

John Maclean Keynote: **MANN GULCH: A NATIONAL LEGACY AT 75**

A quarter century ago, Bob Sallee, the last living survivor of the Mann Gulch Fire, stood roughly where I am today and talked about the fire that took the lives of 13 of his fellow smokejumpers on August 5, 1949. He hadn't known the men well, he told those gathered for the 50th anniversary, but they were united by a special fear each of them had overcome as they knelt in the open doorway of an airplane, ready to jump out, and thought, "My God, am I really going to do this."

We are gathered once again to memorialize the fallen and the event. Fatal wildland fires do not die out when the last ember is extinguished. Those who lived on in the twilight of the Mann Gulch Fire – the families, friends and fellow smokejumpers of those who died, and a sympathetic public – continued to feel its lingering effects. Sallee, for one, was indelibly marked by the fire. He did not seek the limelight, but he never turned down an invitation to tell his story to fire groups, who like the audience here in Helena 25 years ago were hushed and enthralled as he spoke. He told me after one talk I attended that Mann Gulch had left him with an emotional dead spot, an inability to feel the elations and disappointments, the highs and lows that mark the lives of others. Today, we would recognize this as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder and offer ways to diminish its effects.

Bob is no longer with us. He died in 2014 at the age of 82, and Homer "Skip" Stratton, the last living member of the recovery detail, died that same year, at the age of 92. They were the last living participants in the fire. It is worth noting that Sallee's grave marker, a modest rectangle of granite flat on the ground in a cemetery near Spokane, does not mention his smokejumper pedigree or Mann Gulch. It says simply, Robert W. Sallee, the dates of his life and death, and the inscription, "Loving husband, father and grandfather." It is also worth noting Sallee's final words here in Helena 25 years ago. After half a century, he said, perhaps the time had come to let go of the fire. "*There is a time to put away the pain and anger that came after it,*" he said. He echoed my father, Norman Maclean, who predicted in his book about Mann Gulch, *Young Men and Fire*, that over time memory of the fire would fade to forgetfulness.

Yet here we are at the 75-year mark with the memory of Mann Gulch vibrantly alive, which, despite what Bob and my father had to say, is thanks in no small part to their talks and writing. An impressive array of memorial events show that the fire has not slipped from memory and become a thing of the past. Part of my job today is to try to explain why this has happened, why the Mann Gulch Fire has extended its reach, offering recognition and solace to those with direct ties to

it and assurance to all of us that the lessons of the fire will be passed on, saving lives in the future as they have in the past.

Mann Gulch remains with us, in part, because of two enduring mysteries: first and foremost, how did the fire, which burned on a ridge top far from the Missouri River when the crew jumped in, get below them down by the river in the bottom of Mann Gulch, where it blew up? And second, did the escape fire lighted by Wag Dodge, the crew boss, which was intended to save the men, instead impede the crew and contribute to their deaths? There are various answers, none of which have achieved universal acceptance or are likely to, and unsolved mysteries are the lifeblood of legend. When I talked about the mysteries with Sara Brown, program manager at the Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory, which was founded partly as a consequence of Mann Gulch, she remarked, “*They are part of the mystique that keeps us learning from the fire.*”

The man sometimes identified as the fourteenth victim of Mann Gulch, Harry Gisborne, who has been called the first fire scientist, added another mystery when he hiked into the gulch in November after the fire, despite his doctor’s warning that his heart might not stand the strain. He was accompanied by Ranger John Robert Jansson, who was haunted to the end of his days by his role in the fire. Gisborne went into the gulch to check out a theory he had formed to explain the fire’s behavior, but when his observations contradicted the theory, he discarded it. It was the end of a long day and Gisborne took a moment to rest, telling Jansson he was eager to get back to his desk and pull the new material together. Those were virtually his last words. His heart failed and stopped, and his fresh insights into the fire died with him. In *Young Men and Fire*, there’s a description of Gisborne lying on his back where Jansson had arranged him, carefully replacing his eyeglasses, “Then Jansson ran for help. The stars came out. Nothing moved on the game trail. The great Missouri passing below repeated the same succession of chords it probably will play for a million years to come. The only other motion was the moon floating across the lenses of Gisborne’s glasses, which at last were unobservant.”

The fire inspired not only my father’s book, but an impressive body of other works: more books, technical essays, music and dance, documentaries and other visual arts. Taken together, they have not only preserved the story, but enhanced and given it greater depth. Only three years after the fire, Hollywood produced *Red Skies of Montana*, a full-length feature film loosely based on the fire. *Young Men and Fire*, the first book-length account, became an award-winning best seller that introduced smokejumping to a national audience. Richard Rothermel’s study, “A Race That Couldn’t Be Won,” remains a benchmark in the study of fire

behavior. Even a brief summary of aftereffects, however, should include James Keelaghan's haunting ballad, *Cold Missouri Waters*, which has become the unofficial anthem of the wildland fire service.

The legacy has many layers. In an unwanted replay, Colorado's South Canyon Fire in 1994 cost the lives of 14 firefighters, including three smokejumpers, the first deaths by fire for smokejumpers since Mann Gulch. It was Mann Gulch all over again, observers remarked, noting the close resemblance of topography, fire behavior, and number of deaths.

The improbable story of the resurrection of the C-47, the Johnson Flying Service plane that flew the men to Mann Gulch, now named Miss Montana, is a saga in its own right. It began with the recovery of the plane from a muddy grave in the bottom of the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh where it crashed in 1954. The plane was purchased in 2001 by the Museum of Mountain Flying in Missoula, where it was restored by a veritable army of volunteers and made a transatlantic flight to Europe in 2019 for the 75th anniversary of D-Day and the 70th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift. Miss Montana is flying here, in the sky above us, as part of this memorial event.

Importantly, the lives and personalities of the men who died in Mann Gulch have been recovered thanks to research by many people and the cooperation of friends and families. As Mike Bina has noted, memorial ceremonies are being held for the first time at the gravesites of all 13 men. The effects of a fatal fire can indeed reach from one generation to another. When Bina contacted Eldon Diettert's niece, Heidi Powell, she told her story about Grandmother Diettert hearing of Eldon's loss as though the event was fresh, although Eldon had died before she was born and Grandmother Diettert had been gone for a quarter century. The girl appeared to take on her grandmother's pain, Bina said, "as though she had failed by not having enough tears to wash it away."

Over the decades, firefighters, literary fans, fire buffs, and the simply curious have worn footpaths into Mann Gulch. Earlier this year the trail into the gulch from neighboring Meriwether Gulch was declared a National Recreation Trail, the Mann Gulch Overlook Trail, after a determined effort by the Mann Gulch student club at the C.R. Anderson Middle School in Helena. To walk the ground is to come to grips with terrain that shaped its history. Hiking the crew's escape route up the gulch is a leg-killing lesson in humility. The rimrock beckons from above, forever beyond the reach of the doomed 13. For years the dagger shape of Dodge's escape fire could be made out, because while the main fire scorched the ground,

the escape fire burned quickly and lightly, allowing full regeneration. The Meriwether Fire of 2007, however, swept the entire gulch, and the ghost of Dodge's fire has disappeared.

Mann Gulch has saved lives in many ways: the fire contributed to the 10 Standard firefighting Orders in place since 1957; Dodge's escape fire presaged the fire shelters that have saved hundreds of lives; Gisborne's legacy led to creation of the Forest Service's first fire science lab, the one in Missoula. This year, the lab has produced an online video tour of the fire that's sure to become a learning tool for firefighters and a window into the event for a general audience. The narrator, David Turner, retired forester for the Helena National Forest, has many decades of experience with Mann Gulch. A special edition of his account of the fire, *The Thirteenth Fire*, has been reissued for this memorial occasion.

A challenge for the wildland fire community in future years is to make more progress in dealing with the mental health of survivors, not only those like Bob Sallee who barely escaped the flames, but those like Grandmother Diettert, the "second victims," as they're called, the friends and family touched by tragedy. Too often they are left in silence and isolation once the rush of attention in the aftermath of tragedy has passed.

Today's memorial events help keep alive the spirit and lessons of Mann Gulch, honoring the sacrifices of the past and bringing greater understanding of the challenges of wildland fire today. Mann Gulch has not faded into obscurity, but has risen from the ashes to become a cultural legacy for the wildland fire community, Montana, and the nation.