

STEPHEN J. PYNE

john, of the smokechasers

MOVIES ABOUT WILDLAND FIRE are poor, and frequently dreadful, and there is no indication that, despite better graphics, they are poised to improve. *Always* was a mindless remake of *A Guy Named Joe*; *Firestorm* is to firefighting what *Batman* is to law enforcement; only *Red Skies of Montana* (1953) has shown any punch or staying power. The reason seems to be that all the drama is contained in physical action: These are, in essence, chase movies or tales of personal combat, often not much above juvenile sport stories, and when they try to incorporate moral drama beyond the expression of physical virtues such as courage and stamina, they collapse like a weary fire grunt falling into an ash-filled stump hole. Documentaries are little better. They focus on those mesmerizing, telegenic flames, or slip into the default narrative, which is a war story stripped of the true horrors of war. NOVA's *Fire Wars*, for example, simply follows a hotshot platoon through its seasonal campaigns. Teasers for a film version of Norman Maclean's meditation, *Young Men and Fire*, promise more of the same, as a smokejumper struggles against personal demons and a dyspeptic marriage, waiting for renewal through violent action against the flames. Only the title will bear any connection to the originating text.

One can rail against this tradition—say it isn't necessarily so; say it should be possible at least in principle to reconcile moral drama and physical action. Or one can accept that the genre is what it is, and if so, ask what kind of film might best convey its truest features. The logic points to a film that is pure action, that simply has its protagonist compete against the flame without encumbering quirks of personality, nagging social concerns, romantic subplots, politics, or ethics, that gives him only a Job To Do. Logic points, that is, to a training film. It leads to *Forest Smokechaser*.

Forest Smokechaser was produced by the U.S. Forest Service (Intermountain Region) and released in 1948. It features John Smokechaser, an Everyman Northern Rockies lookout-fireman, residing at a tower on Brundage Mountain along with his wife, Josephine, and their daughter, Joan. The plot simply follows John as he spots a fire, reports it, tracks it down, and puts it out, while a narrator, speaking both to John and to an audience of Johnnie-wanna-bes, explains what is happening. ("Careful, John, a sprained ankle now and your chances of getting the job done are shot." "The hardhat came out of John's pack. He wears it to keep from getting conked.") If you want to know how to attack and extinguish a wildland fire with handtools, there is no better manual. More recently the film has acquired special historical interest because it demonstrates exactly what techniques the crew portrayed in Maclean's account of the 1949 Mann Gulch fire actually possessed (a smokejumper was only a smokechaser who parachuted into fires).

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Still, the film was, from its origins, a cliché in the making. Absurdities abound. John always has loose dirt at the tip of his shovel, his pulaski never cracks against a rock, his jeans never soil, and if he really wanted to stop the fire from crowning through that thicket of pine saplings, he ought to clobber the guy with the flamethrower hiding just outside the frame. But, hey, this is Hollywood, after a fashion. Step by step, through scouting, hotspotting, firelining, and mopping up, John singlehandedly wrestles the fire to its knees. He stops a fast-moving lead through a heavy-needled slope; he knocks down the hot flames of a pitchy stump, and digs out the smoldering burns of a rotten one; he fells a simmering snag ("Old Heartbreaker, three foot through and sound as a dollar") with a never-dull pulaski; he separates the quick from the dead, tossing cold wood into a boneyard, while giving the still-smoking wood a dirt bath; he chops, spades, mixes, over and over again. For three days he stays at it, living on water and an occasional can of beans, with a packcover for his blanket and a packframe for his pillow. When he departs, before the music swells in the background, the narrator quietly declares, "and so the fire is out"—dead out, tested like John himself, *mano a mano*, with his bare hands.

Even forty years ago the film was so corny it was campy. Crews loved it. We showed it on 16mm projectors on the fire cache walls on rainy days, while the veterans chanted the familiar lines in sync and the rookies learned the basics. This is what the job was about. John Smokechaser, portrayed by a genuine firefighter named John W. Parker, was our mythic culture hero—our Stormalong, our John Henry. We all longed to fell Old Heartbreaker with a pulaski and rip that punky stump out by its roots. John Smokechaser was the fire guild's paragon, a man who knew what to do and just did it.

The wildland fire community has moved far beyond simple suppression. "Hit 'em hard and keep 'em small" seems antiquarian amid the complexities of deciding today what fires to attack and how, amid a determination to reinstate free-burning flames into a welter of landscapes well beyond John's "empire of trees." No one has managed to animate this new reality, or even to ponder seriously how the dilemmas of deciding might inform a moral drama commensurate with the physical action of a firefight. But if they do, the outcome will probably pull some postmodern punches (John or Joan Wildland-Fire-Use-Monitor doesn't carry much panache), and my instincts tell me that if it happens it will likely take the form of a training film. I hope it's campy.

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