RIGHETTI, Bob
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Interview with: **Bob Righetti**
Interviewed by: **David Schreiner**
Location: **Pozo, California**
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Edited/Corrected by: Bob Righetti, 1/14/05

DAVID SCHREINER: Good morning. This is an interview with Bob Righetti, and we're at his ranch here in Pozo, California. The date is August eleventh; It's 10:20 in the morning and I'm the interviewer. I'm David Schreiner, S-C-H-R-E-I-N-E-R, and now I'll hand it over to Bob.

BOB RIGHETTI: Good morning. My name is Bob Righetti, and that's [spelled] R-I-G-H-E-T-T-I. I was raised here in Pozo. I moved here as a child in 1934. In the early '40s my dad worked for the U.S. Forest Service. With the advent of World War II the Forest Service was very short of people. We had the conscientious objectors, and kids----- I say, "kids", meaning young men around 15 to 17 years of age, acting as firefighters. In those days, only the ranger and the fire management officer had automobiles. The rest of the personnel that were in the field had horses and mules.

When there were fires here in the valley, the first fire truck through would pass by our house on Pozo Road, blowing a siren signaling for me or my older sister to get out to the road. (Pozo Road at that time was Highway 178). The next truck would pick us up and take us to the fire. We would wait there. If the fire wasn't 'picked up', my sister or I would collect all of the horses. (The horses were owned by private individuals). We

would take the horses to our ranch. The Forest Service stored hay there. We would feed the animals and care for them. Later a forest packer would transfer them around as needed. If there were surplus mules on the fire, they would also be brought to the corrals, and my sister or I would feed and care for them as they were also transported to and from the fire.

Also at that time, with it being Highway 178, the Forest Service would burn on each side of the right-of-way on the highway as a hazard reduction. Due to the shortage of man-power, this was done in case of fire. Since my dad was foreman on the crew, I could go with him. That's when I learned how to do firing with a fusee and drip torch, and to mop-up with a back pump. Beginning at the young age of 12, I learned a lot about fire characteristics.

In April of 1948, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Following four years of military service, in March of 1952, I went to to work for the Forest Service on a road crew. Having served in the Navy Seabee's, I had a background in operating heavy equipment. I would help the guys on the F.S. road crew; putting in culverts and cleaning up roads and slides, getting ready for the coming fire season. In June, I returned to Pozo station as a TTO (tank truck operator). I drove a Marmon Harrington engine. On the station foreman's days off, I was the acting foreman.

From that point on, I worked until I was laid off because my 180 day appointment ran out. I then worked about a year for another employer.

In 1954 I returned to the Forest Service and received a permanent appointment. In 1955 while foreman at Cerro Alto Guard Station, I got married. In August of that same summer I transferred to Pozo Ranger Station and held the position of foreman for two

years, followed by the fire prevention technician position. In 1959 I was transferred to the Cuyama district and was the fire prevention technician at Ozena station. In 1960 I transferred to the Santa Barbara district as assistant fire management officer in charge of suppresion. I was there until 1962 at which time I accepted the assistant fire management officer position on the Ojai ranger district.

During my time on the Ojai district several fuel breaks were built. The U.S. Navy Seabee's had a training base at Rose Valley for advanced students. After completion of three weeks in the classroom at Port Hueneme, students would come to Rose Valley and operate heavy equipment. The officer and the chief in charge of the base were friends I had served with over seas while in the Navy. During the time the students were not at Rose Valley I was able to use any of the heavy equipment we needed for work on the fuel breaks. With this equipment and student help, we built Nordoff fuel break and several jeep roads. The Rose Valley base in no longer in operation.

I forgot to mention that during the 50's when I was in Pozo, we did a lot of the pre-attack work. We put in tractor lines and signed them. Pre-attack handbooks were written, which in my opinion, should still be very essential to fire management. However, I don't think they are used much any longer.

In 1965, I became the district fire management officer on the Santa Maria ranger district.

In 1966 we had the Wellman fire. It was a very large fire, 93,600 acres. I had the privilege of jumping the Redding smoke jumpers for the first time in Southern California. They were headed for Santa Barbara and the lead pilot asked me if I wanted to jump them on the Wellman or have them go on to Santa Barbara.

Taking into consideration the extra travel time from Santa Barbara back to the fire I asked the pilot if it was safe to jump them then. He said, "yes", so I said, "let's go," and they bailed out right over the fire, logging another jump! I believe that this was the only fire in Southern California smoke jumpers have ever jumped on.

At this time the southern forests were building fuel breaks on major ridges. To do this, contract bulldozers were used to scrape the brush off the ridge tops. This also created erosion and removed top soil. Ray Dalen of the forest supervisor's office was in charge of this project. He talked with me of his concerns regarding the amount of erosion, and removal of top soil. I told him that I had done some work with the California Fish & Game during my time away from the forest service in the early 1950's. I explained how effective our work using a huge towner brush disk on the old San Luis ranger district was. Ray said, "Well, let's see what we can do." After some research, I located a man by the name of Bill Twist, president of Towner Disk Company. I asked Mr. Twist if a lease agreement for a large disk could be worked out with his company. Gratefully, an agreement was made. We brought a disk down from Sacramento and changed the way fuel breaks were built. We disked the brush because that method chopped it, and put it into the soil. This helped to eliminate erosion, while still providing some cover. Others in the Forest Service began working with the ball and chain crushing, then moved into prescribed burning.

The Forest Service Department of Research in Arcadia, California invited me to work with them in the development of Southern California fire prescriptions. Because of working with our local range improvement groups on control burning, I knew how beneficial this could be to the Forest Service. With lots of effort, and lots of test plots,

we developed the prescriptions that are used today in Southern California. Lisle Green and Gene Conrad were the research personnel we worked with. We learned why fire did lots of the things we knew it was going to do, but, we didn't know why. Through the prescriptions and through our burning program, using district personnel to manage the small fires and do the testing, we developed some great fire fighters.

I was also invited to go to Marana, Arizona and work with the national training team in the development of a training guide for the fire camp logistics section, which eventually became the Incident Command System. I feel fortunate to have been elected as one of the authors of the Service Chief, or Logistics Chief training plan still being used today. That was a thrill for me! Originally, I was asked to be an evaluator.
The people that were supposed to author the plans didn't show, so, I along with Rick Gale of the Park Service, and Jack Rey of B.L.M. authored the program. We received a great response for our efforts. This experience was one of the highlights of my Forest Service career.

During my career I flew air attack on many fires. I believe I was the first night air attack boss in the nation. I know I was the first on the Los Padres forest. I still believe strongly in the night flying program, and feel it would save the taxpayer money.

I served a total of 29 years. I was on a fire team; I traveled to a lot of major fires in California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona and New Mexico, and met lots of great people. I ended up working as a logistics chief. Lots of people couldn't figure out why. I felt that the need to give the personnel what they needed to fight fire meant more than being a fire boss or incident commander. Logistics people that could take care of our personnel were hard to come by. I took a great deal of pride in my job. Upon my

retirement I received several letters from folks who really appreciated what I helped do for them. I don't feel I went out of my way to do these things. I was doing my job, trying to make things as comfortable as possible so they could put their efforts into controlling fires.

I keep abreast of fire fighting today. The loss of people disturbs me. We went through the Safety First program. I don't feel it's used as it should be today. I think our emphasis are way overboard on safety. I guess I would say, "How safe must you be?" I hear the terms: It's dangerous to be out there….Don't man the fires at night…Hold the fire boss responsible for accidents. The thought of fighting a wildfire is dangerous. Being properly trained, and paying attention make it as safe as any other job. Seems like too many are in it for the money and the big adventure. Going back to when I started with the Forest Service…money was not a factor. We were paid per annum. They could work you in shifts, or as long as they wanted, with no days off. During the 1950's differential came into being, followed several years later by overtime. Management could 'max out' real easy if they were on a fire team. I see there are eighteen 'watch out' situations now. I feel the ten standard firefighting orders and thirteen 'watch out' situations are enough to memorize and follow …especially for new hires. In my opinion, we are over burdening our fire fighters today with the amount of protective gear they carry. When I see the amount of gear that a firefighter carries today, versus what we carried, I feel the extra weight should be a safety concern. It may be that carrying fire shelters, nomex, etc. could give a false sense of security.

Today they have the GPS's, small radios and cell phones. Such neat stuff to work with. We fought fire in Levis, Big Mac shirts from JCPenney and Stetson cowboy hats!

Lots of people laugh about that, but, the Stetson hat wide brim gave us a lot of protection from heat. You could pull it down on your head, put a handkerchief over your face, and you had protection! Since they were made of cotton, the shirts and pants would not flame.

When I first worked for the Forest Service, helicopters were kind of a novelty, just coming into operation.

Used mainly for recon, they would haul water or rations to firefighters out on the line. They would drop 50 gallons of water on hot spots, and we were real happy! Look what we have with helicopters today!

We used to work our trails with mules, trail graders, trail plows and by hand. It was a real adventure and a neat time in my life. I've seen the best of the Forest Service. I've come from the horse and mule days to the time of a man being put on the moon. I was on a fire on the Angeles when some of the first air tankers were used…I can't remember the exact date, but, they were little crop-dusters dropping water. The last drop of the day was some white stuff they called Borate. Evaluators were up on the lines checking the drops. It was quite interesting to see that. That was the very beginning of the air tankers. Then came the T.B.M.s and the P.B.Y.s. The T.B.M.s were Forest Service aircraft flown by Forest Service pilots. They did a good job, but had a very scary sinking characteristic. We lost several pilots because of communications and the way the program was structured. If you could get a surplus plane, and tank it, you could get a job. I'm happy to say that things are much better today.

I'm proud of how far the Forest Service has come. However, I would like to see more prescribed fire use so we don't create the hydrophobic soil conditions caused by

intense fires. I would like to see equipment used again in the crushing and fuel break work.

There are a lot of ventures still out there; we just need to stick to the mission statement that we had in our manuals. If we follow those we can move forward.

The wilderness concept bothers me today, and always has. What a wilderness is to the Forest Service or a government agency document, is totally different to the person that lives in New York or Los Angeles. City dwellers have the idea that we are destroying a wilderness, and we need to save it. I live in an area where there is wilderness surrounding most of our drainage. The area drains into the Salinas Reservoir which is the lifeblood water for San Luis Obispo. Under current wilderness guidelines there cannot be any prescribed burning, crushing of brush, or management type work which needs to be done to prevent erosion and silt, and keep it out of the reservoirs. One of our Southern California mission statements is to protect and enhance our watersheds. I would like to see the Forest Service look at some of these things. Forget the radical side, whether you are working for a government agency or not, doesn't matter. We need to have a good, clear mission statement. We need to stand up and fight the radicals. Whether they are on one side, or the other, shouldn't matter. We need to hold the straight line, look at the long run, and hope that down the road, my great-great-great grandkids will be able to live, and see the things that I've tried to protect. The forest is a land of many uses, but, it's also America's playground, and should be kept that way. It should be used in a good manner, not tied up in bureaucracy.

SCHREINER: Thank you, Bob.

(End of interview)