower Rye Creek area, about a quarter mile from the North Fork. Check out Johnson's video clip of this event and others with a visit to the *NKC Tribune's* Facebook page.

Photo courtesy of Bill Johnson



early, so it went out to the range looking good.
“In the 30 years we’ve been grazing cattle, this is probably the fifth or sixth time we didn’t come in with all of them.”

Zueger: “An unusual day on the range.”

“It was unusual because we were riding where firefighters were building firebreaks,” Zueger said. “My husband **Mark** was with me and at one point we agreed it was time to take a good look around because none of this would be here when we return in the spring. At the least, it just wouldn’t be the same.

“It was very smoky. We spent a long time looking for the cows – five hours the first day.

“I didn’t even think about wearing a mask.”

Torching trees, spotting and grass fire

Kayser’s range rider, **Bill Johnson**, also lives in the Teanaway. Bill’s in chemotherapy for leukemia. Over the summer his doctor downshifted him to once every two months instead of twice a month because he said it was taking the stuffing out of him. His next session is on Monday, Sept. 25.

“On Friday, Sept. 1, Sam and I went out to survey the situation and discuss what we should do.

“From that meeting we developed a plan. I started riding the North Fork the next day. I rode every day until Wednesday, Sept. 13. The plan was for me to locate the cows, get the information to Sam and whoever was riding with him so they could take the cows to safe haven at Henry’s Field, Rye Patch and Bussoli Field, where the National Guard eventually set up a roadblock.”

From Sept. 2 through Sept. 13, the days they were in the North Fork, the fire grew from 14,563 to 33,950



“On the south side of Camp Lake to the top of the ridge it went up like a torch. It hadn’t been logged or firewised in decades because of the spotted owl. After it went up it looked like a forest of matchsticks.”

At times in the Teanaway there wasn’t a half-mile of visibility. How did Johnson do with the smoke?

“I moistened a silk scarf and doubled-wrapped it around my face. Nothing got through. That’s one of a range rider’s three most important gear items. The other two are a hat and chaps.

“I guess I could have gone with a full-blown respirator, but that’s not something cows are used to seeing. That may have caused the stampede we were anticipating.

Johnson said he didn’t take any chances out there. “I always had a good backdoor and a couple of secondary escape routes. To my advantage I know the lay of the land. I’ve been out there for years herding cattle.”

Last weekend Johnson, leukemia and all, was back to work at his place, splitting and stacking wood.

“I have a hydraulic splitter. It’s not that hard,” he laughed. “And like Sam’s mother **Clem** says, ‘Wherever you’re hurting, it’s a long way from your heart, so best get back on your horse and get busy.’

“My parents and grandparents taught me that, too. You have to keep moving. You can’t lie around waiting for death to happen.”

Control your emotions

Kayser’s 200 cows are a sizable investment and in the face of the wildfire they were certainly positioned to evaporate. So, worry wasn’t the operative word. Panic might have been. He noted, “That was the biggest challenge for me: Controlling my emotions. Fortunately I



had excellent help from DNR’s **Larry Leach**. He provided me with information every day I was out there and that helped tremendously.

“Oh, there was a day or two when I thought I would lose cattle but I just kept in touch with Larry and listened to his recommendations so I could make good decisions. I didn’t want any of the people helping me to get in harm’s way. At the end I was confident we got them all in.”

Early estimates last week place the losses in the 50,000-acre Teanaway Community Forest, where Kayser maintains a 35,000-acre grazing lease, at about a fifth of the forest, somewhere around 9,000-plus acres. DNR officials cautioned the estimate is not official or final.

In a couple weeks, Kayser, Johnson and other volunteer riders head back to the range to roundup cows for market.

“I’ve been riding the range for over 20 years,” Kayser said. “I remember a wildfire out there several years ago, but that only grew to 300 acres or so. We didn’t have to move cows because they wanted to put it out. That fire was nothing like this one.”

Kayser opted not to wear a mask while he was out there. Asked how he handled the smoke he paused for a moment and deadpanned, “Well, Jim ... I coughed.

“Hell. Wildland firefighters and cigarette smokers take in more than I ever did.”