

# Village Men Did Supurb Job As Firefighters

By KERRY L. CARTIER

BLM

Steamboat pilots on the Koyukuk River in the early 1900's named one mountain west of the river "Roundabout Mountain" because the river approached the mountain many times before finally going around it. Natives in Huslia, 12 miles north of Roundabout Mountain, could see smoke near the mountain which heralded the arrival of a steamboat.

On July 13 there had been no steamboat for decades, but there was plenty of smoke south of Huslia near Roundabout Mountain. It was wildfire, started by lightning as were 54 other fires that day.

When reported to the Bureau of Land Management Fire Control Headquarters in Fairbanks, the fire had burned an estimated 2,000 acres.

Smoke was heavy on July 14, and the size of the fire was guessed at 9,600 acres — an estimate which would later prove wrong. Jim Commack, a native from Shungnak, was given the job of getting the fire under control as quickly as possible.

Fire Boss Commack had other help: Division Boss Roger Huntington and Fire Line Boss Jim Huntington of Galena, and Division Boss Barney Attla of Huslia.

BLM firefighters from other villages were sent in: the 24-man Galena Number 3 crew, the 23-man Galena Number 4 crew, the 15-man Nulato Number 2 crew, the Ruby Number 1-B crew of 11 men, and the Huslia Number 2 crew of 18 men.

With 16 men from Kobuk, Ambler and Shungnak, 107 people were at the fire. All of them, including supervisors, were from Alaska villages.

The Roundabout Mountain fire was burning hot. Only men could move in the soft terrain; a machine would get stuck quickly, if any had been available.

The 107 men used shovels and pulaskis — tools with an axe blade and grubbing blade on the same handle — to clear the vegetation in a line in front of the flames.

In theory, the flames would burn to the line and run out of fuel. To continue to spread, flames would have to jump the fire line or burn around its ends.

A B-25 plane dropped 5,000 gallons of fire retardant to make a fireproof strip similar to that made by the firefighters, but that was the only outside help received the first day. A helicopter was used by Fire Boss Commack to see where his firefighters should go to have the most effect.

On July 15, the size of the fire was revised downward from 9,600 acres to 4,000 acres, and Commack and his men managed to keep the fire from getting too much larger. By midnight 206 men were at the fire.

The fire burned toward the men on the fireline. If it jumped the line, they would have to put it out immediately or retreat and build new lines. But their fire lines held. The fire war stopped.

Although the fire no longer raged uncontrolled, there were still hot spots. The firefighters patrolled the edge of the burned area to be sure hot spots caused no new flareups, and to be sure the fire would die.

By July 16, 129 men were left at the Roundabout Mountain Fire. They had done their job; the flames were stopped. While it wasn't the largest fire, it was the largest in central Alaska on the day 55 new fires — a record number — were reported this summer. And it was under control.