

The 1976 Battlement Creek Fire - A Historical Perspective

By Keith Lammey, President

2012's hot, dry and windy conditions and the almost daily news reports, including National news, about "active" fires in Colorado, caused me to reflect about an earlier period of Battlement Mesa history – The July 17, 1976 Battlement Creek Fire.

Most Battlement Mesa residents know that our community experienced a devastating fire in 1999 where nine homes in Monument Creek burned, but few residents know about "the other fire." Although the 1999 fire was awful, the 1976 Battlement Creek fire was much worse.

According to the official US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management Report, by mid-July 1976, it had already been a busy wild land fire season. Like 2012, conditions in the area were dry and the fire danger was high.

On July 11, 1976, a severe lightning storm struck the Morrisania area late in the afternoon. On July 12th, about 1:30 PM, a fire was reported at Eames Orchard. The Grand Valley Volunteer Fire Department (GVVFD) responded and had the fire controlled by 5 PM. The initial fire burned ½ acre. At 7:25 PM a BLM air patrol confirmed that the fire was no longer smoking.

On July 15th at 2 PM, smoke was reported by residents of the Eames Orchard and two GVVFD fire fighters responded within about ½ hour to the same area as the July 12th fire had burned. Unfortunately, shortly after the fire fighters arrived, the winds increased and the fire spread south and southeast into sage and cheat grass. What had been a minor fire suddenly became a serious and threatening fire. GVVFD dispatched additional manpower and equipment to the scene.

The initial attack strategy was designed to prevent the fire from moving west and south toward natural gas lines and wells to the west and the Project Rulison site to the south. (Project Rulison is where Austrol Oil of Houston, Texas and the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratories, under the supervision of the Atomic Energy Commission conducted an underground nuclear explosion in an effort to release natural gas held in the "tight" underground formation).

On July 16th, the plan was to hold the fire to the east of the Battlement Creek road and to stop the fire from spreading up canyon toward the gas wells, pipelines and the critical Project Rulison site. To achieve this, crews and equipment were deployed along the Battlement Creek road and along the west flank of the fire.

Three air tankers had been deployed to drop retardant along the fire's west flank. On the morning of the 16th, a Douglas B-26, loaded with 900 gallons of fire retardant arrived at the Battlement Creek fire at approximately 8:40 AM. The pilot flew the aircraft along the county road located at the bottom of the canyon. At approximately 8:55 AM, after releasing the retardant, the B-26 crashed into the side of the mountain ridge at 8,400 feet while trying to complete a turn. The aircraft exploded on impact and burned. The pilot, Donald Goodman, was killed.

By night fall on the 16th, hand crews had built a handline along the ridgetop with the intent to burn out the ridgetop fire line.

On July 17th, the area was to be widened and burned out, thus tying in the entire perimeter. A 4-man burnout Mormon Lake Hotshot crew was assigned to this critical task. About 2:45 PM, the 4-man burnout crew's planned escape route was suddenly cut off by the fire's quick run up a steep draw. Despite protective gear, three men, Anthony "Tony" Czak, Scott L. Nelson and Stephen H. Furey, became trapped and died. A fourth fire fighter, John C. Gibson was severely burned, but lived.

With the help of heavy rain showers, the fire was contained on July 18th, declared under control on the 19th and declared out on the 20th. Although the fire only burned 880 acres, it cost the lives of four men and a total of 270 men and 20 aircraft fought the fire.

A Memorial to the three firefighters, Tony Czak, Scott Nelson, and Stephen Furey and the air tanker pilot, Donald Goodman, is on display near the Visitor's Cabin in Parachute.