

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

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| Incident Name: Waldron Creek Fire | Incident Date & Time: 08/25/1931 in late afternoon or early evening |
| Incident Location: Teton District of the Lewis & Clark National Forest | Incident Size: 800 acres |
| Types of resources involved: U.S. Forest Service temporary-hire firefighters | # of Fatalities/injuries: 5 fatalities |
| <p>Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment <p>This fire is <u>not</u> documented in the NWC Historical Wildland Firefighter Fatalities publication (NFES 1849/PMS 822)</p> | |
| Conditions leading up to the event: | |
| <p>Continuous state-wide drought conditions had prevailed since 1917 and were exacerbated by weather throughout the summer of 1931. At the time of the fire, precipitation in the Teton District of the Lewis & Clark National Forest was 60% of its average and 1931 became the warmest recorded year for the district to that date.</p> <p>The U.S. Forest Service as a whole had underdeveloped capacity for wildland firefighting commensurate with its stated suppression goals, but this was especially severe in the more remote areas of Montana, such as the Rocky Mountain Front, where this fire occurred. The Waldron Creek Fire started in late August, and numerous other fires throughout the region had tied up experienced personnel. Throw-together crews of general labor were commonly used across the nation for wildfire suppression, and all the crews sent to the Waldron Creek Fire were comprised of day labor from the local area, without any previous fire experience.</p> | |
| Brief description of the event: | |
| <p>On August 25, 1931, a 20 man crew of laborers was assembled in Great Falls, Montana to be sent to the Waldron Creek Fire, in the South Fork of Waldron Creek drainage on the Teton District of the Lewis & Clark National Forest, near the town of Choteau, Montana. The fire was first reported on August 23, following a lightning storm on August 22. The fire was burning in stands of mature timber and heavy dead and down, in a sensitive region of timber that had been sold but not yet harvested. Following the initial report, Teton District Ranger Walt Streeter took command of the incident and gathered an initial 15 man crew from Great Falls, arriving on scene on August 24, where Streeter transferred command to H.H. Hendron, Lewis & Clark National Forest Assistant Supervisor. Streeter then returned to Choteau to gather 25 additional men to serve as firefighters. While doing this, Streeter also requested more men from the Lewis & Clark NF headquarters in Great Falls.</p> <p>On the morning of August 25, a crew of 20 men was transported by train from Great Falls to Choteau, then by vehicle to Teton Canyon. The men were recruited from the general Great Falls labor pool, and were inexperienced and unfamiliar with the fire area and behavior. There they were placed under the command of Franklin Fellers, a local farmer with firefighting experience, who led them on a 12-mile hike to the fire. At the fire, Fellers left the crew by a 20 acre spot and proceeded to rendezvous with Bud McNeal, Teton District Alternate Ranger, who had taken over the fire. The men at the spot were unable to see the main fire, as it was obscured by a spur ridge. While Fellers was briefing McNeal, the afternoon winds picked up, as they had the two days prior. The wind event propelled the main fire down drainage toward the spot, with an estimated doubling in size from 300 to over 700 acres in several minutes.</p> <p>When the fire blew up, 15 of the 20 men made their way uphill into a burned area on a spur ridge, then escaped off the back side, making their way to the fire camp. Five men: Hjalmar "Harry" Gunnarson, Herbert Novotny, Frank Williamson, Ted Bierchen, and Charles Allen, made their way down into the main drainage, in front of the fire. Witnesses stated the five were led by Gunnarson. It is unclear what occurred immediately before the men were killed, but the bodies of Novotny, Bierchen, Williamson, and Allen were found by partially-constructed fireline, indicating a possible attempt to stop the fire, and Novotny's body was found alone, upslope of the others, a day after the other bodies were found. All bodies were burned beyond recognition, and identification had to be made based on personal effects.</p> <p>After the blowup, the fire saw no significant growth, and remained approximately 800 acres. The total number of men assigned to it grew to 125, and operations on the fire were complete approximately a week later.</p> <p>The Teton County coroner, Charles Roberts, held an inquest on August 28, following a survey of the fatality site. He concluded that each of the dead "<i>[h]ad no one to blame but himself.</i>" A similar statement, signed by several witnesses, was submitted by Ranger Streeter to Lewis & Clark National Forest headquarters in Great Falls. The bodies of Bierchen and Williamson were returned to their families. Novotny, Gunnarson, and Allen lay in unmarked graves until grave markers were supplied by Dr. Charles Palmer, professor at the University of Montana and former Missoula Smokejumper. Novotny's marker was placed at the Highland Cemetery in Great Fall, Montana in 2011, with markers for Gunnarson and Allen being placed in the cemetery at Choteau, Montana in 2014.</p> | |

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Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Strong afternoon winds manifested on the days between the passage of the weather system that led to the fire's ignition and the day of the blowup. Chronic drought conditions were exacerbated by acute weather conditions that summer. The fire occurred in an area of heavy dead and down fuels, which were extremely receptive to fire under the conditions. The fire occurred in a steep, rocky drainage that was conducive to both extreme fire behavior and uncondusive to escape by firefighters.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

The incident occurred when experienced overhead was away from the inexperienced crew, leading to a breakdown in command when the fire blew up. The death of the five men may have been prevented if they had leadership with them who could more accurately assess the blowup and the right actions to be taken given the circumstances.

At the time of the blowup, the crew was new to the fire area, unable to see the main fire, and exhausted from a day of travel and a strenuous hike in. Under these circumstances, situational awareness broke down and it is unlikely any of the five men killed had a full understanding of the fire behavior and circumstances before they were burned over.

If the men were indeed trying to make a stand to stop the fire, then direct, frontal-attack tactics were tragically unsuited to the conditions and had no chance of success. While Gunnarson had some experience in wildland firefighting, the situation and fire behavior were such that any effort by the five men would have had little effect.

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The five men killed on the Waldron Creek Fire were part of the 23 total men killed across the country during the 1931 fire season. Scant records exist for all of these tragedies and most of these have never been acknowledged by their employing agency.

The Waldron Creek Fire, and the 1931 season in general, comprised the tail end of the U.S. Forest Service's use of crews comprised of general labor, hired the day of, without any additional training. With the continuation of the Great Depression and the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, along with the beginning of the smokejumper program and the eventual shift to dedicated fire officers and crews across both federal and state agencies, the days of untrained fire crews were coming to an end. This has led to a neglect of these early fire crews, which don't fit into a view of a dedicated, professional wildland fire service. Understanding the history of this era, as well as the sacrifices made by those involved, is essential for a complete picture of the evolution of wildland firefighting in America, and the lessons learned are still relevant to firefighters today.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/waldron-creek-fire-entrapment-fatalities-1931>
<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1931/08/25/5-fatality-crew/>

Book:

- *Montana's Waldron Creek Fire: The 1931 Tragedy and the Legacy of the Forgotten Five* ~ by Dr. Charles Palmer

The team writing this summary relied on this book about the Waldron Creek Fire by Dr. Charles Palmer, Ed. D., Professor of Integrative Physiology & Athletic Training at the University of Montana. It is the definitive history of the incident and the team would like to extend their thanks to Dr. Palmer for his work.

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Lewis & Clark Interagency Hotshot Crew

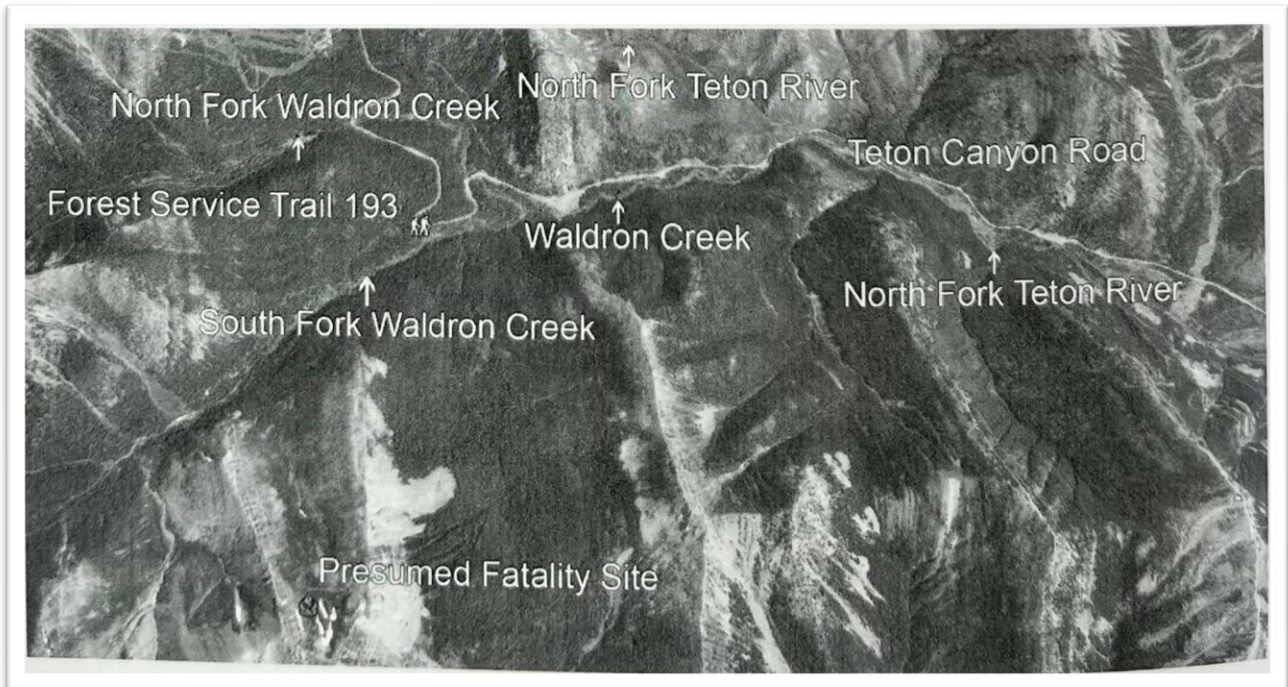
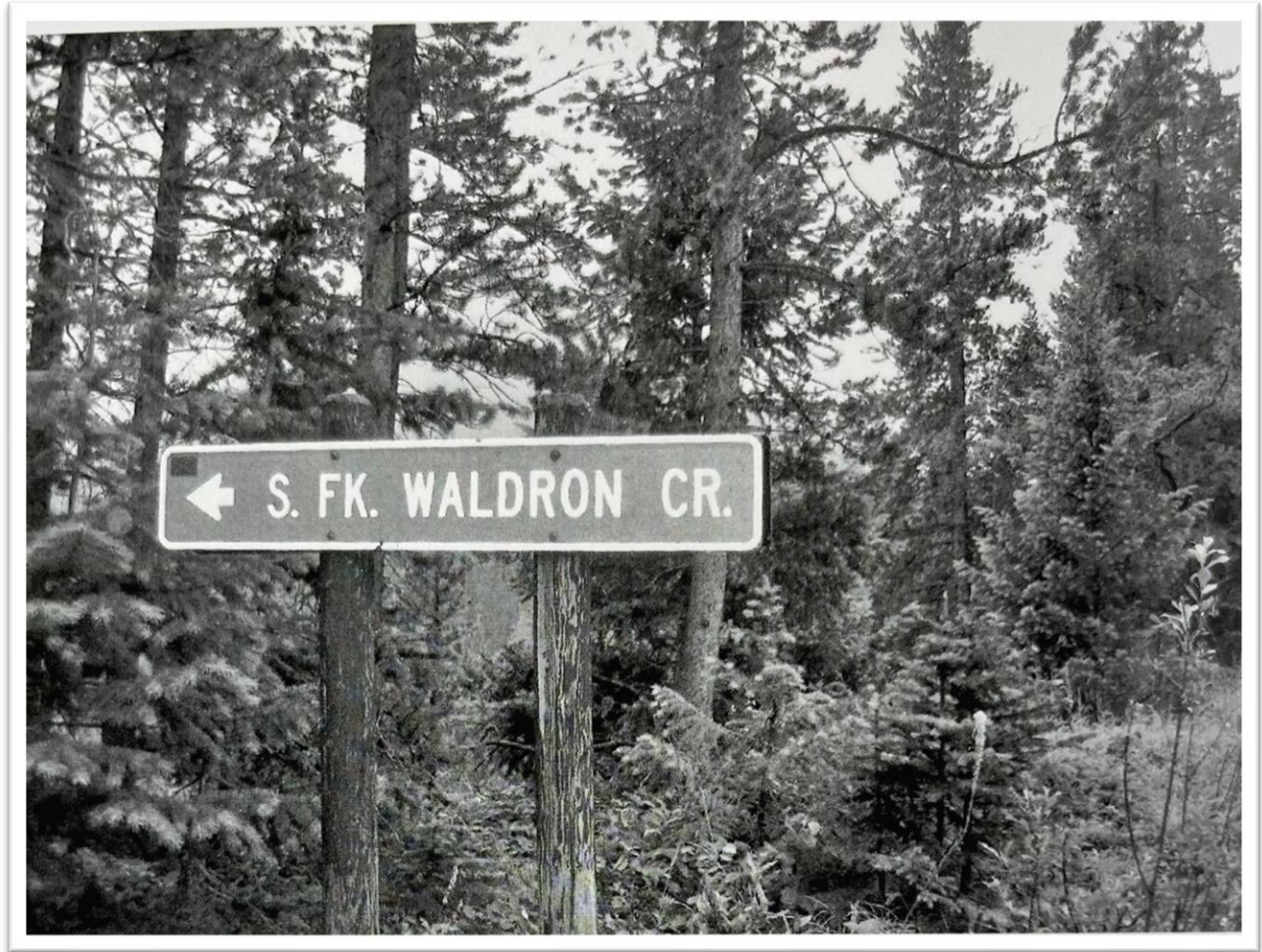
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**Memorial stone placed at the Wildland Firefighter Memorial in Boise, Idaho in 2009
This is the only memorial that exists for this incident
(Incorrect date has been noted)**

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Fatality site location information from the book *Montana's Waldron Creek Fire* (page 138)