National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

FINDING AID

1988 FIRE 25TH ANNIVERSARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

2014

Prepared by
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Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190-0168

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HISTORY

"In the summer of 1988, fires swept through Yellowstone National Park burning over 793,000 acres and resulting in the largest firefighting effort in the United States at the time. After the first snows of September, when the fires finally were brought under control, many predicted the nation's first park would never recover. "Moonscape" was a favorite expression at the time. The fires that blazed through the park in the summer of 1988 affected more than just the land. Thousands of scientists, firefighters, journalists, park personnel, and others from around the country also experienced the fires that year."*

The 1988 fire 25th anniversary oral history project was a component of a larger, multi-year documentation project of the 1988 fire initiated in 2005 by Yellowstone National Park Archives. In 2014, the park contracted with the Montana State University Department of History and Philosophy to plan and conduct a series of oral history interviews with people who were directly involved with the 1988 fires. Over 60 individuals responded positively to an initial survey request.

MSU's Affiliate Faculty member Diane Smith led the planning of the oral history project. Working with park staff, Smith narrowed the pool of potential interviewees and drafted interview questions. The interviews were then carried out by MSU undergraduate students Todd Jensen and Garrett Smith, and master's student Andrea Yeager from July to August, 2014. All three had attended Dr. Smith's "History of Yellowstone" class the previous school year. The majority of interviews were conducted by phone, due to a limited travel budget. Interviewees who lived in communities close to the Park were interviewed in person. The students then transcribed the interviews and digitized the tapes using the archives' equipment.

Dr. Smith, the first recipient of a Doctorate in Philosophy and History from MSU, has a long-term research interest in Yellowstone. Her first book, "Letters from Yellowstone (1999)," is a novelization of interpretive work in the park, and her 2012 dissertation explored specimen exchange and display between Yellowstone, the National Museum, and National Zoo in the early 20th century. Smith currently works as a research historian with the U. S. Forest Service in Missoula, Montana.

*Diane M. Smith, PhD., excerpt from "Yellowstone National Park Fires of 1988 Oral History Project", 2014.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

1988 FIRE 25TH ANNIVERSARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
2014

CATALOG NUMBER MSC 207 (YELL 215280)

VOLUME 0.25 LF (19 digital objects)

DESCRIPTION This collection consists of eighteen oral history interviews with individuals involved with the 1988 fire season in Yellowstone.

Interview subjects were chosen to represent both decision makers and a representative sample of rank and file employees. In the former category, Yellowstone superintendent Bob Barbee speaks to the administrative decisions made during the fires and their consequences. Forest Service scientists Dick Rothermel and Bob Mutch represent the group of senior fire analysts known at the time as the "fire gods." They and Yellowstone ecologist Don Despain provide details of the scientific work done during the fire and its impact on future fire policy.

At an operational level, Yellowstone assistant fire management officer Phil Perkins and chief of maintenance Tim Hudson discuss how fire management decisions were implemented, while USFS fire analyst Gene Rogers represents the link between on-the-ground fire operations and the "fire gods."

The bulk of interviewees were involved in the fires at the ground level. Park employees include maintenance worker Ralph Jerla and concessionaire bus driver John McCutcheon. Researchers Bobbie Bartlette and Liz Colvard discuss day-to-day scientific and logistical work. Journalist Rocky Barker and news director Al Nash represent the news media presence during the fires. Firefighters are well represented in this collection. Helicopter crewmember John Giller, hotshot Dugger Hughes, wildland firefighters Bobbie Scopa and Russ Wenke, and section chief Larry Whelan all share their experiences of fighting fire in Yellowstone.

Many interviews discuss aspects of fire ecology and fire management policy, especially the costs and benefits of allowing natural fires to burn. Other frequent topics include the difficulty of controlling wildfire under adverse weather conditions and the challenges of coordinating responses between different agencies. Public relations and media relations are also frequently discussed. Personal stories round out most interviews. Some

relate to historic events including "Black Saturday" (August 20) and the defense of the Old Faithful Inn (September 7), but most are individual and unique experiences of the interviewee.

The following is excerpted from the project introductory essay, prepared by Principle Investigator Dr. Diane M. Smith:

"These oral histories...capture the day-to-day, on-the-ground experiences of those who were there to keep the park open, visitors safe, firefighters transported, and the basic infrastructure working. Ralph Jerla helped ensure that firefighters had safe drinking water and access to water to fight fires, while Tim Hudson kept the lights on and the pumps working. Everyone had a role to play and a contribution to make that summer, from meeting with the press and political representatives, to keeping track of the weather. Superintendent Bob Barbee had the unenviable responsibility of having to do it all.

Conducted twenty-six years after the fires, these interviews also provide a perspective that may have been impossible to capture at the time. For example, even firefighters such as Russ Wenke, trained to fight fires, reported that it has taken time for him to fully appreciate the natural role fire plays in Yellowstone and other fire-dependent forests throughout the region. 'I would've been the first in 1988 to say, "Oh man, it's burned up way too much of Yellowstone. It's never going to be the same," Wenke admitted. 'But I'm also one of the first now to point out to people how it has come back and it is a natural thing.' As fire manager Phil Perkins put it, the fires in Yellowstone were just '… nature taking its course, and it's just fine. The park was going to be just fine…,' [...]

Flying over Yellowstone National Park during and after the fires, researchers and others reported not a moonscape at all, but rather a mosaic of burned, partially burned, and unburned areas. This is how fire rejuvenates a landscape over time. The history of the 1988 Yellowstone fires, comprised of news reports, feature stories, photographs, books, scientific reports, and policy evaluations written at the time and after, creates a similar mosaic. These interviews with individuals who experienced the fires on the ground add yet one more piece to that picture, capturing the human experience and adding what might be considered the heart and soul of the story."

- Diane M. Smith, Phd., "Yellowstone National Park Fires of 1988 Oral History Project", 2014.

ORGANIZATION Arranged alphabetically by last name and by alpha-numeric code.

PROVENANCE Records created by Montana State University under a Cooperative Extension Studies Unit (CESU) agreement for Yellowstone National Park, 2014.

RESTRICTIONS No

ASSOCIATED MATERIALS

- Audio recordings and transcripts for all interviews online at Montana Memory Project (mtmemory.org)
- 1988 Fire Records (RG03-1988), Yellowstone National Park Combined Archives
- MarJane Ambler Interior Park Employees Oral Histories (MSC 206), Yellowstone National Park Combined Archives

CONTAINER LIST

File Unit **Title**
01 Project Documentation

Item Nbr	Title
YELL215280-D1	Project Narrative, 2014 Including background information and technical notes by project Principal Investigator Dr. Diane M. Smith.
YELL215280-D2	Transcripts, 2014 Transcripts (unedited) submitted by project team. Individual transcripts were created and edited by archives staff and are attached to the finding aid below.
YELL215280-D3	Completion Report, 2014 Final report of Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) project.

File Unit **Title**
02 Oral Histories

Item Nbr	Title
YELL215280-OH1	Robert "Bob" Barbee interviewed by Todd Jensen and Garrett Smith in Bozeman, Montana, August 8, 2014 Bob Barbee was Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park in 1988. In this interview Barbee recounts his overall impressions of the 1988 fire season from his position as superintendent. Major themes include the importance of media management and preventing politicians and public opinion from dictating fire policy. Barbee emphasizes that the response to the fires consisted of "hundreds of decisions…made by hundreds of people." He sees his greatest contribution as pushing the importance of public relations to other officials, including National Park Service director Bill Mott. Other important decision makers discussed include Yellowstone chief ecologist Don Despain and chief ranger Dan Sholly. The basic progress of the fires is discussed, as are firefighting tactics including bulldozer lines and the defense of structures. Barbee expresses regret that he did not evacuate the Old Faithful area and close the park sooner but defends the overall government response to the fires arguing that an uncontrollable fire season was inevitable given the conditions in 1988. Finally, Barbee emphasizes the importance of proactively training park administrators in wildfire behavior and firefighting strategies to be able to respond quickly in crisis situations. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78279?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH2 Rocky Barker interviewed by Todd Jensen by telephone, August 6, 2014

Rocky Barker was a journalist covering the fires for the Idaho Falls Post Register. This interview covers Barker's involvement as a journalist in the fires of 1988. A major theme is the contemporary controversy over firefighting tactics, with Superintendent Bob Barbee and ecologist Don Despain's natural approach to suppression contrasting with others, including National Forest Service Incident Manager Dave Poncin and Senator Max Baucus who pushed for a more aggressive approach. Another theme is the tactics of journalists, including Barker himself and his colleagues Bob Ekey and Steve Fuller, to procure interviews with officials and get their stories written and distributed amid the chaos of the fires. Barker discusses the physical hardships of covering the fires and the strain it placed on his family, and a gives a dramatic account of his escape from the firestorm at Old Faithful. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78283?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH3 Roberta "Bobbie" Bartlette interviewed by Todd Jensen, Andrea Yeager, and Garrett Smith by telephone, July 28, 2014

Bobbie Bartlette (surname Hartford in 1988) was a researcher with the U.S. Forest Service Fire Laboratory in Missoula, Montana. Much of the interview centers on Bartlette's research activities in 1988 including pine needles and dead trees as carriers of fire, the impact of soil moisture on fire activity, and the regenerative effects of forest fires. Bartlette also discusses her interactions with tourists who often required basic fire education; lab work vs. field work; safety procedures for field techs; and wildlife behavior, especially elk. Bartlette relates a dramatic experience when her team stood their ground in the face of an approaching crown fire, and expresses an overall appreciation for the positive effects of the fire on forest health and her gratitude that no lives were lost. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78275?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH4 Elizabeth "Liz" Colvard interviewed by Todd Jensen and Andrea Yeager by telephone, July 8, 2014

Liz Colvard was a researcher for the National Park Service and U.S. Geological Survey in 1988. In this interview Colvard recounts her work

duties during the fires, which mostly consisted of supply runs, support work at the Mammoth Fire Cache, and serving food at the YCC camp. She describes the excitement and high morale of the research office staff including Henry Shovic, Don Despain, and John Varley in spite of a chaotic work environment and chronic sleep deprivation. Colvard also discusses being briefed on public relations, wildlife behavior, and tourist interactions. She describes a dramatic incident attempting to set up a research plot in the face of a rapidly approaching fire. Colvard's overall impression of the fires is positive, emphasizing their regenerative effect on the forest and the opportunity for overtime pay for park employees. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78269?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH5 Donald "Don" Despain interviewed by Todd Jensen in Gardiner, Montana, August 12, 2014

Don Despain was the chief ecologist for Yellowstone National Park in 1988. This interview covers Despain's background, his involvement with the 1988 fires, and observations on the regenerative effects of forest fires. Despain describes the research opportunities created by the Park Service's decision to abandon total suppression and his early fire studies in Yellowstone in the 1970s. In 1988, extraordinary weather conditions challenge the predictions Despain created from his earlier studies. Despain recounts his duties during the fires as a fire behavior officer, and describes the futility of most firefighting efforts in the park in the face of persistently dry conditions. He also describes the difficulty of public relations given the emotional reaction to the fires and poor understanding of fire ecology in the general public. Finally, Despain reflects on observing the park's forests recover after the fire including detailed descriptions of plant succession, lodgepole pine propagation, continued soil fertility, and benefits to animal species. Throughout, Despain maintains the beneficial effect of fire to long term forest health. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78274?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH6 John Giller interviewed by Todd Jensen and Andrea Yeager by telephone, July 7, 2014

John Giller was a U.S. Forest Service firefighter who served as a helicopter crewmember in 1988. In this interview Giller vividly describes his experiences during the month he spent in Yellowstone. Major themes include tensions caused by the conflicting goals and

strategies of the many agencies involved in firefighting, including the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Army; the public relations difficulties caused by the Park Service's inconsistent messaging about fire strategy; the futility of attempting to suppress already out-of-control wildfires; and the lessons learned by the Park Service and larger wildfire community about wildfire management and interagency cooperation. Giller also reflects on the public image of firefighting and the importance of public relations for the profession, as well as the long term implications of managing human development in forested areas. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78273?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH7 Timothy "Tim" Hudson interviewed by Todd Jensen by telephone, August 11, 2014

Tim Hudson was Chief of Maintenance for Yellowstone National Park in 1988. In this interview Hudson gives an overview of his activities during the fires of 1988 as Chief of Maintenance. Major themes are protecting electrical systems especially in the defense of Grant Village, and providing sufficient water for firefighting especially in the defense of Norris. Hudson provides details of the electrical and water infrastructure of the park and describes the repair and recovery efforts after the fires. Other topics discussed include the defense of the Old Faithful Inn; defense of the Tower district; the evacuation of Mammoth Hot Springs; deploying farm irrigation equipment against fires; firefighting tactics; erosion control; and wildlife behavior. Hudson also believes 1988 was a watershed for raising media awareness of Yellowstone which continues to this day. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78270?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH8 William "Dugger" Hughes interviewed by Todd Jensen and Andrea Yeager by telephone, July 21, 2014

Dugger Hughes was a hotshot firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service in 1988. In this interview Hughes describes the work his team did to fireproof the grounds of the Old Faithful Inn especially thinning vegetation. He also reflects on the fire as a whole, expressing frustration that the management strategy seemed to vacillate between containment and suppression without a clear commitment to either. Other topics include media relations, interacting with tourists, living conditions at the

park, and the importance of the 1988 fires and Richard Rothermel's studies to wildland firefighting. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78280?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH9 Ralph Jerla interviewed by Todd Jensen in Gardiner, Montana, August 12, 2014

Relph Jerla was a water district supervisor in 1988. In this interview Jerla provides details of the park's water system in the Northern District and the strain it was subjected to as a result of the fires. Jerla discusses trying to control water use in Mammoth Hot Springs, and gives a dramatic account of being burned over while manning a water station near Mammoth. Supplying clean drinking water to fire crews and efforts to clean the park's water system after the fires are also discussed. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78272?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH10 John McCutcheon interviewed by Todd Jensen by telephone, August 1, 2014

John McCutcheon was a bus driver for concessionaire TW Recreation Services in 1988. McCutcheon gives a vivid account of his role in the evacuation of the Old Faithful complex. This includes rescuing a sleeping concessions worker, seeing the chaos of the evacuation, and the fear he and his passengers experienced driving through the "fire tube" that park roads had become. McCutcheon also discusses ferrying firefighters to and from airports, tourists' misconceptions of the fire, and witnessing fire crest the top of Obsidian Cliff. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78282?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH11 Robert "Bob" Mutch interviewed by Todd Jensen by telephone, June 30, 2014

Bob Mutch was a fire scientist employed by the U.S. Forest Service in 1988. In this wide-ranging interview, Mutch recounts his work in Yellowstone as a fire behavior analyst and reflects on the legacy of 1988 for fire science and forest management policy. As the first modern "mega-fire," Yellowstone revealed the impossibility and undesirability of total suppression and the importance of fire to fire-adapted landscapes. Mutch discusses the ecological effects of fire and speculates

on the future of fire management in the age of mega-fires. Also, Mutch provides a detailed first-hand account of the fire storm at Old Faithful and the subsequent evacuation, noting the reactions of concessionaire and Park Service employees to the crisis. Finally, Mutch shares an original poem inspired by the events of 1988 and reflects on its meaning. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78285?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH12 Albert "Al" Nash interviewed by Todd Jensen in Mammoth Hot Springs, Yellowstone National Park, July 17, 2014

Al Nash was news director for the Montana Television Network in 1988. In this interview Nash recounts his experience coordinating coverage of the 1988 fires from his production office in Billings. Major topics include the difficulty of covering such a large and complex event including the logistics of moving reporters, limited technology, and the massive scope of the fires as a whole. Nash discusses strategies to focus on small stories; working with park information officials; working and competing with local reporters, including Larry Mayer of the Billings Gazette and Rocky Barker of the Idaho Statesman; coordination between local news stations and national networks; the failure of media to cover the fire accurately; and the failure of park officials to better manage the media story. From his experience as public affairs officer for the park, Nash also reflects on the meaning of 1988 to fire management policy, and the appreciation he has gained for the difficulty of interpreting the meaning of wildland fire to the public. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78271?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH13 Philip "Phil" Perkins interviewed by Todd Jensen and Andrea Yeager by telephone, August 8, 2014

Phil Perkins was the assistant Fire Management Officer for Yellowstone National Park in 1988. Perkins provides a comprehensive overview of the 1988 fire season, including the climate conditions leading up to the fires, and the origins and progress of the major fire complexes. Perkins discusses the criticism and ultimate vindication of the park's fire management policy; firefighting cooperation between different federal agencies; managing media and public relations during the fire; and changes to fire policy after 1988. Perkins also describes his experiences during "Black Saturday" (August 20th) and personally fighting to save the Huckleberry Creek Patrol Cabin. The activities of his colleagues Terry Danforth, Dan Sholly, Don Despain, Steve Fry, and Bob Barbee

are also discussed. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78281?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH14 Eugene "Gene" Rogers interviewed by Todd Jensen by telephone, July 14, 2014

Gene Rogers was a U.S. Forest Service fire analyst in 1988 assigned to the North Fork Fire. Rogers gives an in-depth description of the work done by fire behavior analysts during the Yellowstone fires. Topics include technologies used, the fire mapping and modeling process, fuel type analysis, and use of climate and weather data as well as physical observation. Rogers discusses coordinating his predictions gained from working directly the North Fork Fire with those of the "fire gods" based in West Yellowstone, including Richard Rothermel, Bob Mutch, and Don Despain. He also reflects on the impact of 1988 for the future course of fire science. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78276?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH15 Richard "Dick" Rothermel interviewed by Todd Jensen, Garrett Smith, and Andrea Yeager in Gardiner, Montana, July 24, 2014

Dick Rothermel was an influential fire scientist for the U.S. Forest Service in 1988. Rothermel provides a summary overview of the 1988 fire season and describes his activities as a fire behavior analyst assigned to Yellowstone by the National Forest Service. Fire ecology is the main topic of the interview including discussions of climate, weather, fuel types, moisture, and debates over the beneficial and destructive effects of wildland fire. Rothermel also provides a few personal stories of his time in Yellowstone including fraught relations with the media and an attitude of resignation about the fires on the part of park officials. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78284?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH16 Roberta "Bobbie" Scopa interviewed by Todd Jensen and Andrea Yeager by telephone, July 8, 2014

Bobbie Scopa was a wildland firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service in 1988. This interview focuses on Scopa's experience defending Cooke City, Montana, from the Yellowstone fires. Scopa vividly describes a

night spent back burning to protect homes against approaching flames. Other stories include descriptions of living conditions for firefighters, interactions with locals, being unprepared for fall temperatures in Montana, the strain of overwork, and being separated from family, and the relief that came with the eventual snowfall. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78286?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH17 Russell "Russ" Wenke interviewed by Todd Jensen and Garrett Smith by telephone, July 29, 2014

Russ Wenke was a municipal firefighter for the city of Cody, Wyoming, in 1988. In this interview Wenke describes his time commanding a wildland engine crew in Yellowstone and the Shoshone National Forest. He discusses living conditions in the large Crandall fire camp, including the neighboring military camp, suppling winter clothing, and meeting people from all over the country. Wenke also describes his work defending the K Bar Z Ranch and interactions with journalists. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78268?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a

YELL215280-OH18 Laurence "Larry" Whelan interviewed by Todd Jensen by phone, July 14, 2014

Larry Whelan was a Fire Management Officer for the U.S. Forest Service in 1988. Whelan discusses his challenges complying with restrictions on firefighting tactics within the park, poor communication with Park Service officials, the difficulty of getting qualified firefighters assigned to his command, and dealing with tourists during an active fire. Whelan touches on differences in firefighting strategies between the Park Service and Forest Service, and expresses satisfaction about his team's handling of the fire. Transcript is attached. Listen online: https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/78278?keywords=&lsk=885d44d5da184c154dc04cb77dd6966a