MOUNTAIN MAN

Toiyabe Patrol: Five U.S. Forest Service Summers
East of the High Sierra in the 1960s

Les Joslin

It was not the money that lured college freshman Les Joslin to the Toiyabe National Forest in the summer of 1962; as a GS-3, fire-control aide, he earned $1.83 an hour. Nor was it the pine-scented, rugged landscape that attracted him to Bridgeport, California, site of the ranger station from which he would fight fires, repair trails, and corralward tourists; he had never been there before. No, what impelled him to work for the Forest Service was the opportunity to serve the American people. The magnificent National Forests the agency managed were “not Forest Service land,” he emphasizes: “A small point? Not at all! It’s an important distinction that informs—or should inform—the perceptions of both the public servants and the publics they serve.”

Joslin’s dedication framed his deep-seated commitment: all whom he encountered “deserved the best and friendliest service I could provide. I learned then, and believe still, that public service means just that.”

It helped that he looked the part: the book’s cover is a 1963 photograph of the young firefighter as he leans against the district’s government-green Chevy pickup, equipped with a slip-on tank and pump unit. Rail-thin and open-faced, and with close-cropped hair, Joslin is draped in the agency’s signature uniform; exuding an idealistic eagerness, his is the perfect mien for this can-do organization.

Each summer he did all he could to advance the agency’s multiple-use mission. At spring-semester’s end, he headed upcountry to dig out snow-encased garbage cans, pick up flipped picnic benches, spruce up campsites, and rehab outhouses; Joslin fancied himself “the fastest staple gun in the west,” so rapidly did he post the latest Smoky Bear posters. As “mountain muscle replaced campus flab,” he also expanded his mind, gaining a deeper appreciation for the complex ecosystems in which he labored—the district’s sprawling half-a-million acres rose from Nevada’s “Great Basin sagebrush scrub” to the “lofty serrated summits of the Sawtooth Ridge and other peaks in the eleven-to-twelve-thousand foot range” bordering on Yosemite; from chillest Alpine lakes to the saline Walker Lake, this was the variegated terrain over which he daily hiked, rode, or drove.

No wonder he reflects fondly on his experiences—who would not want to recall time so well spent? Yet this nostalgic undertone does not make for a saccharine read. Joslin remembers no more than the record allows, in part because he became the district clerk (he could type!), a job that trained him to write with clarity and control; as the office’s public face, he also contributed squibs to local newspapers about recreational opportunities and fire dangers. These clippings, reinforced through research in agency documents and local archives, make for an unpretentious and straightforward narrative.

That’s why its firefighting focus is so intriguing. Joslin encountered no big blowups during his five Sierran summers; no great epiphanies came to him as he beat back flames or drowned smoldering embers. Still, he constantly scanned the horizon for a puff of smoke and sometimes was trumped by his vigilant enthusiasm. Glimpsing a large volume of it billowing over a ridge, he raced to the scene only to discover a father-and-son team admiring the campfire they had ignited within a trunk hollow; returning from town one evening he caught sight of an expanding orange glow over Bodie Hills, and then to his chagrin realized he had spotted the moonrise. There were plenty of real flames, though, and his matter-of-fact discussion of his response to them provides ample evidence of the Forest Service’s robust fire-suppression infrastructure.

The requisite smokechaser pack Joslin would sling over his back contained a Puskaki, shovel, hardhat, map, and rations; the water tanks he humped up and down steep hills; and the Chevy that could morph into a small fire truck were among the technology he wielded. If the terrain was difficult or the size of blaze outstripped the Bridgeport district’s capabilities, radio communications could mobilize weather-forecasting stations and hot-shot teams from across the west, an army bolstered by soldiers from regional bases, and tanker planes capable of dumping hundreds of gallons of slurry. The vocabulary Joslin uses to describe these battles, like the tactics the agency used to fight them, are militaristic. This combative language ran contrary to the already well-established scientific insight that fire was essential to the creation of many types of healthy forests, suggesting how powerful politics and culture were in setting the agency’s agenda.

However, like Joslin’s earlier Uncle Sam’s Cabins, and his edition of Ranger Walt Perry’s memoirs, Toiyabe Patrol also reminds us just how important human agency is in defining the past that gives shape to individual lives: “those five Toiyabe summers,” Joslin attests, “were both inspiration for and confirmation of the person and public servant I strove to be.”

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