

Around here, the wind blows like this all afternoon 300 days a year! And on the other 65, it blows like this all day long! This is a common adage in many locales of the West, and is especially fitting where I spent most of my teenage years. Like most people who work outdoors, I became accustomed to the wind. On one occasion, however, I failed to anticipate the trouble it can cause.

My dad worked for U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and during the early 1960s our family lived on Camas National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Idaho. There were pros and cons to living in that rural setting, and it wasn't until years later that I realized one of the most positive was the opportunity to work on a nearby cattle ranch during summers and on weekends throughout the school year.

The variety of tasks related to a hay and cattle operation provided learning experiences few teenagers in more densely populated areas could imagine. There were really fun jobs, like harvesting "meadow hay" along Modoc Creek near Monida Pass and hauling it to Hamer down the then-being-constructed Interstate 15. There were really *not fun jobs* like trying to avoid falling down in the muck that forms on frozen ground in corrals when newly arrived critters from the auction yard need to be coerced into the chute for vaccination, branding, or "dehorning." The hundreds of tasks in between included time on horseback, lots of time on farm equipment, repairing anything that broke, and irrigating the alfalfa so essential to getting cows through the winter.

Sprinkler systems were in their infancy then, with few "wheel lines" in use, and pivots yet to come. More common was a ditch, a canvas dam, a shovel, and a cutout. Those ditches became overgrown with grasses and weeds each year and had to be cleaned out early in the spring. One simple but necessary task was to first burn the ditches clean before irrigation could begin. The same propane tank and torch setup used to heat branding irons was loaded into the pickup bed, and with one person driving slowly along a ditch, another person could sweep the flames into the ditch to burn off the vegetation. Snowdrifts in the ditches hadn't been gone long so the growth hadn't dried out much and when weeds outside the ditch did start to burn, a few swats with a handy shovel would snuff them out. That is, until that wind had its say.

Nick, the ranch owner's son, was the same

The Camas Incident

The pros and cons of living in rural Idaho.

By Frank Swisher

age as me and a co-worker on the majority of job assignments during those years. We were working along a ditch that ran parallel to and only a short distance from the refuge fence line. I don't remember now who was driving and who was burning, but I do remember



PHOTOS COURTESY FRANK SWISHER



both of us frantically flailing shovels and dirt in a fruitless attempt to stop a fire moving through weeds and grass at the same speed as the wind. We quickly realized our efforts were totally ineffective and watched as the fire raced across the fenced boundary of the Camas National Wildlife Refuge, igniting the old split-juniper fence posts as it went.

It continued spreading till it reached a natural barrier, Camas Creek, which was swollen with spring runoff. As the fire burned out, refuge vehicles and personnel arrived via the road running along the far side of the creek, where they were able to ensure the fire spread no further. Though short-lived, the smoke had attracted a lot of attention. It seemed much bigger and more destructive while aflame, but only about three acres inside the refuge actual-

ly burned. We now had plenty of time to throw dirt on the few remaining hot spots while contemplating our fate.

Reed Mickelsen, the ranch owner, had seen the wind-driven plume of smoke and drove up as we walked back to the pickup.

He told us to make sure every bit of fire was out, then gather up the gear and head home. He would go to refuge headquarters to talk with the manager. Reed was a successful cattleman whose patience and good nature brought out the best in employees, even teenagers. My opportunity to experience such a wide variety of tasks during those years was surely exceeded by the opportunity to work for a man of such exemplary character. I was confident that he would explain the situation to the refuge manager in a way that would minimize our culpability, but the fact



FROM TOP: Ralph Swisher operates heavy equipment to clear the drifts. It didn't snow much there but the wind caused havoc.

► Reed Mickelsen (red shirt), branding boss, the "volunteer" crew and the writer, crouching, take a short break while working calves. ► Reed wields the hot iron, Frank holds the head, and Nick (out of view) works the feet.

remained that due to our negligence, we had destroyed government property. Additionally, I figured that my dad being an employee at the refuge could only make things worse.

We didn't have to worry about the outcome for long. By dinnertime that evening, everything had been scrutinized and discussed, and a decision had been made. The Fish & Wildlife Service would provide steel fence posts to replace the juniper posts damaged or destroyed by the fire, and the Mickelsen Hereford Ranch would provide the labor to install them and repair the fence. It was a commonsense conclusion to a minor occurrence in a small corner of the West. I wonder if that would be the case today. ■

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