

The Capitan Gap Fire, the Taos Snowballs and Smokey Bear

~ Val Christianson, WUI Prevention Specialist - NIFC



The original Taos Pueblo Snowballs in the St. Santiago Feast Day parade in Taos, NM, July 25, 1950, just two months after the Capitan Gap fire.

PREFACE: Adolph Samora and Paul Romero are the only two surviving members of the original Taos Pueblo Snowballs. They witnessed the events first hand which are spoken of in this brief account.

There have been numerous tales, accounts, and biographies of the original encounter with the tiny black bear cub that would become Smokey. The Mescalero Redhats are mentioned. The US Army is mentioned. But there has never been any mention in any account of the Taos Pueblo Snowballs. And so here is the rest of the story...

Early Friday morning, May 5, 1950, the Carson National Forest Supervisor's Office, in Taos, New Mexico, received a phone call from the Lincoln National Forest in southeastern New Mexico. The call

was a request for assistance in fighting a wildfire that had begun the day before in the Capitan Mountains. The "Los Tablos Fire" was being driven by 70 mile per hour winds accompanied by scouring sand blown in from the southwest. The Carson SO Dispatch contacted seasonal employees Lupe Martinez and Telisfor Trujillo. Lupe and Telisfor, the Crew Foremen, are referred to today as "Crew Reps" for emergency "pickup crews" (EFF) from rural communities in northern New Mexico. They were directed to gather together the recently formed Taos Pueblo "Snowballs" and prepare them to board the old school bus and travel south to the Lincoln National Forest and assist on the 1,000 acre fire. This adventure would be but the second outing for the Snowballs, the first being a wildfire on the Gila National Forest near Silver City the month before.

The Office of the Taos WarChiefs (the local Pueblo Government), under the supervision of Geronimo "Duck" Trujillo (Telisfor's father), was contacted by Lupe and Telisfor, who themselves were both Pueblo members. Since there were no phones in the village in 1950, the only way to communicate an urgent message to Tribal members was via the "Village Crier." The WarChief ascended to the top of the Pueblo massif, four stories in height, and began wailing aloud in the native Tiwa tongue summoning the available firefighters of the village to report immediately. An opportunity for the new Snowballs to go on assignment was at hand. First come, first served, only 25 men would be boarding the bus. They were to assemble in the village plaza and be counted. They must have their



Left is Paul Romero and right, Adolph Samora. These gentlemen are regrettably the last of the original Snowballs.

own work boots and the emergency personal provisions provided by the Carson. The only helmets that the Forest cache could find for the crew were a box of metal, wide brimmed hardhats painted white. Crew member Del Reyna looked at his crewmates and then looked up at the majestic snow covered Taos Mountains towering over the Pueblo and remarked, "We all look like a bunch of snowballs!" The crew all laughed and the name stuck. It is still used today by Taos Pueblo members when they go out as an EFF crew. They boarded the old school bus that was driven by Sam Martinez. The crew bosses for the Snowballs were Tony and Albert Martinez and they reported directly to Lupe and Telisfor. Tony and Albert would keep track of the crew's time and handle logistics in the base camp and on the fire line.

As soon as the manifest was completed, the Snowballs loaded the bus and headed south on a long, uncomfortable, albeit exciting, all-day drive. The northern New Mexico spring morning was still crisp as the

bus headed down the deep canyon of the Rio Grande. The older crew members wrapped themselves in Pendleton and Chimayo woolen blankets to keep warm. The morning breakfast consisted of what the wives and mothers had prepared back in the Pueblo, the now-famous breakfast burrito, a flour tortilla with pintos, onion and potatoes. Green chili was not yet in season! The crew passed the time singing aloud "Taos Round Dance Songs" and fantasizing if they might be able to make a down payment on a new Ford pickup with their fire paycheck! As the bus wound its way along the side of the roaring river, swollen with the spring snowmelt, the Jemez Mountains appeared just west of the Rio and the Snowballs could not imagine that exactly 50 years later some of their sons, daughters and grandchildren would be involved in suppressing the largest human-caused wildfire in New Mexico history, the Cerro Grande above Los Alamos. The bus proceeded through downtown Albuquerque and stopped at the historic "Lindy's Diner" on Fifth and Route 66. Lupe and Telisfor obtained a

small soda, a bologna sandwich with a little mayo, an apple and a handful of chips for each member. Yum!

The tired crew arrived at the Los Tablos base camp early Friday evening. After their Crew Reps checked them in, the Snowballs stowed their personal gear in a small cache next to a freshly bulldozed juniper tree, then grabbed a handtool, a round half gallon metal canteen, and an impromptu sack lunch, with you guessed it, a bologna and mayo sandwich. They hooked up headlamps to their helmets, jumped on Army deuce and a halves (two and a half ton transportation trucks for troops) and were driven several miles to a drop off point. They immediately began to hike up an established fireline where they would relieve the day crew of US Army soldiers from Ft. Bliss, Texas, who were supervised by New Mexico Game Wardens. Their responsibility would be that of extending the fireline around the perimeter of the still active fire, widening the line, and patrolling for spot fires and hotspots. Night crew duty usually involved mop-up: a dirty,

mundane and sometimes dangerous job. They were forever watchful of embers that may have blown over the fireline by the erratic spring winds.

By late Saturday morning, May 6, the Los Tablos was coming under containment and fire personnel were beginning to be demobilized. By early afternoon the Snowballs were gathering their belongings to begin the journey back to Taos when a new alarm went through the base camp that another wildfire had started upwind from their present location. The "Demob" process was put on hold for everyone and the base camp was ordered to relocate as soon as possible because it was directly in the anticipated path of the new fire, the "Capitan Gap Fire." After just a few hours of uncomfortable rest upon their return from the previous night's shift, the Snowballs were ordered out to the line again. That Saturday afternoon they punched direct line with the Soldiers from Ft. Bliss, along with new crews reporting to base camp. These crews included the Mescalero Apache Redhats, and community crews from Zia Pueblo and Santo Domingo Pueblo. The Mescalero crew was sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, while Zia and Santo Domingo were sponsored by the Forest Service. The crews were on the line well through the first night before being ordered to stand down on Sunday morning. They would perform evening shift "mop-up" duties through the duration of the incident.

The Capitan Gap Fire was an extremely dangerous fire burning in the higher elevations of the 10,000 foot Capitan Mountains. The fire was actively burning in Douglas fir, white fir and quaking aspen. It was rapidly consuming the watershed of the north side of the east-west oriented mountain range, along with the habitat of elk, bighorn sheep and the American black bear.

On Monday, May 8, the winds became so strong that a crew of Ft. Bliss soldiers, under the supervision of a Game Warden, had to take shelter in a rock slide of a narrow canyon. Since there were no fire shelters readily available in 1950, the crew boss sternly told his frightened crew to lie face down in the rock slide, burrowing their faces into the cooler air of the rock crevices. The fire roared

overhead, singeing their clothes and hair, crowning as it raced from west to east. This is what we would term a "burn over" today. All of the crew survived, with only minor injuries. Late in the afternoon, after such a close call, the Ft. Bliss crew began their trek down Capitan Mountain to base camp for some much needed rest and first aid.

Through the smoke and haze of the fire, dusk came early that evening. As the Snowballs headed uphill to begin their night "mop-up" duties, they passed the Ft. Bliss crew heading down off of the line toward base camp. On that particular section of the fireline only the military crews and the Snowballs were on duty. They briefly explained their burn over experience to Lupe and Telisfor, a harrowing ordeal. The Snowballs gratefully acknowledged the survival of the soldiers and then wondered what they were getting into that evening with their mop-up duties because the temperature and winds had abated little. As they parted company with the soldiers, Game Warden Speed Simmons hollered back up at the Snowballs that there was a small, wild and frightened black bear cub further up near the rock outcrop where they had taken refuge. He said that several soldiers tried to secure it, in the guise of rescuing it, but that it scratched a couple of them pretty good. As the Snowballs hiked past the rock pile/talus slope they soon heard a shrill whining and crying that they ascertained to be the wailing of the cub. Through the rapidly approaching dark, in the midst of throat-filling smoke and still existing flames in the remaining vegetation, the crew saw the very small fur ball scampering away from their progress and running toward a charred snag. It struggled up the snag to chest level, and Lupe and Telisfor could decipher that the hair had been quite singed on the ears and bottom of the little critter. In the dull light of their primitive headlamps, they could see the paws had been burned enough to produce obvious blisters. They realized that the animal had not sought shelter in the tree during the crowning of the burnover but it had probably hid near or in the rock slide where the soldiers had sought shelter. They knew the animal would have perished quickly had it been in the tree. The burn injuries no doubt were received as it was roaming amidst the

freshly burned vegetation of the forest floor.

Telisfor reached out to gently encompass the cub in his hands and remove it from the snag. Even with his gloves on, and due to the obvious fright and confusion of the animal, he quickly put him down on the forest floor when the disoriented cub attempted to lash out at him. The crew all laughed at Telisfor as the little cub scampered several feet away. They knew they would not be able to rescue the animal, or adopt it as a mascot, because they still had their evening tasks to perform. At orientation in base camp everyone had been told that this part of the Forest was also a game preserve and that all wildlife should be strictly left alone for fear of a \$300 fine from Game and Fish. The little cub attempted to tag after the crew as they continued their upward trek on the fireline, but it soon gave up its pursuit due to its injuries. Thus ended the very brief, yet unheralded and historical, encounter of the Taos Pueblo Snowballs and what would become the living Smokey Bear.

As they continued up the fireline they encountered another Ft. Bliss crew that was headed downhill after their daytime shift. In the encroaching darkness the Snowballs relayed to them that there was a fierce, huge wild boar ravaging the smoldering undergrowth remains a little further down from them. The soldiers' eyes all got big for a second, but then the Snowballs chuckled and told them not to fear, but that only a tiny injured cub was wandering around looking for an adoptive mother. The soldiers were relieved to hear the boar was but a cub, and the two crews parted ways with a warning from Telisfor that the cub, though injured, was sure feisty. Less than a minute later the Snowballs heard an "Ouch!" from down the fireline a small distance, and then they all laughed as they realized a soldier must have just got nipped by the young black bear cub.

That was the first time the Snowballs saw of the animal on the fireline. They may have encountered "Smokey" again the next morning as they were moving back down off of the Mountain, and they may have seen him in base camp, but those details are vaguely recorded and remembered. There are numerous accounts of

various soldiers and overhead picking up the animal and eventually bringing it back to camp, but that initial encounter with the Snowballs on the fireline is what endears Smokey to Native American firefighters. They weren't immediately aware that the survival of one small cub, in the midst of such destruction, would become such an All-American symbol. They probably were not then aware that the Capitan Gap Fire was human caused either. But as the years and generations have gone by, the Taos Pueblo Snowballs and Wildfire Prevention have become synonymous in northern New Mexico. They weren't aware that on the night of Monday, May, 8, 1950,

when they first met that little black bear cub, he would become the real Smokey Bear, but they did take back the knowledge of the importance of his survival and that "Only YOU Can Prevent Wildfires".

As told by Adolph Samora, 76, and Paul Romero, 77, to Val Christianson, BIA Prevention Coordinator, and Andy Lujan (Retired), Prevention Technician, Northern Pueblos Agency, Taos Pueblo Forestry Guard Station, May 6, 2005, and with the Taos WarChiefs on August 8, 2007, Taos

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