

RIGHT TO PROTECT ONE'S OWN PROPERTY

Testimony

by

Walter S. Gardner

I believe it was in 1947 or 48 that we got a call from Clover Valley to help fight fire. We took the whole hay crew over, fought fire all night. Worked lots of men then, put up most of the hay with horses vet. There were high winds, maybe 60 or 70 miles an hour. They needed all the help they could get. When we got there the fire was moving South toward Warm Creek, blowing off the mountain. It would start up in the foot hills and burn to the highway in no time. Faster than a man could run a horse. We'd no more than get it put out and hear would come another fire down along side the old burn, seemed like it was jumping a quarter mile ahead of itself.

It burned up all the feed on 5 or 6 ranches, from Brough's ranch to the Weeks Ranch. Burned standing meadow hay, hay in the stacks, all their fall and winter feed. Though I can't remember any Homes burning.

Ranchers all turned out to fight fire then, very few fires got away in those days. We got on them before they got away. Ed McKenzie was our Forest Ranger then, the only one who ever really worked with ranchers. Everyone respected Ed. Today they don't want anyone on the fires. They want the ranchers to go home. They want to handle it themselves. On the Shandy Town fire, the Forest Service stopped the Refuge crawler after it had opened a fire line across Refuge ground. They wouldn't let it continue onto the Forest Service ground. Some people almost lost their lives because of it. They did lose a pumper truck.

It seems we have less and less say over the affairs of our own communities anymore. Our ranches, our homes, everything we own is in jeopardy.

Now they want Wilderness on our mountains. The threat then would be even greater.

Ranching families could lose in one day what its taken three or four generations to build. We cannot afford Wilderness designation. It must be stopped.

In all of our lives when we had only ourselves and our neighbors to depend on, we never felt insecure. But now with outside interest controlling the Public Lands that surround us, we are in a greater danger of losing all we own.

Sincerely
Walter Gardner

Oct 10, 1990

Cliff Gardner
Bertha Gardner
Witnesses

A history of fire control in Ruby Valley

My Great Grandfather brought his family to Ruby Valley in 1880. By that date most of the Valley had been settled and the only remaining land that would qualify for homesteading was in Secret Valley. Secret is a small mountain valley or park whose water drains through Secret Pass to the Humboldt River but has always been considered part of Ruby Valley. It was there that he and the older boys in the family took up land.

Then in 1905, my Grandfather, Bill Gardner, sold his homestead to his brother Alex and moved to the Southern end of Ruby Valley and bought the Dawley Ranch from Robert Harrison. I was raised there, on Dawley Creek, attending one-room schools and then boarding out in Elko for High School.

There has been a great deal of change in the way we live and do things during my lifetime. Mostly for better, for life is much easier now. But there have been many changes that I don't believe have been good. We people have become less dependent on ourselves and our neighbors over the years, while Government has become more and more dominant in the affairs of our lives.

An example of this is the manner in which we fight range fires in our Valley these days as apposed to the past. As a boy in the 1940's and 50's, I remember how the Valley people responded to others' needs when fires started. People from as far as 35 miles away would be on a fire in no time, getting there even before the smallest fires were put out. And although the only real tool for fighting the fires then were the same shovels used by the Ranchers for irrigation and fence building, the Valley people were effective with them and very few fires got out of control.

Then in the early 1970's Fire Departments were formed in our Valleys. I can't remember that the people were requesting such help from the State, but there they were. The State Department of Forestry, helping us become organized and furnishing fire trucks. But rather than becoming more effective, we seem to only spend more money than before. People no longer seem to care as much and tend to let the professionals take the responsibility. And of course there are more professionals each year with bigger and better equipment. Then too, local people are often made to feel they're not needed or wanted on the fire line.

Then in the late 70's things were made worse when the Land Management Agencies adopted policy whereby they could chose to let a fire burn if they felt it could be beneficial to resources. For the first time since the Valley was settled, local people could no longer fight range fires in any manner they felt necessary.

A very serious situation in Ruby Valley, for the ranches lay right along the foothills almost against the mountains. These foothills are ideal for range fires. Big Sage and Cheat grass thrive on the steep well drained Granet foothills. And when summer thunderstorms move through, lightening plays across them like it is invited. Any fire close to the ranches is a serious threat. If high winds or other conditions are right, a fire can burn a ranchers range and cattle in no time or worse, burn across their private land distroying a years hay crop, equipment, buildings and fences, everything it may have taken 3 or 4 generations to build can be lost.

My Father tells of a dry year in the 1940's when a fire started in Clover Valley. The winds were so bad, and the fire so intense, that they put out a call to all the surrounding Valleys for help. Dad joined others and tried to fight the fire at its Southern boundary just south of Bob Steeles ranch, (now Ferris Brough's ranch.)

As he told it, they would get the fire mostly under control only to have another hot spot start up at the foot of the mountain and in a matter of minutes it would be down to Highway 93. The winds were carrying sparks and starting new fires as much as 100 yards ahead of itself. The winds were so strong that it burned standing grass in the fields ready to be cut for hay, along with newly stacked hay, and many buildings.

In 1979 the so called "Shanty Town Fire" burned from the Camp Ground just South of the Gallagher Hatchery North to Harrison Pass, over 9 miles in six hours.

After fire fighters had held the fire back as it passed around the Refuge Headquarters, they took a stand to stop the fire just south of a State employee's residence a mile further on. The Refuge crawler was used to make a fire line up the ridge from the County Road to the base of the mountain. But just as they were about to start on up the slope the Forest Service stopped the crawler, declaring they intended to let the fire burn on over the Forest Service lands.

The Fire Fighters then took a stand in front of the employee's residence. A bad call, for they not only lost a Division of Forestry pickup, but almost lost two lives of fire fighters as a result. All of which may have been prevented if only the first firebreak could have been completed.

This last Summer, (1988), a fire started on B.L.M. lands just North of Paul Neff's hay field. Paul was putting up hay not 200 yards away, yet when Paul's neighbor, Alan Sharp came with their ranch crawler and began dozing a fire break around the fire, he was stopped by the first B.L.M. personnel on the fire and told to take the crawler off the fire line.

It is not the people working for a State or Federal Agencies that stand to lose his home or livelihood if range fires get away, but local people. Local people must have the right to govern the affairs of their own communities.

But even more important, if we are to remain a independent and free people, we must not allow ourselves to turn our responsibilities over to higher and higher leveles of government. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. If we ignore the latter, we will lose the first.

Cliff Mardner, Spring 1989