Fire!

By Heather Smith Thomas

Monday, August 11, 2003, was another hot day in a long, hot, dry summer. We'd already had several fires in our area, including the Tobias fire up the valley from us—that burned 20,000 acres of timber and cattle range. The Cramer fire in July on Horse Creek affected our whole community, with the deaths of 2 young college students fighting fire for the Forest Service (FS). One was the 24-year-old son of good friends of ours.

Lightning had recently started 2 fires near our cattle range and delayed our moving cattle into the high pasture until we were sure the fires were controlled. We'd just put the cattle up there. Following a brief thunderstorm, there was smoke on the mountain, so my husband, Lynn, drove up the creek to see where the fire was. He came back down quickly with bad news. Smoke was billowing out of heavy timber in the head of Mulkey Creek, only a mile from our range allotment. We had to get our cattle out.

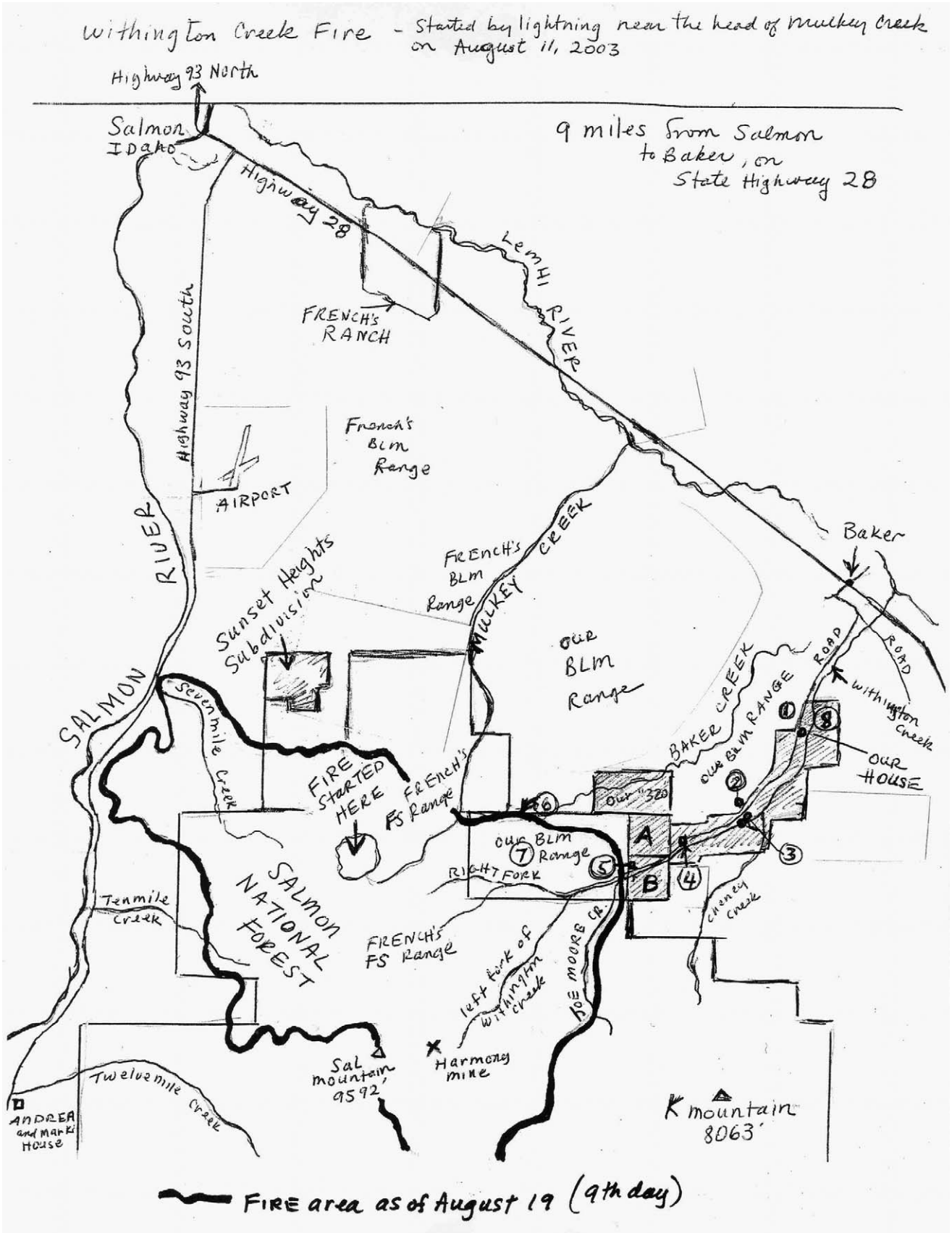
Our son, Michael, was cutting hay on a ranch up the valley (in an area with no cell phone service) on a custom haying job. His wife, Carolyn, telephoned a neighbor up there who drove to the field to find Michael. Helicopters starting dumping water on 2 other fires above our ranch. As we waited for Michael to come home, we could hear the drone of a bomber. A plane from McCall (100 miles away) brought a load of fire retardant slurry and dumped it along the lower edge of the fire to try to keep it from coming down out of the timber.

Whipped by the wind in tinder-dry trees, the fire was rapidly growing; we had to get our cattle out. Michael and Carolyn grabbed horses and dogs and trailered several miles up Withington Creek to try to gather our cattle in the right fork canyon. Lynn went in a jeep pickup to call the cows; we often move them from pasture to pasture (and on the range) by someone riding ahead, calling. This would be a fast and furious roundup, and our grandkids (10 and 12 years old) stayed home in case it became dangerous.

Initial fire in heavy timber, day 2.

Lynn, Michael, and Carolyn had 2-way radios that helped them gather cattle more quickly from the timber and steep mountainsides. Lynn had a vantage point from the jeep road across the canyon and radioed locations of cattle the kids could not see. They planned to bring cattle down the canyon to our 160-acre mountain pasture at the top end of the ranch, several miles farther from the fire.

My brother was camping at his little place below that pasture, and I gave him one of our 2-way radios. When our crew came down after dark with the cows (with dogs bringing some through thick brush where riders could not go or see), Lynn radioed to my brother to open the cattleguard gate.


withington Creek Fire - Started by lightning near the head of Muckey Creek on August 11, 2003
Highway 93 North
Salmon Idaho
Highway 28
9 miles from Salmon to Baker, on State Highway 28
Lemhi River
FRENCH'S RANCH
Highway 93 South
French's BLM Range
AIRPORT
Salmon River
Baker
Sunset Heights Subdivision
French's BLM Range
Muckey Creek
OUR BLM Range
Baker Creek
Our BLM Range
Road
Withington Creek
OUR HOUSE
Sevenmile Creek
FIRE STARTED HERE
FRENCH'S FS Range
Our "320"
OUR BLM Range
RIGHT FORK
Tenmile Creek
SALMON NATIONAL FOREST
FRENCH'S FS Range
left fork of withington creek
Joe Moore Cr.
Cheney Creek
Sal mountain 9592'
Harmony mine
Twelvemile Creek
ANDREA and Mark House
K mountain 8063'
FIRE area as of August 19 (9th day)

Helicopter dipping water for firefighting.

That saved a bottleneck at the cattleguard since the cattle were all ahead of the riders and pickup on the narrow road (steep shale above and below the road).

The smoke was thick, and it had gotten dark too quickly to find all the cows; at daylight the next morning, the 3 of them went back and gathered the ones they'd missed. All together, they brought 60 pair out of that canyon and dumped them into our private pasture. At the same time, our range neighbors Dan and Eileen French and several friends trailered horses up Withington Creek and began gathering their cattle from the head of Withington Creek and Mulkey Creek to take them down Mulkey Creek and out of reach of the fire. FS crews told them they had just one shot at getting the cattle and could not leave their pickups and trailers in Withington Creek because it was not safe, so they had drivers drop off the horses and riders and take the rigs back out.

Firefighting started that morning with ground crews and bulldozers to clear out old logging roads so vehicles could get crews and equipment farther into that rugged country. Water trucks (to haul water to a portable tank the helicopters could dip out of) and 2 helicopters dumped water all day. Because of the drought, our creek was very low, but crews were able to dam off some places near the road so the 5 water trucks could fill up.

We still had most of our cattle on the next drainage, in Baker Creek, and worried about their safety; the fire was still spreading through timber on the end of the Lemhi Range of mountains. During the night it traveled up toward the ridge, and flames were leaping 60 feet in the air—visible to Andrea and Mark (our daughter and son-in-law) living on the other side of the mountain at 12 Mile. By that next morning the fire was burning all along the ridge and lapping onto the other side from 7 Mile to 12 Mile. It also came partway down the face of the mountain toward town, toward a housing subdivision (Sunset Heights) above the airport.

As soon as Michael and Carolyn gathered the rest of the cattle out of Withington Creek, they got fresh horses and rode up the Baker Creek side of our range, ready to gather cows on that side if the fire started coming that way. They spent the rest of the day waiting on the ridge, watching the fire across the canyon. They had radios and a cell phone; there was cell service on that high ridge. If the fire came that way, they could tell us to open the gates on the lower end of the allotment and start gathering cattle. I stayed by the phone all day (taking a portable phone and 2-way radio outside with me when I fed the horses that evening) and kept our range neighbors posted on what was happening with the fire. By late evening, however, the wind died, and it seemed

Map of the Withington Creek Fire that started August 11, 2003, in the timbered area above the head of Mulkey Creek, on the FS allotment above our ranch and BLM range. Our BLM range lies north and west of our ranch. The shaded area in the Withington Creek and Baker Creek drainages is our ranch. Withington Creek and the county road go through our main ranch. Baker Creek runs through our 320-acre mountain pasture. A and B are our 2 160-acre pastures on steep mountainsides. B is where we put cows the first night—the ones we gathered out of the right fork of Withington Creek.

1. Our house.
2. Michael and Carolyn's house, on our ranch.
3. Peets' house and Loucks' house.
4. Binnings' house (these homes—Peets', Loucks', Binnings', and John's—are on small acreages that were sold earlier from the land that became our ranch).
5. John's cabin (fire stopped less than a quarter mile from the cabin).
6. The ridge between Withington Creek and Baker Creek that Lynn, Michael, and Carolyn brought the cows down—to put them through our 320-acre pasture and on down through the 160-acre pasture and down the road to our lower fields.
7. The west portion of our BLM range, on the right fork of Withington Creek, was where our cattle were at risk the first 2 days of the fire. We gathered them into our southern 160-acre mountain pasture (B).
8. Our lower hayfields, where we finally put the cows (late at night) after we got them off the mountain the day the fire blew up (August 16).

The heavy black line is the fire line as of August 19 (ninth day of the fire), still uncontrolled on portions of the north and south end. All the drainages in the fire area are steep, deep canyons. Andrea and Mark's house near the mouth of Twelvemile Creek on the Salmon River is just over the mountain ridge from our range and was at the edge of the Twelvemile Fire (July 5, 2000), in which both suffered burn injuries trying to halt the fire.

Helicopter dipping facility after being burned in fire.

safe to leave the cattle there for the night. We didn't want to bring the cattle home if we didn't have to, into the hay meadows—after a taste of green fields, they would not want to go back to the dry range.

Day 3

At daylight (5:00 AM), Lynn and Michael drove up the creek to check on the fire to see if it was safe for Michael to continue his hay cutting job. He was several days behind. Lynn and Carolyn kept checking on the fire throughout the day, so we could get in touch with Michael if things changed.

Two busloads of firefighters arrived and more equipment. Hot weather and strong wind kept it growing, in spite of retardant and water dumped around its lower edges. Lynn stayed up the creek several hours and helped the fire crew locate better places in the creek (a mile closer to their big water tank) for the water trucks.

Day 4

Lynn, Michael, and Carolyn went to a morning fire meeting in town to find out whether FS/BLM commanders thought it was still safe for our cows in Baker Creek (and were told the cows were safe, that the fire would not come down the mountain). The fire crew wanted to set up a spike camp in one of our hay meadows—for 100 tents and a place to park equipment at night—so they wouldn't have to bring everyone out every morning from town.

Day 5

A few of the Frenches' cows started coming back up Mulkey Creek and drifting into Withington Creek. That morning the fire crew found several cows drinking from the pumpkin pod used for filling the helicopter dip tank. Some of our cows from Baker Creek were trickling over the top, but we hoped they wouldn't go down into Withington Creek. A little rain gave us hope, but it didn't last.

Michael and Carolyn drove up the Baker Creek side of our range to take salt to the cows and left the gate open in case the cows needed to come down off that side in a hurry. Things were calm until evening when strong winds blew, sweeping the fire toward Sunset Heights. Fire crews evacuated everyone in the subdivision.

Day 6

This was the day of our grandkids' 4-H horse show, but we couldn't all be gone from the creek in case the fire came our way again. At 4:00 AM, before dawn, Michael and Carolyn drove to the head of Mulkey Creek to check on the fire. It was quiet (no wind), so they decided to take their kids and horses to the horse show.

Lynn drove up on our mountain pasture and sawed out a tree that had blown down across the jeep road in case we had to get a vehicle up there in a hurry for opening all the gates.

The fire crew started setting up spike camp in our hayfield. Lynn drove up the creek in early afternoon to check on the fire since the wind was starting again. About that time, the fire above Sunset Heights blew up, and local firemen rushed out there to try to save the houses. Bomber planes from McCall (100 miles away) made steady trips to dump retardant on that edge of the fire. At 12 Mile, Andrea and Mark worked to get all the weeds away from their house and shop and wet everything down with sprinklers—and made plans for evacuation.

The wind blew hard, then changed direction. This saved Sunset Heights but brought the fire our way again. As Lynn drove up the creek to check on it, he met all the pumper trucks coming swiftly back down. The first driver told him the fire was coming down into Withington Creek fast—and to turn around and get out of there.

All the crews were getting out as fast as they could; they'd been ordered off the hill (all of which burned less than an hour later).

Down here at the ranch, I glanced out the window and saw a huge mushroom cloud of black smoke boiling up over the hill behind the house (it went up 25,000 feet). Lynn radioed to me to tell the kids the cows were in danger. I called Michael on his cell phone at the fairgrounds and told him we had to get the cows out of Baker Creek right now. They left their horses and trailer at the fairgrounds (to be taken care of by friends) and rushed home.

We called Dan French to say the fire was coming back across Mulkey Creek and might threaten his cattle. His son and a friend were in the Mulkey Creek canyon on 4-wheelers, sawing out trees in the trail in case they had to bring more cows down—and they were right in the way of the fire. Dan was glad for the warning and told us later he trailered his horse to the mouth of Mulkey Creek and galloped several miles up the trail to where the boys were to tell them to get out of there fast.

By the time our kids got home from the fairgrounds, Lynn had left with his jeep to drive up to our range in Baker Creek and start opening gates—hiking to many of them since they are in inaccessible terrain for driving. Michael and

Carolyn left their kids at their house with Carolyn's mom (who was here for the horse show), grabbed other horses and their dogs, and galloped several miles—up the road and through our 320-acre mountain pasture and into Baker Creek. It's a steep climb, but they didn't spare the horses; there was only a short time before the fire would be coming from Mulkey Creek.

Lynn began to have misgivings as he drove as fast as possible up the steep, rocky ridges. Smoke was thick all over, but the huge black cloud boiling over the top of the rim was incredible. He worried more about being able to breathe than about being burned up; they might all be suffocated with smoke inhalation even before the fire got to them. He reached the top of the ridge as the kids came up into Baker Creek on their horses. Smoke obliterated his view into Withington Creek. The roar of the fire was indescribable—like the sound of a dozen 747 airplanes taking off at once. He tried to look into Withington Creek to see if cattle had drifted over there and saw only smoke; later we realized that the salt the kids had put on the ridge and Baker Creek area the day before saved a lot of cattle—the salt-hungry cows had stayed on the Baker Creek side.

There were cattle right on top, however, so he shooshed them down off the rim to start them on their way toward home. He drove places no driver had ever dared go, honking and yelling, parking the jeep, and running after groups of cattle he couldn't drive to. The cows didn't seem upset by the thick smoke and approaching fire, but the honking (and the sight of his bright yellow fire shirt) was spooky enough to get them motivated. A couple times, when he was a ways from the jeep, he wondered if he could get back to it in time and down out of there if the fire caught them.

Michael and Carolyn pushed their horses to the limit, rounding up the lower groups. Carolyn started booting cows out through the timber, and Michael rushed over the hill toward the north to gather cows out of Basco Basin. They all had radios, but Michael and Carolyn couldn't hear one another with the hill between them. Lynn, higher on the ridge, could hear them both, and they could hear him, and he relayed their messages.

Here at home on my radio, I could hear snatches of frantic conversations—mostly Lynn because he was higher on the mountain. I was outside and across the creek because that gave a better reception (less hills in the way) than in the house. I also had my portable phone since I was constantly getting calls from people asking about the fire, asking if we were all right, asking if they could help. I had to refuse offers from friends who wanted to help gather the cattle. There was no time; we had only a brief window of opportunity—no one could get here quickly enough with horses.

Second, we did not want to put anyone else at risk if they didn't know the range. It's steep and timbered, and people could get lost out there and be in harm's way.

The fire crews had all come down from upper Withington Creek. They brought their vehicles and bulldozers but had to leave a lot of equipment (pumps, hoses, and so on) to burn up in the fire. On their way down, they stopped at the homes along the creek and evacuated everyone. If the wind continued to blow, the fire would soon be down to our ranch and would burn the subdivision homes along the creek bottom. Our neighbors were all pulling out. Friends came to load pickups and vans with important possessions and furniture.

The fire crew setting up camp in our field quickly dismantled all their tents and facilities and hauled everything away.

A fire officer stopped at Michael and Carolyn's house and told their kids it would be best to leave. Little Heather called a 4-H family, who came and took them and Carolyn's mom. Meanwhile, Michael and Carolyn had no clue they were being evacuated; they were still on the mountain desperately trying to round up cows. A helicopter and a spotter plane kept track of them, however; a message went out on the scanner that there were 2 horseback riders trapped in the fire on Withington Creek (because they seemed lost and going the wrong way—up the mountain to gather cows instead of coming down to safety). The pilot of the plane never saw Lynn and his jeep; he was higher up the mountain, obscured by heavy smoke.

Andrea called me, wondering what was happening. After nearly losing her life 3 years earlier in a range fire at 12 Mile (when the wind changed and blew 30-foot flames over her and Mark as they tried to make a fire line with a little crawler tractor), she knew firsthand the terrible danger Lynn, Michael, and Carolyn were in. She'd spent the rest of the summer of 2000 in critical condition in the burn intensive care unit in Salt Lake, undergoing several skin graft surgeries. *(Editor's Note: See book review "Beyond the Flames" in this issue.)*

I tried to reassure her, though there was fear in my heart, while listening to snatches of radio transmissions in which Lynn was yelling at Michael that the fire was coming closer—to leave the cow and calf he was fighting in Basco Basin and get back over the hill where there were 30 head he might have a chance to save.

I could hear Lynn telling Michael the fire was coming up the hill behind them, and they might have to make a run for it.

Thanks to radios, the dogs, great determination, and horses that were very fit and able to gallop continually on steep terrain, they were able to coordinate their efforts for maximum speed and effectiveness. In less than 2 hours they rounded up cattle out of a rugged area that usually takes 2 days—and left only a few behind. The fire was lapping over their side of the ridge right behind them as they brought the groups together and hustled the herd down out of there. If they'd been 15 minutes later, their way out would have been cut off by fire.

At one point it looked like they'd have to leave the cows and run for it, but the wind changed and saved them. The wind blew the fire back into itself and stopped its advance—

on the main ridge between Withington Creek and Baker Creek, right before it got into heavy timber on the Baker Creek side. If it had started into that timber, it might have burned up the cows, the riders, all the rest of our high range, and all our private mountain pasture.

At one point when Michael looked down from the ridge, fire was traveling swiftly down Withington Creek, starting up the long draws toward the ridge—and in moments nearly reached the top. Wind was bringing it 30 miles an hour. Any people or animals in Withington Creek canyon or those draws would have been trapped. Afterward, he and Carolyn were thankful they hadn't tried to go into Withington Creek to check for cattle; they would never have made it back out.

As it was, they barely made it out of the Baker Creek side with the cows, bringing them down through our 320- and 160-acre pastures to the creek canyon—and had to hurry to get the other 60 pairs out of that pasture where they'd put them 6 days earlier.

The way the fire was coming down the creek, those cattle were in its path, too. Lynn could see the fire was coming right down the canyon; they had to get those cows, but there wasn't much time. He bounced the jeep as fast as he could down the ridge to get ahead of the cows they were bringing and on down to the canyon—so he could hike up the other side to start bringing cattle down.

The fire crews were still in the process of evacuating homes in the canyon, and when they saw Lynn and the kids coming down with the cows, they opened up part of the fence so the cows could go out the corner and down the road. Lynn left his jeep and started up the other mountain on foot to get cows that were up at the very top. Michael hurried up another draw on his horse, leaving Carolyn to finish bringing the big herd and gather cattle in the bottom.

Two Fish and Game officers talked to Lynn briefly and didn't want him to go up the mountain because it was not safe, but he had to try to get those cows. Estimating the speed of the wind and the fire, the officer said, "You only have about 15 minutes!" He drove up on a bench and parked in a spot where he could see up around the bend of the canyon, watching the fire come down, and told Lynn that if the fire got too close, he'd honk his horn—to let Lynn and Michael know to get down out of there *fast.*

With added strength of adrenaline spawned by emergency, Lynn hiked quickly to the top—to start those cattle down—and Michael and his horse made it up the other draw, but cattle were scattered all through the brush. The dogs (which had been a big help on the Baker Creek drive) were exhausted and stayed with Carolyn near the creek bottom. But Michael needed help and called the dogs. The 2 young pups, who'd been working cows only a few weeks that summer, were unsure what to do, but Carolyn stopped her horse and stayed very still. The pups ran around her horse whining, but Michael kept calling, and Carolyn didn't say a word, not wanting to confuse them. So they left her and ran up the mountain (about three-quarters of a mile) and got there in time to help Michael gather cattle spread out in the brush. The old dog finally followed the pups to help.

It looked for a few minutes like they'd never get the cattle out in time, with the fire coming fast down the creek. Then, like a miracle, the wind changed, and the fire stopped. It came within a quarter mile of the cows, the riders, and the cabin in the creek bottom and stopped. The cows were finally gathered and headed down the road. The herd was strung out for a mile, and though Lynn tried to get through them—to get ahead of them before they got to the hayfields—he didn't quite make it. In his hurry at the start of the crisis, he hadn't taken time to shut the gates along the road.

One field still had hay bales (that we hadn't yet had time to haul), so we wanted to bring the cows down to a lower field that was cleared of hay. But the cows found the open gate into the field of bales, and in they went. The kids' horses were spent, yet they had to gallop around and gather reluctant cows out of the hay and get them back on the road. Lynn drove on down to get me so he could help the kids on foot while I drove the jeep. It was dark by then, and we needed the jeep (with flashing lights) to go ahead of the cows on their last mile down the road so no vehicles would come round a corner and plow into the herd.

There was still a lot of traffic on the road, with fire crews and pumper trucks (for structure protection on homes where folks had been evacuated—sprinkling the houses and surrounding areas), and some of the rest of the fire crew and trucks hauling the bulldozers were coming out. A long line of trucks were stuck behind the herd of cows; they patiently had to follow us slowly down to where we could put the cattle into the field.

By the time we got them safely home, it was 11:00 PM and very dark. Michael and Carolyn knew they'd left a few cattle on the range (like the cow that Michael had to leave in Basco Basin) but didn't know how may they were short. In the mad scramble to round up, they hadn't gotten a count on the herd, and Carolyn was afraid they might be short as many as 20 head.

That day the fire grew by 8,000 acres, going up the Lemhi Range and threatening other creek drainages. It was expanding into more rugged country (where it might travel many miles) and had become one of the top-priority fires in Idaho. There were now 700 people working on it. We desperately needed cooler weather and less wind.

Day 7

We got up at 4:00 AM, and Lynn drove up the creek to check on the fire, though it was still dark. It totally burned the right fork of Withington Creek where our 60 cattle had been before we brought them down on Monday night and Tuesday morning. If any others had drifted in from the Baker Creek side in the interim days, they perished. While Lynn was checking the fire, I put a few important things in boxes and sacks; previously, I hadn't taken time to think about what we should take if we had to leave our home.

Our house is several miles lower on the creek than the homes at the upper end and not as much brush and trees around the house. But if the fire came on down, we might have to get out, too.

Smoke filled our valley, but the fire came no farther in the night. It was still burning on Joe Moore Creek, however—a little tributary just above our 160-acre pasture—and could at any time come around the hill and back down into the creek bottom. We had a group of cows on pasture on our upper place (a meadow across from where the FS planned to set up spike camp) and realized that if the fire came on down, those cows would be at risk. So at daylight I saddled my old mare and rode up there to bring those cows down to the field above our house. They'd be 2 miles farther from the fire and would graze down that field to make less fire danger around our house, haystacks, and barnyard buildings.

Dan and Eileen French drove up the creek to open all the range gates (above our allotment) so any cows still alive up there could come down. Michael and Carolyn drove a 4-wheeler onto the Baker Creek range to look for cows. At first, there was too much smoke to see, and they weren't sure if there was fire with that smoke. They saw 1 calf there and 5 head on a hillside in the middle range.

They went home and got horses and gathered those cattle. By then it was midday, the smoke had cleared a little on the Baker Creek side, and Lynn drove up far enough to see that the fire had stopped where it closed in behind them on the ridge on their cattle drive the day before. He radioed to Michael and Carolyn, and they decided to go back up there, but their horses were spent from the 2-day ordeal. A friend came along in his car as they put the 5 head into the field. He took Michael and his saddle home (3 miles) to get a fresh horse—and Carolyn led his tired horse.

Lynn found smoldering hot spots along the ridge where the fire stopped; grass roots and manure piles were still burning, the fire slowly creeping toward sagebrush and timber. He tried to stop it with a shovel, but it was too big a task. He radioed to me that he was coming back down to get water. I phoned some friends, and they got to our house as Lynn got back down the mountain. He went back up with 5 more people to help and 50 gallons of water (in jugs and laundry soap containers with lids) in the back of the jeep. While they worked on fire spots, Michael on a fresh horse was able to locate 2 more pair of cattle and bring them down.

Day 8

The fire was still uncontrolled and growing. This morning the smoke was like a heavy fog; we couldn't see 100 feet. Lynn took more water to the ridge around Baker Creek to see if the hot spots they worked on yesterday were really out. They were—but other areas were still smoldering and growing hotter. A neighbor boy went up on his motorcycle, and together they worked for several hours to douse more hot spots. As they worked, they saw some big trees in Mulkey Creek burst into flame in areas that partially burned the day before. Lynn radioed me, and I called the fire desk to report those; it was still too smoky for the spotter planes to fly, and the fire crew was not yet aware of these new outbreaks.

Lynn hiked up and down the big draws into Withington Creek looking for hot spots and dead cattle but found no cattle.

Dan French called to let us know they got 35 more cows out of Mulkey Creek. Some were covered with soot from walking through burned trees and brush, but most seemed okay. They were still short some cows (some might have perished in Withington Creek), but the FS crews wouldn't let them ride through there to look for them. It was still too dangerous; some of the area was still burning, and in places the hot coals were several feet deep.

We were not sure if we had all our cows. Michael and Carolyn tried to ride through the herd in the field to mark off their tag numbers, but the cattle were flighty and upset from the wild and fast roundup. It took several days of quiet checking before the cows settled down enough to see who was still missing (a cow and 2 calves came down through all the open range gates a few days later, and a young bull showed up 4 weeks later).

Day 9

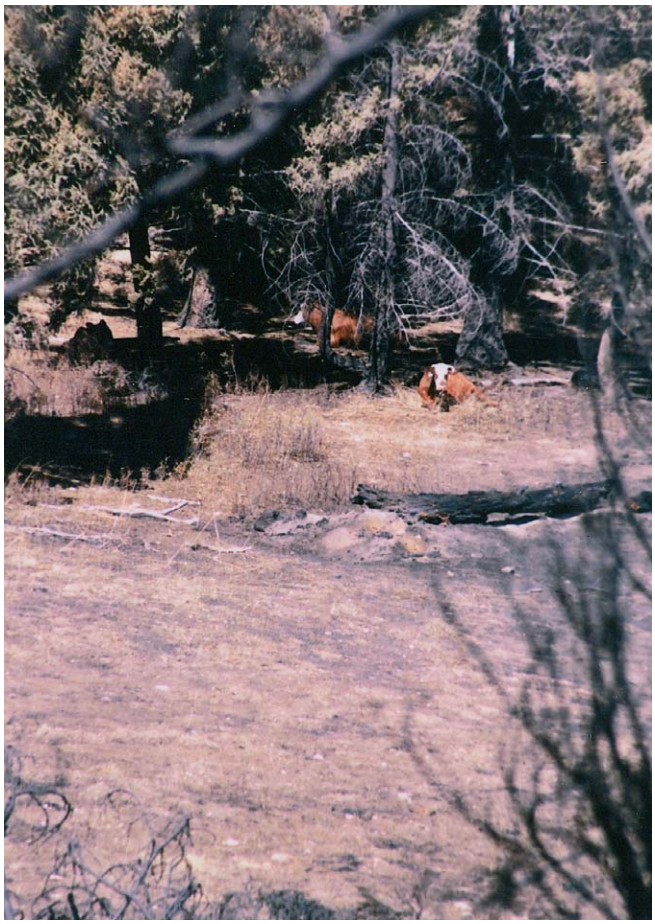
Michael and Carolyn checked the right fork of Withington Creek to see if there were any dead cows but found none. Then they looked for cattle on the low range pasture. A storm raged part of the night, bringing more wind and lightning but no rain.

Day 10

The lightning started more fires, and the fire in Joe Moore Creek was still burning briskly. The FS put a crew on it through the night as well as during the day, trying to keep it from spreading farther. They pulled some of their other crews off the Withington Creek area since it was under control. They let our up-creek neighbors go back to their homes. They kept pumper trucks there for structure protection through the day, taking them off after midnight, feeling the danger was not as great. We were still enveloped in thick smoke, drifting in from the other end of the fire that is not yet controlled.

That evening Lynn and I drove up the creek, talked with the fire crew at the forks, then drove up into our allotment. It was an eerie, stark, and ghostly landscape—with smoking skeletons of trees and all the brush along the creek burned away. The places our cows used to bed, the patches of poison larkspur we always chopped down each year, the favorite shade trees—all gone. A few small spots remained intact or only lightly burned, but mostly everything was gone. Thank God we got the cows out the first days of the fire, before it came down this canyon!

The jeep road around the mountainside was precarious, only half as wide as before; the brush had been burned away from the edges, and the roots and topsoil that held the bushes.



Neighbor's cattle in small unburned area.

Everything seemed stark and steeper, burned down to the dirt and rocks with no buffering of grass and plants.

Day 11

The fire was still burning in Joe Moore Creek (and still very smoky), but the fire crew told us it was nearly under control. The cows on the lower hay meadows were running out of feed, but we couldn't put them back on the range (with part of it burned up and most of the boundary fences gone) or our private mountain pasture until the fire danger had passed. Coming home from the range 6 weeks early made a crisis for fall pasture.

Day 12

Lynn drove up the creek to check on the Joe Moore fire. On the road he met Dan French taking hay to 3 cows and a calf that survived the fire. They had burned feet, unable to travel. They'd holed up in a small patch of trees that lightly burned and were close to a water trough, but it had no water; the pipeline had burned up. An FS pumper truck was able to drive to the trough and dump some water in it for the cows. Dan took hay to them for several days until they were stronger. Somehow the cows escaped the fire, but their feet were severely burned from walking through hot coals and ashes. The calf was in bad shape. His hind feet were completely burned, and his belly was burned; the skin was starting to peel away and open up.

That night we had a thunderstorm, and it actually rained! We had a downpour for a short while, with water running down the driveway. This helped put out the hot spots still burning on Withington Creek and Joe Moore.

Day 13

The air was clear of smoke for once, thanks to the rain, but our creek was running black and thick like syrup—a mixture of mud and ashes. With all the grass gone from most of our watershed, there was nothing to hold the runoff; the rain washed mud and ashes into the creek. Lynn and I drove up to the forks and took pictures of the burned areas. With no smoke, we could finally see the total view and devastation—including the erosion from the previous night's rain. It was a sobering situation. Not only was the grass gone (and most of the timber and all the fences), but the damage that might occur on this steep watershed could be tremendous until it heals.

Day 14

The Frenches took a stock trailer and portable panels and were able to load their cows and bring them home—where they treated them with antibiotics and put them in a clean grassy pasture. The calf was beyond hope, however, and they had to destroy him.

Aftermath

The kids moved their cows to the rest of the hayfields, then started feeding hay. After the calves were sold in the fall, they took the cows to our upper dryland pastures, which held them a few more weeks. After that, however, we had no more pasture and had to buy more hay. The impact, financially, on their operation was pretty high. Also devastating, when the cows were pregnancy checked that fall, was the discovery that more than 50 head were open (in a herd that usually has only a dozen open cows in the fall). The stress of that wild roundup to save the cows resulted in early embryo loss in many that were in the first 45 days of pregnancy.

The Frenches found more of their cattle, including some that had been severely burned in upper Mulkey Creek. They kept those in a riparian enclosure for a few days (where there was grass and water for them) until they'd regained their strength and then trailed them down to where they could get to them with a trailer to haul them the rest of the way home. A Hereford bull the fire crews had seen in upper Withington Creek the afternoon the fire blew up was among the survivors. The pumper truck driver who saw him said the bull was in a bad place and probably wouldn't survive the fire. But somehow he'd made it over the top into Mulkey Creek and joined up with other cattle. He looked "like someone had taken a blowtorch to him, with his hide and hair scorched and some hide clear gone," said Dan, but he was alive and walking.

Typical rangeland before (a) and after the fire (b).

We hiked to the old Harmony Mine (a copper mine that operated in the late 1920s and early 1930s) and took photos of the old mill building (originally 5 stories tall), now all burned and gone. Runoff erosion from the rain after the fire washed a huge amount of dirt and rocks down onto the old road to the mine, making a pile more than 8 feet deep, obliterating the road.

The FS closed the road in upper Withington Creek to vehicle traffic to protect the fragile land from off-road traffic. There was concern about toxic effects of old mine tailings washing into the creek. Years ago, high water each spring brought down some of that toxic material and killed all the fish in the creek. In 1951 the Fish and Game planted more fish, but they died. Finally, by the 1960s, so much of the tailing pile had been flushed away that toxic effects were minimal. A new planting of fish survived. But with watershed damage from the fire, there will be more runoff than usual and more toxic material flushed into the creek again. So the tailings pile from the mine was relocated to a site farther downstream where the canyon was wide enough to dig a pit farther from the creek where the tailings could be deposited and covered.

The several miles of burned-up boundary fence between BLM and FS was another issue, along with the fact we were not allowed to graze cattle in the burned area for 2 years. This had an impact on our ranching operation, leaving us short on summer pasture. And even though we could use the portion that did not burn, it was difficult to keep the cattle in the proper place.

Instead of rebuilding the boundary fence, the BLM put in a temporary electric fence between the burned and unburned areas on our range, which was not totally effective at keeping cattle from going into Withington Creek. When they drifted in there for water, there was nothing to keep them from going into the adjacent FS allotment, and it took days of riding to find them. Some ended up coming home with neighbors' cattle on other drainages, and 2 were never found. The elk strung some of the electric wire around the mountains, creating a hazard for horsemen, cattle, and wildlife alike. The boundary fence was not rebuilt for 2 years.

Much of the timber and sagebrush in upper Withington Creek and Mulkey Creek is completely gone. Some trees were killed by the fire but still standing (some of these were harvested in 2005).

Much of the grass came back very well, other spots became huge weed patches (where all the grass roots and seeds were killed), and some of the very hot areas burned everything—even the thin layer of topsoil—clear down to the rocks. Even the blown-in weed seeds didn't find enough soil to grow. It will be interesting to see how these areas "heal" over the years.

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