

# A Rude Awakening

*By Ed Hockett*

July 10, 2005

I was asleep. I was sleeping peacefully because I believe there are so many firefighters on the ranch that we will spot fires immediately, reach them quickly, and have the manpower to extinguish them before they can spread.

**0530**

**ZZZZZZZ**. Sugar plums are dancing in my head. **ZZZZZ**. One of the sugar plums is kissing me. Crap! It is just a dog sticking his nose in my face and licking me. He wants me to get me up and feed him. I'll turn over and ignore him. **ZZZ**. The sugar plums are dancing to the the music of ... hummingbirds? ... buzzing at my window demanding I put out their food. Come on guys! Give me a break! I just want a few more minutes of...Z

My semi-conscious thoughts are severely jolted by a **Wah-WahWah-Wee** emitting from the fire radio sitting on the nightstand next to my bed.

The crackly voice of a female dispatcher chimes, "QRTs, please respond to a fire on Fisher Mountain."

My unconscious brain tries to telepathically remind the dispatcher that QRTs only go on medical calls not fire calls,,and by the way...just where in Hell is Fisher Mountain? I think I will just lie here to see which one of the rural fire districts claims it.

None does.

Apparently everyone else is as confused as I am. Just as this mystery was beginning to force me to think, good old Spanish Peaks 17's testosterone laden voice rises above the disinformation and announces he is responding to the incident. Well...good. If he knows where he's going and what he is going to do, that is good enough for...Z.

**Ring**

This must be a nightmare. Can't a guy get a little rest on a Sunday morning?

**Ring**

My wife remains lifeless at my side. Apparently it is my duty to answer the phone.

**Ri...**

Somehow the phone receiver magically moves next to my ear. I utter an "Alo." taken from some undetermined Western language.

My word is greeted by the dulcet tones of Ed Gieske. "Good Morning, Ed! We have a fire just off Vista West Drive to the North of the Ranch."

I can not confirm any level of alertness, but he immediately caught my attention. I sat bolt upright in bed with my eyes open, even though my brain was still back dancing with the sugar plums. He continued, "Do you know where that is?" A picture of Bob and Ann Scott waving as they stood on the porch of a house on a corner followed by a picture of Paul Richter's and Diane Rader's majestic home sitting high on a hill abruptly replaced my vision of sugar plums.

I tried desperately to answer coherently. "Yes."

Without any recognition that he was speaking to the brain dead, Mr. Gieske proceeded, "(Fisher Peak) 24 (Dennis Scott) is going to the scene to do a size-up. 35 (Chuck Ferrero) and 23 (Chuck Austin) are going to Station 3 (SFTR's Lazaro Martinez Station) to pick up 4162 (Brush truck). 1 (Chief Buddie Curro) is responding from his home in Starkville in Command 1 (Chief's vehicle). 2 (Assistant Chief Rich Babnick) is going to Station 1 (Starkville) to await instructions."

The unrelenting barrage of numbers felt like so many slaps to my face. I fought to wake up. "Yes, sir. What do you want me to do?"

"Go directly to the scene."

I do not know if I said goodbye, or hung up the receiver. The next thing I knew I was out of bed with my yellow and green wildland firefighting apparel on and I was lacing up my boots. My mind struggled to recall the very minimal items I had not already put in the car for sudden emergencies such as this. I grabbed my water and keys, and was out the door. I fired up my trusty Honda, and rocketed out the driveway.

My God! A fire near the Ranch. Our greatest community fear is a fire gaining steam off the Ranch and then rolling on to our property. The very thought of impending disaster now falling into the hands of the Fisher Peak Volunteers shot my adrenaline way up, and pressed my foot on the gas pedal down. I reminded myself to drive safely, but I repeatedly peered nervously into my rear-view mirror to see if Harriet Vaugeois might be out there poised to stop me for going more than 25 M.P.H. on the Ranch roads. There went the mailboxes. There went Cottonwood. Here I was on Little Bear. I turned on to Vista West.

Some ways down Vista West I encountered Dennis Scott who had blocked the road with his red pick up. Dennis indicated the direction of the fire. I was pleasantly surprised to find that since the last time I had visited this civilized part of the Ranch, the property owners of lot 41 had thoughtfully built a house and driveway. It was now from this convenient driveway that we gazed across the expanse toward Trinidad. There on the Western slope of a neighboring ridge a plume of smoke was rising vertically in the morning sun. The sometimes strong upslope

morning breeze diffused the smoke occasionally, but the column resolutely regained its shape.

We have had a wet winter, spring, and even early summer. It had just rained yesterday. Weren't we exempt from threats like I was now viewing? As I contemplated the potential of this column of smoke, the engine crew of Chuck Ferrero and Chuck Austin with Chief Buddie Curro joined Dennis and me in short order. Together we all regarded the natural disturbance before us. It was clear there was a fire and we knew its location.

Unfortunately, in order to achieve extinguishment we had to first solve two ages-old riddles: 1) Now that we know where the fire is, how do we get to it? followed by the equally difficult, 2) How do we then find the fire when we are standing in a thick forest of trees? Buddie is the Chief, so we deferred these monumental questions to him. He accepted this challenge with some relish because the strike had almost literally happened in his Starkville backyard. He knew we could not get the brush truck through the boundary fence unless we cut it. Consequently he believed the fire might best be accessed from our Mutual neighbor's (Fred Sola) land in Starkville. He, then, set off for Starkville to make this determination. The rest of us accepted the heavy burden of staging at the Ranch's guard shack to await further instruction.

Staging is a frustrating, but necessary evil. In order to reduce risk it is essential to view the fire and determine its extent before attacking. Everyone knows this, but that does not make it any easier to wait when you know a threat is out there, and your adrenaline is pushing you to action. Therefore, It was with painful anxiety that we waited and listened to the radio for some two hours as Buddie with the aid of the landowner fruitlessly scouted the neighboring ridges on ATVs. They had easily gained access to the area from Starkville, but could not pinpoint the fire.

While we staged at the guard shack, Assistant Chief Rich Babnick had been staging all morning at the Starkville station. I believe Rich is a patient man, but he has his limits. He had overseen the creation of SFTR as well as Trinidad Lake Ranch. As a result, he knows the physical geography of our area as well as anyone. He had viewed the smoke column first thing that morning from Trinidad Lake Ranch. Based on his knowledge and observation, he believed he knew exactly where the fire was. He grew tired of listening to the terribly garbled radio transmissions typical of radio communication in our area. At the same time, he could not neglect that the temperature was rising, the relative humidity was dropping, and the wind was increasing. All of these aspects are recognized Watch Out signs of impending disaster. Rich asked and received permission to come to SFTR in an attempt to access the fire from the Ranch.

Dennis Scott returned to the Driveway to serve as lookout. I tagged along behind Rich as he crossed the Ranch's boundary fence headed toward the fire. Using Dennis as a lookout, we were able to move in a fairly direct line toward the area of the fire, while simultaneously directing Buddie and Fred to join us. In the woods the smell of smoke finally gave the fire away. It still took some troublesome localized sidehill searching, but we were then able to find it relatively quickly.

The fire was the result of a lightning strike. A bolt of lightning had directly struck a ponderosa pine. The energy involved had ripped a line down the length of the tree exploding super-heated bark and pitch in all directions. These burning materials ignited an oval Rich estimated to be .2

of an acre. When we arrived the flame was not great . Our mentor, Gene Downs, would surely have observed that he had roasted marshmallows with Girl Scouts on fires bigger than what we encountered. Consequently, once we found the fire, the four of us were able to contain it within minutes. Fortunately, our delay had not cost us.

After initial attack was complete, Buddie returned to Starkville to organize the entrance of our staged engine and crew, so we could have water to extinguish the fire. Rich and I stayed on scene to babysit, and burn out all the combustible material. At this point we had a good opportunity to assess the burn. Although the year, so far has been wet, it was dismaying to see how well things burned. It is clear that conditions are nearly ripe for a conflagration. All they need is a good ignition source. The Mason fire raging North of us, also started by lightning, could have been us.

The engine and crew arrived on scene shortly now assisted by Brett Bolton. They were able to extend a hose line that allowed us to quench the remainder of the burning material. Thus the Sola Ranch fire was ended.

On every fire you learn things. It was satisfying that we had subdued the fire, but I was somewhat sobered by the experience. The fuel conditions are much further along than I imagined or certainly would like. In addition, access and discovery had proven they could be problems, even when we had a pretty good idea where the fire was. This put a little dent in my absolute confidence that we could contain a fire on the Ranch. As I left the scene sunk in my thoughts of what could have been, I had no idea that the Saturday afternoon lightening storm that had produced this fire was not done with my education, yet.

On Tuesday, now three days after the storm, I was confident enough that danger had passed that I put my wildland apparel in the dirty laundry basket, and headed toward the laundromat. The whole department will surely attest that my wildland shirt and pants had already been to far too many training sessions and fires. I recognized this fact and sought to remedy it.

Unfortunately, no sooner had the washer gone into wash cycle than my fire radio began to make noise. And noise is all that it was. At first I thought it was electrical interference from the washers and dryers, so I moved it around. The noise did not stop, so I went outside and held the radio aloft facing Fisher Peak. At this point, I heard traffic from Stonewall V. F. D. Apparently they were searching for smoke in the Bosque del Oso Wildlife area. Then I heard Ed Gieske's voice. The communication was badly broken, as it tends to be in certain areas of Trinidad. Over time, though, I was able to determine something was happening, and it was happening on the Ranch. I momentarily hesitated, but then pulled my fire clothes from the washer sopping wet. I paused long enough to arrange the clothes on the seats of my car to get some air drying, and I took off for the Ranch.

On the way I established communication with Ed Gieske. He relayed that there was a small grass fire. I relaxed, but decided to continue on since I had come that far already, plus I was curious about how the fire had started and how it had burned. I was rather at a loss to think where I had seen a patch of grass on Owen Baldwin and Chipmunk.

When I arrived I was surprised. There were three Ranch residents observing, and only three firefighters working the fire. I never thought I would see an incident on the Ranch where there were only three firefighters. Apparently recent retirements of key personnel, the time of day, and other circumstances had thinned our ranks.

Chuck Ferrero was running the engine alone, and Buddie and Bob Dye were chainsawing (!) in the woods. There was fire in grass, but it under extremely dense oak brush and thick spreading junipers. The fire was doing its best to preheat the foliage above it. It had torched upward on several occasions, and was preparing to engage fully. The firefighters were working hard, and had cleared much brush from around the fire. Nevertheless, they were hard pressed to deal with the heavy vegetation to even mount an attack. When Mike Friedrich got on scene followed shortly by Buddie's wife, Donna in a second engine, the situation improved drastically.

Once control was achieved, I observed this was the result of another lightening strike. I was staggered to learn, though, It was first reported by Fred Vaugeois on Saturday after the same storm that had started the Sola Ranch fire. It had smoldered in the dense brush and had not fully revealed itself until today.

This fire was another awakening. Once again, It was successfully subdued without damage to the Ranch. Still, it had the potential to easily be something greater. It put into question whether our reporting is quick enough, and whether we really have the manpower available on the Ranch to prevent the escape of a fire. Furthermore, it was apparent that fire can easily occur in places where overgrown vegetation will severely hinder our efforts. My experiences on the two fires awakened me to my overconfidence. I was once told. "There ain't no horse that can't be rode, and there ain't no cowboy that can't be throwed." This cowboy now recognizes there are circumstances he may not be able to manage.

I know people are telling this to us. Bob Dye has stated the need to report sightings quickly. Diana Novacek and David Skogberg have been working their hearts out to get us going on projects like the shaded fuel break on the West side and our own individual creation of defensible space. They are our group conscience speaking to our need to be Firewise. They are trying to get us to protect our homes, but they have seen the results of the Hayman Fire and know that even if our houses are saved, our treasured natural beauty can be lost. Paul Vircsik continually seeks to remind us about fire and how we need to be prepared. As he has stated, 99% of what can be done to save our homes from a wildfire can be done now. If a fire does come, though, he has instructed us on what we must do. I hope people are listening to these voices.

I am not trying to gain membership to The Sky Is Falling Society. I do, however, now recognize our limitations. In addition, the last week we have been teetering on the brink between moderate and high fire danger. In the next week there are weather predictions for extremely high temperatures and the passage of a cold front. Both these are potentially dangerous fire situations. It may have come a little later this year, but we are now definitely in fire season. Is everyone awake?