

# “The Boise Foothills Fires: A History of Devastating Loss and Remarkable Discovery”

By  
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Flames have repeatedly scorched the foothills north of Boise for centuries. However, the city’s population has increasingly encroached on the fragile Boise Front since the 1950s and natural or man-caused fires started in these grasslands and brushy terraces have become substantially more threatening to life and property. Boise’s daily newspaper, *The Idaho Statesman*, is filled with accounts of fires that have affected the landscape of the Boise Foothills since the late 1950s that have destroyed homes, cars, and other personal property as well as substantially damaged recreation areas and wildlife habitat. Despite these devastating losses, some unique discoveries of archaeological and historical significance emerged in the aftermath of the Eighth Street Fire that consumed 15,300 acres in eight days in the late summer of 1996. These discoveries include scattered historic military ordnance near the Boise Barracks and the remains of three civil war soldiers once interred at the old Fort Boise Military Reserve Cemetery. This paper aims to outline the sequence of fires and their results during selected periods of 1957, 1958, 1963, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003 and focus on the archaeological discoveries and overall impact of the Eighth Street Fire of 1996.

Research for the paper began with a call to Guy Pence, Fire and Aviation Staff Officer for the Boise National Forest, to inquire about the most significant foothills fires of the 1900s. Pence provided years and names for four significant fires which became the basis for the remainder of the research. These fires included; the Rocky Canyon Fire of 1957, the Curlew Fire of 1958, the Foothills Fire of 1992, and the Eighth Street Fire of 1996<sup>1</sup>. Mr. Pence did not provide start or containment dates for these fires. Therefore, research in the *Idaho Statesman* newspaper microfilm at the Idaho State Historical Library started June 15<sup>th</sup> and continued through August 31<sup>st</sup> of each of the four years provided by Mr. Pence to correspond with the heightened fire danger of the summer months. Any additional fires that occurred between these dates during these four years were also included in this study. Occasionally while examining the microfilm and documenting the additional fires, mention was made of fires occurring in the Boise Foothills during times other than between June 15<sup>th</sup> and August 31<sup>st</sup> of 1957, 1958, 1992, and 1996. An effort was made to include these specific fires, but these years were not systematically researched for the total number of fires that may have occurred during the designated study period.

For the four fires mentioned by Mr. Pence ample information was available for the Rocky Canyon and the Eighth Street Fires in the *Idaho Statesman*. However, the only large fire documented during the summer of 1958 was the Arrowrock Fire. It is possible that the Curlew Fire either occurred before the middle of June or after August 31<sup>st</sup> –outside of the allotted study period. The Foothills Fire of 1992 did not occur in the Boise Foothills. This substantial fire that

consumed more than 250,000 acres burned along the north side of Interstate 84 between Boise and Mountain Home and into the foothills of Bennett Mountain. Therefore, the Foothills Fire of 1992 is not included in this study. For the fires that are included those that were given a designated reference name (e.g. the Eighth Street Fire) are identified by that name. All others will be identified by their location. In total, 43 fires involving more than 30, 750 acres are included in this study and are outlined in chronological order below.

#### ***July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1957***

***South of Lucky Peak and the Mouth of Morse Creek:*** Small fires were reported south of Lucky Peak and at the mouth of Morse Creek on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1957. These small fires were two of 18 sparked by an electrical storm the night before. BLM firefighters extinguished the blazes the same day. Acreage was estimated at less than 10 acres each<sup>2</sup>.

#### ***July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1957***

***Schaeffer's Creek:*** Fifteen acres burned along Schaeffer's Creek a few miles north of Boise on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1957 as a result of lightning strikes. Despite high winds in the Highlands that prevented smoke jumpers from reaching the flames quickly, no property damage or injuries were reported. The fire was extinguished by July 23<sup>rd</sup> <sup>3</sup>.

#### ***July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1957***

***Lambing Creek, Northeast of Boise:*** A fire sparked by the electrical storm that blew through the treasure Valley on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1957 burned approximately 15 to 20 acres before it was extinguished sometime before the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July. Stands of pine and fir were lost but no personal property damage was reported<sup>4</sup>.

#### ***July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1957***

***"Rocky Canyon Fire":*** At around 11:00 a.m. on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1957 a fire started at Rocky Canyon Road along Cottonwood Creek and quickly spread over the area to the north of the road and to the east of Five Mile Creek. Over 200 firefighters from the BLM and 75 from the Forest Service battled the flame –many of them along the timberline to keep the fire from extending into the forest. By 9:00 p.m. the fire had consumed about 2,000 acres when firefighters thought the blaze would soon be brought under control, but a sudden change in wind direction diverted the flames towards residential neighborhoods northeast of the city. By midnight the fire was suspected to have burned another 2,000 acres and was considered out of control by fire managers. Governor Robert Smylie called a state of emergency as requested by R. L. Penney, state supervisor of the BLM, between 9:00 and midnight on the 22<sup>nd</sup> enabling National Guard troops to be mobilized to fight the fire. Although not immediately dispatched to the fire, guard troops were prepared for action by midnight. The fire continued racing downslope towards the residential areas aided by 10 mph winds and came within only a few miles of the city. Although the possibility that the fire could reach the homes was present, William Matthews, district range manager for the BLM, felt that the regular firefighting forces could contain the blaze with the help of the National Guard<sup>5</sup>. Ultimately only six guard members were dispatched; three bulldozer operators, two mechanics, and one supervisor. The blaze was contained early Thursday July 25<sup>th</sup>. Archie Krast, an Idaho State forester flew over the burned area Thursday morning and estimated the burn at around 2,400 total acres although original estimates put the blaze at closer to 4,000

acres. The BLM was accepting Krast's estimate until a fire boundary map could be drawn. The cause of the Rocky Canyon Fire was investigated as a case of arson. An anonymous woman called authorities and provided names for juveniles she accused of setting the fire. The names were turned over to the FBI for investigation<sup>6</sup>.

#### ***July 24th, 1958***

***Along Hill Road, North of Boise:*** A range fire in the Foothills along Hill Road started on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1958. The brief notice included in the *Idaho Statesman* did not mention what started the fire or when it was contained—only that 15 firefighters from the BLM worked to extinguish the fire that burned eight acres of grass. Apparently no structures were threatened and no injuries were reported<sup>7</sup>.

#### ***August 9th, 1958***

***On Cottonwood Creek, North of Boise:*** A brush and grass fire started in the Boise Foothills along Cottonwood Creek on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1958. Winds pushed the fire up to a road near buildings on the Homer Lawrence Ranch and threatened to cross the road before the wind suddenly changed direction. Mrs. Lawrence was alone at the ranch with four small children whom she took with her to a pasture until the danger of the fire had passed. The *Idaho Statesman* did not state how much acreage was consumed or the cause of the fire. However, it appears that this fire, along with several others in the area were under control by August 12<sup>th</sup> <sup>8</sup>.

#### ***August 13, 1958***

***“Arrowrock Fire”:*** On August 13, 1958 a freak mid-morning thunderstorm touched off numerous blazes throughout the Boise National Forest and the Foothills above Boise. The worst of the blazes was reported in the Soap Creek area along the south bank of Arrowrock Reservoir. The fire began in rough sage and scrub on August 12<sup>th</sup> and was significantly enlarged by the thunderstorm on the 13<sup>th</sup> quickly blowing up and extending into timber and logging slash. More than 200 firefighters were forced back by the explosion of flame for just over 24 hours, but were replaced by 350 fresh crew members by early August 14<sup>th</sup>. The heart of the fire was determined to be 25 miles due east of Boise and 23 miles due south of Idaho City<sup>9</sup>. The Arrowrock Fire was brought under control on August 14<sup>th</sup> with more than 500 fighters on duty after burning 400 acres of sage and underbrush and 1,200 acres of timber along the slopes of Grape Mountain. Officials feared a significant erosion threat to the reservoir from the loss of mountain vegetation<sup>10</sup>.

#### ***August 22nd, 1958***

***On Cottonwood Creek, North of Boise:*** The *Idaho Statesman* reported a small fire was started by lightning on Cottonwood Creek north of Boise on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1958. The fire was extinguished on the same day. No report of acreage was included in the article<sup>11</sup>.

#### ***August 22nd, 1958***

***Flat Creek, eight miles south of Arrowrock Reservoir:*** A forest fire that burned 20 acres along Flat Creek eight miles south of Arrowrock Reservoir was started by lightning on August 22<sup>nd</sup>,

1958<sup>12</sup>. More than 75 firefighters from the Forest Service battled the blaze and had it controlled by August 23<sup>rd</sup> <sup>13</sup>. No personal property damage or injuries were reported.

### ***August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1958***

***Foothills Ten Miles North of Boise:*** A 1,300-acre grass fire started high in the Foothills northeast of Boise near noon on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1958. More than 100 firefighters from the BLM and Forest Service battled for more than 12 hours to contain the blaze before it reached the timber line<sup>14</sup>. Chemical drops from a tri-motored Ford plane helped the firefighters control the fire early Wednesday the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1958<sup>15</sup>. No structures were damaged.

### ***July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1963***

***Stack Rock, Shaeffer Butte:*** A fire that burned 800 acres of timber in the Stack Rock and Schaeffer Butte area started on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1963. Before it was brought under control on August 9<sup>th</sup> it threatened the Bogus Basin ski resort. Although a cause for the fire was not stated in the *Idaho Statesman*, several regional fires had been sparked by lightening in the days preceding this fire<sup>16</sup>.

### ***June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1987***

***“Picket Pin Fire”, “Cottonwood Fire”, “Warm Springs Fire”:*** On June 29<sup>th</sup>, an arsonist started three separate fires in the Boise Foothills. The Picket Pin Fire, the largest of the three totaling 1,300 acres, was particularly devastating. Starting next to Rocky Canyon Road, the fire quickly spread into the Picket Pin Draw and approached the residential area on Promontory Road. By this time the fire was 1 ½ miles wide. The fire began narrow and spread out as it progressed down the ridges fanned by winds up to 20 mph. The fire claimed the home of Mr. and Mrs. Rudolph Rossman valued at \$153,200 who were vacationing in Yellowstone at the time as well as their Porsche and a Mercedes Benz. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Hair, next door neighbors to the Rossman’s, lost their garage along with a Toyota truck and a Mercedes Benz<sup>17</sup>. A Boise fire truck carrying 3,000 gallons of water to pour onto Boise homes at the edge of the blaze was engulfed in flames from below as it was stationed to protect the homes above. Captain Pat Dunn tried to water down the truck as the windows shattered and the upholstery melted until another fire truck was able to pull Engine 802 away from the flames. By his own admission, Dunn’s helmet had melted to his head. The fire truck received about \$55,000 worth of damage but would have to be replaced at a cost of about \$160,000. The truck was not insured. Three firefighters and one resident were taken to St. Alphonsus Hospital and released<sup>18</sup>. Aside from the damage to personal private property, the fire burned a significant portion of the city’s 485 acres of parkland in the Military Reserve northeast of Fort Boise. City Park’s director Jack Cooper stated that the park was severely impacted losing natural grasses, wildflowers, and trees including the tree cover at Cottonwood Creek and compromised the habitat for an endangered species of plant, the Ayers Onion. In all, twelve fire departments were involved with fighting the Picket Pin Fire; Boise, Notus, Wilder, Caldwell, Nampa, Star, Eagle, Cole-Collister, Whitney, Kuna, Middleton, and Meridian. The fire was considered contained two days later on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1987.

The same day that crews were battling the Picket Pin Fire the Cottonwood Fire was started to the north along Cottonwood Creek. Not much information was provided about this fire except that it burned 25 acres and an arsonist link was suspected with the Picket Pin Fire. No injuries or property damage was reported and the fire was contained the same evening<sup>19</sup>.

At 11:34 on June 29th a third fire was started in the Warm Springs/Table Rock area east of Rocky Canyon Road. BLM fire crews were diverted from the Picket Pin and Cottonwood Creek Fires and they were able to limit the spread of the fire to seven acres. This fire did not damage personal property and was determined to be arson caused and related with the two previously set fires. The fire was contained that evening<sup>20</sup>.

### ***August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1988***

***“Bogus Basin Fire”***: Around 5:00 p.m. on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1988 a fire broke out along Bogus Basin Road approximately three miles north of the Hill Road intersection. By 9:30 that night it had consumed nearly 1,300 acres of brush and grass and was continuing to spread quickly across the dry foothills despite the efforts of 80 firefighters, 10 fire engines, two tankers, five bulldozers, a helicopter, and two retardant planes that had already dropped 18,000 gallons of retardant. The blaze headed to the northeast away from the nearest homes which were located several miles away on Eighth Street and between mileposts 4 and 7 on Bogus Basin Road. Because of high winds fire bosses didn’t risk putting firefighters in front of the blaze to create fire lines, but kept working through the night to prevent the fire from spreading to the south towards town. The next day an additional 40 firefighters were assigned to fight the Bogus Basin Fire<sup>21</sup>. By the afternoon of August 3<sup>rd</sup> the blaze was declared contained, however, 20 to 30 mph winds kicked up the flames again around 7:00 and the fire consumed 2,300 acres before it was finally contained three hours later. Ultimately, the Bogus Basin fire left a blackened strip along the Boise Front three miles long and about one and a half miles wide before it was declared fully controlled on August 4<sup>th</sup><sup>22</sup>.

### ***July 21st-August 13, 1990***

***Foothills between Table Rock and 8<sup>th</sup> Street Extension***: Between July 21<sup>st</sup> and August 12<sup>th</sup> of 1990 at least twelve separate fires were intentionally set in the Boise Foothills between Table Rock and the Eighth Street Extension. On July 21<sup>st</sup> a one-acre fire was started near Reserve Street and another small fire was ignited near Table Rock Road. On July 28<sup>th</sup> a second small fire that burned less than one acre was started near Table Rock Road. Two other fires were reported that day; one along Mountain Cove Road and a second along the Eighth Street Extension. Both fires consumed less than one acre before they were extinguished. A three-acre grass fire on the east face of Table Rock and a 180-acre fire along Rocky Canyon Road were reported on August 5<sup>th</sup>. Eight days later five separate fires burned approximately 120 acres along the Eighth Street Extension<sup>23</sup>. Investigators determined that a pyromaniac started all of the fires, not childhood pranks, after detecting a pattern in the location and characteristics of the fires. All of the fires were started between Table Rock and the Eighth Street Extension, no apparent motive was readily discernable, and none of the fires destroyed any structures<sup>24</sup>

### ***August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1996***

***“Eighth Street Fire”***: The most devastating fire to occur in the Boise Foothills in at least the

last 100 years erupted around 3:00 p.m. on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1996. Starting near Mountain Cove Road, it exploded into a massive range fire in less than an hour fueled by tinder-dry grass and pushed along by erratic 50 mph winds. By 9:00 Monday night the fire reached the trees of the Boise National Forest and was spreading down the ridge into Robie Creek. The flames had already spread westward and crossed Bogus Basin Road. Fire crews were setting back burns to protect microwave towers half way up the Boise Front.

Between 100 and 200 homes in the Robie Creek area were evacuated Monday night and residents in the Highlands and Table Rock subdivisions were put on alert as the fire rushed to the north. Six homes in the Foothills were eventually evacuated. Residents piled personal belongings into cars while others took up garden hoses and turned on sprinkler systems to protect homes. Unfortunately, resident Gerald Waller wasn't able to protect his \$700,000 luxury home in the Nines Ridge subdivision and the stucco home with a slate roof burned to the ground. By late Monday night the fire had consumed 6,000 acres of range and forest lands and was continuing to burn out of control. At the same time another 12,000-acre wildfire was burning out of control near Kuna and a 600-acre blaze near the Boise landfill continued to burn complicating fire suppression efforts in the Foothills <sup>25</sup>.

Despite more than 600 firefighters battling the blaze, the Eighth Street Fire continued to burn and by Wednesday August 28 more than 12,000 acres were charred. Boise officials were seeking reinforcements for the Eighth Street Fire but more than 320,000 acres were burning elsewhere across the West employing nearly 20,000 firefighters. Additional help would be slow in coming and the time of containment for the fire was unknown. Fortunately, the winds had died down and cooler weather over the past few days slowed the spread of the fire to the north and northeast. At this time fire officials believed the southern edge of the fire that abutted neighborhoods in the Boise Foothills had been stopped but feared the fire would continue to the north. As a precautionary measure one hundred firefighters flanked a line along Bogus Basin Road to the west, along the Boise Ridge Road to the north and northeast, and Rocky Canyon Road to the south to protect foothills homes. Frank Carroll of the Boise National Forest feared that should the weather turn hotter and windier the fire could spread like the Foothills Fire of 1992 and quickly reach epic proportions consuming 160,000 acres or more including residential neighborhoods. However, he assured the public that they were activating heavy duty helicopters and some of the best firefighters in the country to fight the blaze<sup>26</sup>.

A total of 820 firefighters eventually extinguished the Eighth Street Fire on Sunday September 1, 1996. By then 15,300 acres had burned, one home was destroyed, and over two million dollars had been spent to battle the fire. The cause of the fire was finally determined. Apparently, an off-duty policeman sparked the fire while using tracer bullets at a firing range near Mountain Cove Road. Despite the obvious immediate impacts caused by the Eighth Street Fire (loss of property, financial cost), secondary effects of the fire would be felt by Boise Front and North End residents for some time to come.

The substantial amount of smoke that was produced during the fire and that remained trapped in the valley for weeks following the fire significantly impacted the air quality of Boise. This situation could have been particularly hazardous to small children, asthmatics, and individuals with emphysema. The paper warned that although the moderate level of pollution in the air would likely only cause coughing, burning in the nose, and burning in the throat in healthy indi-

viduals, it could trigger potentially fatal reactions in persons with compromised breathing. Those at risk were asked to refrain from any outdoor activities and all others urged to use caution and limit outside exercise<sup>27</sup>.

The loss of critical vegetation due to the fire substantially increased the potential for flooding in Boise's North End and homes situated lower in the foothills. Leah Juarros, a soil scientist with the Boise National Forest, noted that the grass, brush and trees that once anchored the soil to the hillsides had been replaced by a waxy, water-resilient residue from the burnt vegetation and left the area prone to flooding. Flood control structures would have to be built above the homes in the Foothills to keep sediment from burying them should heavy rains or melt-off occur.

The potential danger of mudslides was not unknown to Boise planners and range managers as it had happened 37 years ago that month. A range fire in the hills northeast of Boise on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1959 left the hillsides bare of vegetation and a 1-inch rainfall seventeen days later left east Boise homes and businesses swimming in 10-inch deep mud. Cottonwood Creek, Maynard Gulch, and Warm Springs Gulch were choked with mud and debris causing the city to flood three times in August of 1959. This period became known as "The Big Mud Bath of 1959"<sup>28</sup>. Remediation efforts included terracing the hill slopes to prevent erosion.

Remediation efforts suggested by Wayne Patton of the Boise National Forest for the 1996 fire included contour felling (small trees cut at right angles to the slopes to slow water flow), damming streams with straw and silt to slow water, installing longer culverts, inside road ditches and trash racks to catch runoff, aerial seeding to restore vegetation, and storm patrols to keep the trails and roads free of debris<sup>29</sup>.

Nearly 280 species of wildlife were affected by the devastating loss of vegetation in the Eighth Street Fire. However, the deer and elk suffered the most because their wintering grounds were destroyed according to Scott Grunder, staff biologist at the Idaho Fish and Game. He estimated that 15,000 head of mule deer made their home in the Boise National Forest and approximately 30-40 percent (N= 4,500-6,000) of these animals migrate down to the warmer foothills in a hard winter. Mortality for both elk and deer was expected to be high for the next couple of winters. Many of the wildlife species losing their homes or food base in the foothills due to the Eighth Street Fire included migratory song birds and birds of prey. Grunder expressed concern over the growing numbers of subdivisions in the foothills causing loss of wildlife habitat and citing that more fires are likely the further into the foothills residential areas are pushed<sup>30</sup>.

The Eighth Street Fire also laid claim to some of the most popular outdoor recreation areas in the Boise region. Most of the 55 miles of hiking, biking, and motorcycle trails were blackened by the fire the day it erupted. Officials stated that it may be the following summer before recreationalists would be allowed back into the area and even then limited to trails designated by recreation specialists as least prone to erosion. The BLM issued warnings of falling rocks, hot spots, and the danger of increased erosion and subsequent flooding dangers to those tempted to return to the Foothills trails before stabilization efforts could be initiated. Outdoor shop owners recommended that mountain bikers and motorcyclists stick to main arteries like the Cartwright Loop, Rocky Canyon Road, Squaw Creek Trail, and West Highland Valley Trails

until stabilization was well under way. The popularity of the area is evident in a 1995 recreation study of the area that documented 600-700 people crossing the junction of Hull's Gulch and Crestline Trails in a two hour period<sup>31</sup>.

In addition to the devastation caused by the Eighth Street Fire some interesting historical finds emerged in its aftermath. One of these was the inadvertent discovery of three human burials of unspecified origin during flood control work in the area north of Boise along Cottonwood Creek in the fall of 1997. Bulldozers were excavating holding ponds in the area where the Boise Barracks Post Cemetery used to be located when the remains were discovered<sup>32</sup>. The discovery of human remain at this site wasn't unprecedented.

In 1906 a flash flood rushed down Cottonwood Creek causing major damage to the cemetery and eroding many of the graves. The cemetery including 166 graves of enlisted men, officers, officer's families, and some civilians was moved one half mile north to level ground in 1906. Shortly after the cemetery was moved, additional graves were discovered by soldiers using the area for target practice. Military training was halted in the area until these graves could be disinterred and reburied at the new site. Additional disinterment of graves took place until the Boise barracks were abandoned in 1913<sup>33</sup>.

The remains of the three individuals remained in the custody of the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office for one year for examination. According to Idaho State Historic Preservation Officer, Robert Yohe, only two of the coffins could be systematically excavated—the other had been destroyed by the bulldozer. One coffin had apparently been opened and the contents mostly removed. Only a few pieces of cloth, a button and small bones were recovered. Yohe stated that these likely would have been missed by crews relocating the old graves. The other coffin had been missed altogether and was still largely intact although the individual within had been somewhat damaged by the collapse of the coffin lid. This individual was buried in a plain pine box (verified microscopically) and was probably only wrapped in a shroud as no other clothing was found in the coffin. Yohe determined that the individual was a male between 35 and 45 years of age with severe periostosis (external bone tumors) of the femur and right tibia, probably died in the infirmary, and was buried directly from there. He also surmised that the individual may have been a Confederate officer because the skeleton exhibited generally good dental health and had several gold fillings not typical of the average foot soldier<sup>34</sup>. On Memorial Day 1998 the soldiers were reburied in the relocated Fort Boise Military Cemetery in a ceremony conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs<sup>35</sup>.

The Eighth Street Fire also revealed an interesting but potentially dangerous cultural resource—unexploded ordnance left over from early military training exercises. Workers beginning fire rehabilitation in the Hull's Gulch area encountered a live World War II-era explosive and World War I-era artillery shells. Corps of Engineers workers were called in to assess the situation before the rehabilitation could continue. At that time a 20-foot swath on either side of major trails was swept for ordnance using an ordnance detector<sup>36</sup>.

From 1873 through World War II the former Boise Army Barracks area was used for

munitions delivery training. It was reported from Boise residents such as Paul Ashley Sr. that his older relatives would ride horses into the foothills to collect old cannon shells to use as doorsteps. However, current Explosive Ordnance Disposal directives acknowledge that some spent ordnance may contain residual explosive components. Therefore, when an artillery round, rifle grenade, and other military munitions were found in the area northeast of Fort Boise Park after the Eighth Street Fire the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers was called in to consult on the situation. A proposed search of the area for unexploded ordnance was given the fifth highest priority in the northwest by the Corps. In an open house meeting at the Idaho State Historical Museum Bob Nore, of the Corps stated that he wasn't overly concerned about the threat from explosives as it was fifty years since the last explosives were used and there had not been any incident. Nevertheless, an 18-month survey of selected spots in the area around the old Boise Barracks was scheduled for the summer of 1999. The survey was estimated to cost more than \$500,000. Following the survey a decision would be made whether to remove the ordnance or not. Unless the ordnance was removed "Trail-only" restrictions would remain in effect between Trail 4 and Curlew Ridge Trail<sup>37</sup>.

By October of 1999 the Corps of Engineers had decided to test portions of 7,000 acres in the Foothills for mortars, bombs, artillery and other unexploded ordnance. The project was to be funded by the Corps DERPS/FUDS program that cleans up ordnance from formally used defense sites at a cost of \$974,137.00. On October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1999 workers from Earth Tech, a California environmental testing firm began sweeping the area three miles up the unpaved portion of Eighth Street across the street from the parking area with magnometers. No ordnance was found during the initial sweep so Earth Tec decided to bring in Ground Penetrating Radar equipment to detect materials buried deeper in the soil. This equipment would allow them to determine what types of ordnance may be present. The search for ordnance would continue until December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999 and would entail sweeping 200 search sites each measuring 100-feet by 100-feet. Workers would begin in the high elevations of the Boise Front and work their way downslope digging up and detonating any found ordnance. The results from this evaluation would determine whether additional work was needed in the area<sup>38</sup>.

Although no live or dud ordnance was discovered in the 1999 sweep, the workers did retrieve 73 pieces of explosive scraps. Therefore, the Corps, exercising on the side of caution, recommended that a 1,000 acre area northeast of the military reserve be systematically and completely cleared of all surface level explosive debris. Based on the concentration of spent munitions and the historical record the 1,000-acre area was a primary target. The project was estimated to cost \$1.67 million, but the Corps argued that the sum was considerably less than the \$5 million it would cost to clear the target area and a 2,000-acre buffer zone around the target. They rejected a plan to dig up the entire 3,000 acres given the suspected low risk<sup>39</sup>.

The offered plan met with much resistance from the public and city officials. Most saw no need to spend millions of dollars to clean up ordnance that had not caused any problems to date. Boise firefighters felt the plan didn't go far enough in the clean up effort citing the possi-

bility of heavy equipment inadvertently detonating buried ordnance during future firefighting or restoration activities<sup>40</sup>.

By January of 2002 the Corps offered Boise an alternative clean up plan. Workers would walk tight transects across the target area looking for unexploded ordnance and picking up scrap. Another 65 acres along major trails and firebreaks would be dug up whenever metal detectors encountered subsurface material. The plan was offered primarily as protective assurance for the Boise and BLM firefighters who expressed concern over inadvertent detonation during earth moving activities. This plan would cost just \$568,000.00 and would be funded by DERPS/FUUDS<sup>41</sup>. Work was expected to begin April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

### ***July 2, 1999***

***Behind Camel's Back Park:*** On Friday, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999 several grass fires were started around the Treasure Valley. Three, including a small blaze behind Camel's Back Park in the North End were blamed on careless use of fireworks. This fire burned only a small area of unlisted acreage. Fire Battalion Chief Dave Hanneman believed the lack of wind that day kept the fire from spreading any further into the surrounding dry grass<sup>42</sup>.

### ***July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1999***

***Table Rock:*** A small six-acre fire was started at Table Rock on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1999. Although believed to be man-caused, it was not thought to be related to a second man-caused fire started at Table Rock later in the week. The fire was extinguished the same day<sup>43</sup>.

### ***July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999***

***Table Rock:*** A fire that burned 25 acres at Table Rock early July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999 was attributed to arson. Twenty-one firefighters from the Boise Fire Department, North Ada County Fire Department, and Whitney County Fire Department responded to the call a little after midnight and contained the blaze within one hour. Witnesses saw 18-year-old Jake Tyler Brewer start the fire with a lighter who was later charged with third-degree arson. The fire did not damage any personal property and did not appear to affect any of the recreational trails on Table Rock<sup>44</sup>.

### ***July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999***

***Rocky Canyon, three miles east of Boise:*** A wind storm swept through the Treasure Valley on Monday July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999 causing five wildfires in the Boise area. The fire along Rocky Canyon was reported at 9:30 p.m. on the 26<sup>th</sup> and burned 100 acres before it was contained at 4:00 p.m.

the following day. No structures were threatened, but the fire burned along the eastern edge of a World War I firing range where unexploded buried ordnance is suspected<sup>45</sup>.

### ***July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999***

***Turner, near Turner Boat Ramp at Lucky Peak:*** Another small fire resulting from the July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999 wind storm was reported at Turner, near the Turner boat ramp at Lucky Peak Reservoir at 9:30 p.m. on the 26<sup>th</sup>. This fire burned 300 acres before it was contained at 4:00 p.m. July 27<sup>th</sup>. No property damage was reported<sup>46</sup>.

### ***July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999***

***Seaman's Gulch, six miles northwest of Boise at Dry Creek Road:*** This fire also resulted from the July 26<sup>th</sup> wind storm. The fire was reported burning near Dry Creek Road and Seaman's Gulch six miles northwest of Boise at 6:00 p.m. on the 26<sup>th</sup>. The fire was contained five hours later after burning 300 acres and damaging a shed<sup>47</sup>.

### ***June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2000***

***Foothills near Hill Road:*** A 40-acre fire at the base of the foothills on the east side of Hill Road was started on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2000 by four young boys playing with fireworks. The 10 and 11 year old boys wrapped duct tape around Whistling Pete's that ignited the grass fire around 4:40 p.m. Twenty units including the Boise Police, the Bureau of Land Management, the Boise Fire Department, other county agencies, and two helicopters responded to the fire and had it contained within 45 minutes. However, the fire spread so rapidly that it threatened 20 homes and six people had to be evacuated. The fire came within just a few feet of one home before it was extinguished. Police Officer Lance Nickerson said the boys would likely have to attend a fire safety class and the parents would be held liable for the damages. On June 29<sup>th</sup>, Boise Police Detective Bob Banta stated that the four boys will probably be tried in juvenile court. Steve Minnis of the Boise Fire Department reported that the boys had altered fireworks when they duct-taped them together and basically manufactured an explosive. Further, the parents would be held liable for the several thousands of dollars that it cost to fight the fire<sup>48</sup>.

### ***July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2000:***

***Bogus Basin Road near Crane Creek Country Club:*** A 50-acre foothills blaze was started on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2000 by two 19 year old men driving off road in a gully between Bogus Basin Road and the hills north of the Crane Creek Country Club. The fire started about 4:40 p.m. when the Jeep Wagoneer that the men were driving developed engine problems and they attempted to pour gasoline directly into the carburetor, igniting nearby vegetation. Winds between 10 and 15 mph quickly spread the flames and threatened homes in the Highlands area. Forty-five firefighters from the BLM and Boise Fire Department, 13 fire engines and brush rigs, an air tanker dropping fire retardant, and a helicopter filling a dip-bucket from a pond on the golf course were able to contain the fire in less than an hour. No one was injured and no structures burned, but

the blaze came within 200 yards of homes in the area and residents of a condominium complex on Hollow Lane had to be evacuated. William R. Hannan and Jason Armstrong faced misdemeanor charges as a result of the fire and may have been held liable for costs associated with fighting the fire<sup>49</sup>.

### **September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2000**

***“Hilltop Fire”, along Hwy 21 toward Lucky Peak:*** The Hilltop Fire was started around 3:00 p.m. on Sunday September 24<sup>th</sup> when a vehicle lost an axle sending sparks into the dry grass just south of the Hilltop Café along Highway 21. Sixty firefighters from the Idaho State Correctional Institution had almost contained the blaze at 450 acres on Sunday, but high winds kicked up and drove the flames south down the canyon toward Lucky Peak. Ten homes in the Brian Subdivision were evacuated at 2:00 a.m. Monday morning as fire crews lit a successful back burn and prevented the loss of personal property. Only one pump house was lost in the fire. Crews finally contained the fire at 2,600 acres on Tuesday September 23<sup>rd</sup>. Reseeding efforts were initiated immediately after the fire was contained to restore sagebrush and other vegetation critical to deer habitat.<sup>50</sup>

### **July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2001**

***Foothills Side of Hill Road near Briar Hill Condominiums:*** Stray fireworks burned two acres in front of the Briar Hill condominiums on the Foothills side of Hill Road near Collister Drive on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The Boise Fire Department contained the fire the same day. Boise Fire Marshal Steve Minnis felt fortunate that the firefighters were able to respond quickly as they could not have put hoses behind the fire as there is no access to that area of the Foothills and the fire could have caused thousands of dollars in damage<sup>51</sup>.

### **June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002**

***Hull’s Gulch Reserve:*** A fire that burned one half-acre at the base of Hull’s Gulch Reserve was intentionally set by a male juvenile celebrating the first day of summer break. The fire started in green thigh-high weeds intermingled with dry vegetation from the previous year at around 4:30 p.m. June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002. Investigators expected third degree arson charges to be filed against the juvenile. No structures were damaged in the fire<sup>52</sup>.

### **July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002**

***Pierce Park and Seaman’s Gulch Roads:*** On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002 around 2:00 p.m. a grass and brush fire broke out on Seaman’s Gulch Road just south of Hidden Springs. Fire crews from Boise, North Ada County, Eagle, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management responded to the fire that moved quickly through the Foothills to the southeast and along the side of Pierce Park Road within a mile of Hill Road. Two U.S. Forest Service Helicopters and one from the Bureau of Land Management spent several hours dropping water on the flames and finally contained the fire at 8:00 p.m. Most of the damage was to grass and sagebrush, but fire crews had

to burn a swath around several homes to eliminate fuel around the residences. Several homes were evacuated in the Hill Road/Pierce Park area and police blocked off Pierce Park and Seaman's Gulch Roads. Although the fire did not cause any serious loss of personal property, it did consume 500 acres of grass and brush in the Foothills before it was extinguished. No cause was determined for the fire but it was suspected to be man-caused<sup>53</sup>.

### ***July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2002***

***East side of Bogus Basin Road:*** A man-caused grass and sagebrush fire was ignited along the east side of Bogus Basin Road about a mile north of Simplot Hill around 7:00 p.m. on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2002. A Bureau of Land Management plane from McCall and two from Boise dropped retardant on the flames which helped firefighters on the ground bring the fire under control about an hour later before it reached a Boise subdivision. Firefighters hit the blaze especially hard as they were expecting an incoming thunderstorm with strong winds later that evening. No structures were damaged and no injuries were reported in this 60-acre fire. A specific cause for the fire was unknown<sup>54</sup>.

### ***July 6, 2003***

***Across from Crow Inn, Warm Springs Avenue:*** A man-caused fire that began on private property across from the Crow Inn on Warm Springs Avenue burned 864 acres of state and private land before it was contained about twelve hours later. No structures were lost, but the flames came within one half mile of houses. About 180 firefighters from the Idaho City Hot Shots, the Boise Fire Department, BLM, and the Forest Service attacked the fire aggressively to hopefully prevent another catastrophic fire like the Eighth Street fire of 1996 that burned 22 square miles of the Foothills. A specific cause for the fire was still under investigation<sup>55</sup>.

Research into the fires that have affected the Boise Foothills over the past 50 years identified 43 separate fires that burned more than 30, 750 acres in the Boise Foothills. Some of the fires were one acre or less, some destroyed thousands of acres like the 15,300-acre Eighth Street Fire in the late summer of 1996. Of the eleven fires identified that occurred before 1970, eight were caused by lightning, and with the exception of the 1,200-3,000 Arrowrock Fire and the 800-acre Stack Rock/Schaeffer Butte Fire all were less than 50 acres. The largest fire in the study that occurred before 1970 was arson-caused and burned between 3,000 and 4,000 acres—larger than the biggest naturally caused fire during the same period. After 1970, when residential development of the Boise Foothills really began to take off, 32 fires affected lands in the foothills. Only three of these fires were attributed to lightning. The remainder of the blazes were man-caused; 18 arson, 4 fireworks mishaps, 2 vehicle caused, 1 tracer round, and 4 unknown.

From this sample study it seems clear that the occurrence of fire in the foothills above Boise is directly linked to the Foothills popularity as a residence and playground for adults and children alike. However, the immense amount of information that was available for the limited time period selected for the study indicates that a true study of the Foothills Fires is far from

complete. I recommend that should a more in-depth study of the Boise Foothills Fires be undertaken, all years from 1950 through 2004 between the months of June and September be consistently researched. From the late stages of this project four more important fires were identified that were not included in this paper, but most certainly should be; the 1958 Curlew Fire, a large Fire in 1959, one in August of 1994, and one in July of 1995. A very brief description of these fires is included in the Appendix.

## ***APPENDIX***

### ***Known Fires in Foothills Requiring Additional Research***

#### **1958 Curlew Fire**

This fire presumably occurred along Curlew Creek north of Rocky Canyon. The name and date of the fire was provided by Guy Pence, Fire and Aviation Staff Manager, Boise National Forest in September 2004. Personal Communication, September 2004.

#### **1959 Large Foothills fire**

Large Foothills fire in August of 1959 followed by several torrential rainstorms sent a wall of mud and debris into the north and east ends of Boise. The decreased vegetation caused severe flooding in the town three times that August alone. The event raised awareness of the importance of a healthy watershed and the need to stabilize burned soils with vegetation and terracing. The foothills were terraced in the area of the fire the same year.

#### **August 1994 Foothills Fire**

Foothills fire burns 562 acres of brush in an unknown location. This fire was mentioned only briefly in the newspaper article describing the Eighth Street Fire in 1996.

#### **July 1995 Foothills Fire**

This fire burned 10 acres of grass and threatened six homes. It was suspected to be man-caused. Information for this fire came from a mention in the Idaho Statesman article in August 1996 describing the Eighth Street Fire.

<sup>1</sup> Pence, Guy. Personal Communication 2004

<sup>2</sup> "Storm Starts 18 Grass Fires in Boise Area", *The Idaho Statesman*, 21 July 1957, Sec. I, p.8.

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