



## **"I'll Never Fight Fire with My Bare Hands Again": Recollections of the First Forest Rangers of the Inland Northwest**

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"Got the fire under control. My knees have scabbed over and feel pretty good today, but my hands are in a hell of a shape. Damned if I'll ever fight fire with my bare hands again."

Typical of turn-of-the-century forest rangers in the Inland Northwest—northern Idaho, western Montana, and eastern Washington—this diarist faced fire and other tribulations far from civilization, often alone on foot or horseback, with little equipment and no means of communication.

In this engaging collection, Hal Rothman has selected and provided context for the best and most informative letters written by early foresters. Highly literate and perceptive, the writers illuminate how they were forced to balance the agency's regulatory impulses with the needs of rural communities that depended upon forests for their livelihood. They reveal much about the challenges they met—autonomous decision-making; fire fighting and prevention; opposition and pressure from local residents; occasional corruption or incompetence; and changing technology and agency expectations. Family life, isolation, and loneliness, they show, could also be challenging. "It got so lonely my dog couldn't stand it," wrote Edward G. Stahl. "He went down to the Kootenai River and howled 'til the ferryman from Gateway came over and took him across to town."

Facing bitter cold and heavy snow in the winter and often flames in the summer (1,700 fires in 1910 alone blackened millions of acres and killed 80 fire fighters) foresters managed to persevere with limited resources, Rothman shows. They surveyed land, enforced regulations, evaluated homestead claims, inventoried resources, organized timber sales, let grazing permits, built infrastructure, and handled many unusual situations that came their way.

O. O. Lansdale became judge, jury, and undertaker upon finding two dead men on the trail. "It was up to me, acting as coroner, to hold an inquest and bury them. Being all alone, the inquest was easy—just a case of dispensation of Providence. The burial was not so easy. Digging two graves with a piece of cedar board; then, with a rope around their feet, dragging them to their graves with the rope around the saddle horse."

As the century progressed and technology advanced, the writers show, the Forest Service evolved. Locals, who constituted the early organization, were gradually replaced by college-trained foresters, and tourism became more prevalent as primitive conditions were overcome.

"My first realization of this change came one day when I was walking along the road toward the nursery," wrote David Olson. "A large black sedan drew up from behind and stopped. A liveried chauffeur asked if I wanted a ride. Looking into the car, I saw two elderly ladies sitting in rocking chairs. They smiled and one of them said they were seeing the wild West."

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