



PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Posse of Westerners

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Kalispell, Montana

September, 12, 2022

Richard A. Hull, Ye Editor, e-mail: richardahull@charter.net

SEPTEMBER MEETING

Monday, September 19, 2022

Topic: “History of the U.S. Forest Service Smokejumpers – A Continuing Saga ” Part 2 in a Series

Presenter: Fred Cooper of Missoula, Montana.

Where: Northwest Montana History Museum, in the second floor historic classroom, 124 Second Avenue East, Kalispell, MT.

Time: Grab 'n' Greet, raffle and book signings start at 6:00 pm.

No dinner offered, but there are downtown restaurants within walking distance.

Historic Presentation: Program begins at 7:00 pm. No reservations are required, but seating will be limited; so come early. Call (406)-309-0938 with any questions.

Posse members may join the program through Zoom at the following address:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85451102305?pwd=Zm55bGl2dTM5TVlEV3dydUxKbmE3Zz09>

Meeting ID: 854 5110 2305

Passcode: 090566

E-mail Tim Christenson at tim.chris@yahoo.com for more help.

ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

The use of airplanes in fighting fires dates back to 1909, but it was not until 1939 that the first successful experiments with smoke-jumpers began. July 12, 1940, marks the first time smoke-jumpers were dropped on a fire.

In this second in the series, former smoke-jumper Fred Cooper covers these early years (1940-1946) as aerial techniques were developed and refined.

In 1940 smoke-jumping was still considered experimental. World War II also

had the Forest Service competing against the the demand for paratroopers. “Reject” parachutes from the military were modified and bases set up at former Civil Conservation Corp camps. The Seeley Lake Ranger Station was the first smokejumper training school. The program expanded, with Missoula eventually becoming the key location.

About 240 smokejumpers were were recruited from the Civilian Conservation Corps program for conscientious objectors in World



Photo courtesy of Fred Cooper

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War II. They had to serve until well after the war, with the last released in 1947.

Another pioneer group was the all-Black U.S. Army 555th battalion (Triple Nickle). The paratrooper unit was specially trained to deal with the threat of Japanese incendiary balloon bombs. The balloons rode the jet stream across the Pacific Ocean, with the goal of setting American forests afire. The attacks were largely unsuccessful, and the unit turned to fighting forest fires directly, making 1,200 jumps on 36 fires.

Returning Army veterans added to the knowledge base and nylon parachutes were introduced. The Smokejumper Project officially became part of the Forest Service in 1944.

The presentation covers the three years of the conscientious objector smokejumper program. It will include photos and letters from the period.

About the Presenter

Fred Cooper was a smokejumper from 1962 to 1967 in Washington and Oregon.

After graduating from Oregon State, he had a career in human resources with the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC.

He is a smokejumper historical researcher and a board member of the National Smokejumper Association.

His new book, the *Smokejumper Experiment*, has just been published and will be available for sale at the meeting. The book details the airplane-parachute invention of 1935, trials and tribulations of the experiment in 1939, training operations in 1940, and biographies of



Fred Cooper
Photo - TheSmoky-Generation.com

the 16 men who made the 1939 Experiment successful. Included also are numerous photos taken during the 1939 experiment. Mike McMillian, who edited the volume, has an epilogue on the “square” Ram-Air parachute used now by both the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.



GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

NMPW 's meetings are held on the 3rd Monday of the month, except the months of December and January, at the Northwest Montana History Museum at 124 Second Avenue East, Kalispell, Montana.

Meetings begin with a Grab 'n' Greet session from 6 pm. to 7 pm. for chance to get acquainted. Historical attire is encouraged, but not required.

Local history authors will have their books for sale, and will be available for signing.

The presentation starts at 7 pm and is free for members and youths 16 and under. Non-members pay \$5.

Historic books will be raffled off as a fund raiser.

All meetings will be broadcast on-line via Zoom for our Out-of-County Corresponding and Brigade members and the members who cannot physically or choose not to attend the meetings.

FUTURE PROGRAMS

October: Monday, October 17, 2022

“Civilian Conservation Corps in Glacier National Park” by

David Butler of Santa Fe, New Mexico



FROM THE SHERIFF'S SADDLEBAG

By Edward "Eddy" Byrne

Once again, we bid farewell to Summer and officially welcome Fall three days after our September meeting. We have come to remember the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and September 11-12 2012 (Benghazi attack). This month also included the auction in Eureka of the Valley History Museum on 11-12 September.

On 9/11 we remembered the events of 21 years ago and honor those who lost their lives and those who responded in the aftermath at the seven buildings comprising the World Trade Center complex in New York City, the Pentagon in Northern Virginia, and a lonely field in Pennsylvania.

2,977 people lost their lives and over 6,000 were injured in these three attacks. This included 2,606 in the WTC; 125 in the Pentagon, 249 innocents on the four planes, and 19 terrorists. In New York casualties included 343 New York Fire Department firefighters, 23 NYPD Officers, and 37 Port Authority, Officers. The 19 terrorists were led by an Egyptian, Mohammad Atta, 15 Saudi nationals, two from the United Arab Emirates, and one from Lebanon.

In addition, this is the 10th anniversary of the Benghazi attack in Libya. The attack resulted in the deaths of four Americans including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, Sean Smith, a U.S. Foreign Service Information Management Officer, and two CIA contractors, Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty. Ten other Americans were wounded.

The first and only memorial to the Benghazi attack is located here in the Flathead on the Averil Elk farm in Bigfork. The annual 9/11 memorial ceremony is extremely moving. The presentation of the colors (flags) by a mounted

color guard riding through the trees to the memorial was followed by multiple dignitaries addressing the audience. The entire event is catered and free to the public. This year the ceremony was followed by the showing of the movie "13 Hours", a depiction of the 13-hour battle that began a 9:40 pm on September 11 and ended late in the morning on the 12th. If you have never attended the ceremony it is well worth putting it on your calendar for next year. You can visit the site but you must coordinate through the Flathead Lake Lodge.

The other significant event this year on 9/11 and 9/12 was the liquidation auction of the Valley Heritage Museum in Eureka. This included selling tractors, cars, trucks, farming, logging, and mining equipment along with a myriad of engines, saddles, antiques, et cetera. A wonderful collection that is no longer centrally located for the public to visit. In order to prevent this from happening to any of our other regional museums, it is imperative that we the public, and more specifically those of us who cherish our history, visit and financially support our local museums and historic sites.

Once again I hope to see you all next week at our September meeting and presentation.



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Members aware of events not listed here are encouraged to contact Ye Editor with the particulars at richardahull@charter.net

- **Sept. 15-18:** 2022 Westerners International Conference, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Hosted by The Pikes Peak Posse of the Westerns.

Register online at:
<https://pikespeakwesterns.square.site>

Visit our website: northwestmontanaposseofwesterners.wordpress.com

FROM YE EDITOR'S DESK

Two gems in the Mission Valley.



The Ninepipes Museum

Article and photos by Rick Hull

As part of a continuing series on local museum, my wife and I ventured south last weekend to visit the Ninepipes Museum of Early Montana between Ronan and St. Ignatius.

It is one of the most exceptional museums I have visited. The rooms are filled with authentic buckskin clothing, bows and arrows, historic firearms, original paintings and hundreds of old photographs.



Museum gift shop

One section has a dozen mounted animals in a full-scale diorama, and on the opposite side, an Indian tepee with a real babbling book and pond. Hand-held speakers provide a self-guided tour.

Unfortunately you will have to take my word about the exhibits – photographs in the museum

portion are not allowed.

The museum is open Wednesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Through Dec. 11. The website is: <https://ninepipesmuseum.org/>

So I headed south to see how the renovation of the St. Ignatius Mission church turned out. When we arrived a black bear wandering the grounds was the main attraction.



St. Ignatius Church

The 55 murals filling the interior were painted by the mission cook in his spare time in 1904-05.

As you can see below, the just-completed \$1.4 million restoration has been vividly successful.



St. Ignatius Mission Church Interior

The church is open to the public and photos are allowed. There is no admission, but donations are accepted.

<https://stignatiusmission.org/> is the website.

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U.S.S. Montana



U.S. Navy Photo

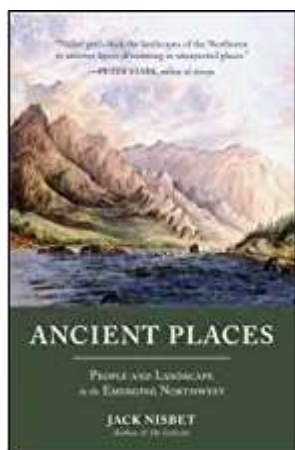
The U.S.S. Montana submarine was commissioned in a ceremony June 25 in Norfolk Virginia. It is the second Navy ship to carry the Montana name.

A battleship that would be named Montana was approved in 1939 before the start of WWII. It was supposed to be the first of a new class of battleships. But the program was canceled when the emphasis turned to aircraft carriers. A model of the proposed ship is on display in Helena.



FROM THE BOOK SHELF

By Rick Hull



Ancient Places – People and Landscape in the Emerging Northwest, by Jack Nisbet, is a collection of off-the-wall essays about the Pacific Northwest. Nisbet lives in Spokane.

The stories start with a night in November 1792 when a meteor strikes a lake in northern Canada, landing “with a sound like a mass of jelly.” But daylight showed no sign of broken branches or marks in the snow or ice.

Next Nisbet joins the exploration of an ice-bearing cave in downtown Spokane, and looks at similar caves in the volcanic geology of the Columbia Basin. Then he talks about the biscuitroot, an important Indian food source, and then investigates some unusual ants. He also retells the story of 15-ton meteorite found in the Willamette Valley and a mysterious 1872 earthquake.

Nibset picks several local characters as subjects, and how they were influenced by the Northwest. A history of the terra-cotta industry in eastern Washington becomes a story about Leno Prestini, who expanded his sculpture with the clay material into some fame as a painter. Wes Wehr turned his interest in geology and fossils into artwork from melted crayons.

The stories take the mundane and make it entertaining,

256 pages. \$18.95

TRIVIA QUESTION

Last month's question was about the nationality of an early fur trader killed by Blackfeet near Evaro. His home is also the name of an Idaho county, though it is not initially obvious.

Barbara Boorman and **Pat Walsh** both had the answer. The unfortunate individual was from Hawaii and the county is spelled phonetically as Owyhee.

Hawaii was once known as the Sandwich Islands, which explains the reference to lunch.

This Month's Trivia Question

This month's article is about the 1929 fire that swept over Teakettle Mountain and into Glacier National Park.

The question is: How is the 1929 fire related to Teakettle Mountain?

Submit your answer to Ye Editor at richardahull@charter.net and we will print the names of all those who get it right.

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Barbara Boorman and Pat Walsh
Trivia Question

THE FLATHEAD'S BIGGEST FIRE

How the 1929 Fire Threatened Columbia Falls and Invaded Glacier National Park

By Rick Hull

Residents of Northwest Montana are no stranger to bad fire years, and even the earliest settlers complained of smoky summers.

But the most frightening blaze occurred in 1929, when Kalispell residents could see the vivid glow lighting up the eastern horizon.

“This, with the flames on Teakettle Mountain, and the fire north of Columbia Falls, gave the impression that the whole country from the Canyon to the park, were afire,” reported the Daily Inter Lake.

Residents in Belton (West Glacier) and Apgar fled for their lives, and the only fire line manned by volunteers saved Columbia Falls.

The trouble started with the Sullivan Creek fire on the upper South Fork. The fire grew to prominence August 12, 1929, when it was declared the worst of the season. It had burned 3,000-4,000 acres, and there were 100 firefighters on the line, with 25 more coming from Missoula. Flames raged through a fire camp, even though the site was located in green timber.

Then the Trail Creek fire blew up on August 13, and local Forest Service supervisor Nagal said it would probably need to be fought from both the Fortine and the North Fork sides of the Whitefish Range. Meanwhile, Coram had its own 300-acre fire.

Next was a fire that broke out four miles north of Half Moon on August 17 .

Forest supervisor Nagal said, “Conditions are right for a big blow up at any time,” and he was right.

The first to go was the Half Moon Fire. A blast of high winds at 2 a.m. on August 19 sent the flames racing east. That afternoon a fire broke out two miles east at Cedar Creek, north of Columbia Falls along the base of Teakettle Mountain. Finally there was another fire on Anderson Ridge, about two and a half miles northeast.

Continuing high winds combined the three fires into one huge fire.

Forty men were trapped at Cedar Lake. But volunteer truck drivers drove though of half-mile of



Half Moon Fire sweeps up Teakettle Mountain in 1929.

U.S. Forest Service Photo by K.D. Swan

Courtesy of the Northwest Montana History Museum

flames to rescue them. Boorman, of the forestry association, said it was the most spectacular drive he had ever witnessed. Just after passing a big skidway, the logs broke loose and tumbled down onto the road.

The Half Moon Fire made a “wild run” the next day, sweeping up Teakettle Mountain to the top. It ran north to a mile beyond Bailey Lake, and south to within two miles of Columbia Falls. On the following day, August 21, it jumped the North Fork River and invaded Glacier National Park. A special train ran to Belton (West Glacier) to evacuate the tourists. North Fork residents were fleeing for their lives, driving their horses north towards safety across the Canadian border.

Boorman called it, “the cleanest fire he ever seen.” Everything was burnt down to the mineral soil, he said. Howard Flint, Forest Service fire chief, flew over the fire and said it was the worst he had ever seen and impossible to check. “One man would have done as much good as a thousand,” he was quoted.

The fire spared Belton, stopping 250 feet short, and park headquarters did not burn, despite initial reports to the contrary. An old burn on Apgar Mountain was credited with bogging down the fire.

By August 23 the Half Moon fire had burned an estimated 75,000 acres, running up the Middle Fork to Nyack, and towards the head of Lake McDonald. However Mr. Lewis, owner of what is now the Lake McDonald lodge, insisted the lodge was not in danger and was operating as normal.

Coram residents were holding the fire off with Forest Service pumps, and the American Legion in Kalispell was recruiting volunteers to man the lines at Columbia Falls.

On August 24 the Sullivan Creek Fire blew up, eventually running seven miles up the mountain sides.

A change in the weather helped August 26, with rain in the park and north of Whitefish. Fire crews concentrated on keeping the fire from crossing the Flathead River at Bad Rock Canyon and spreading into the mountains south. Twenty firefighters were reported in the hospital for smoke inhalation.

Though the worst was over, the fires continued to spread. The Sullivan Creek fire ran for another three or four miles on the mountain tops, and the Half Moon fire was burning along the mountain on the north side of Lake McDonald. Fires continued to break out, with 20 new fires reported by August 31.

The fires burned well into September. The Half Moon fire was estimated at 29,000 acres, or 45 square miles. The Sullivan Creek fire burned 33,000 acres, or almost 52 square miles.

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The next issue of Pony Tracks will be issued October 10, 2022 (or thereabouts)

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