

My Time at Tunnel

Part One

Two summers after Bill and Theresa Leet had their adventures at Tunnel Guard Station, I found myself riding in with my partner, Ron Barager, and the two guys whose job it was to prepare us for taking over as the Tunnel rangers. Ben Casad, the District Ranger, had Pete Garner and Frank Moser lead us up in the late spring of 1967 to show us how to open the cabin, maintain the fire gear, take care of the animals, and not get hurt if we can help it.

I had been hired for the summer to do front country work in the campgrounds and such, and did the usual training at fire school outside Mammoth. After a few weeks going round to hose out the outhouses and pick up garbage cans full of warming fish entrails, I saw that this was not my vision of working in the Sierra wilderness.

There was a rumor that there was this high cabin to support the fire crews, and that one of the people that was supposed to be staying up there with Ron was not going to appear. I thought I was the perfect candidate to replace him. I talked to the Assistant District Ranger, and laid out my qualifications, the best of which had at least a thin foundation in reality. I also mentioned that, at the end of the fire season, I was going to go with Ron up to Humboldt State to begin a degree in Forestry.

He was skeptical to say the least, but his back must have been up against the wall, because he accepted me, at least provisionally. Oh man, this was gonna be great.

I didn't know it at the time, but it was to be about the best job I'd ever have. I came to love the old "Home Comfort" wood stove, the animals, and the rush of firefighting.. The meadows were lush and colorful, unlike anything I had seen before in all my hiking farther to the north. I was free, grown-up, and in heaven.

The first jobs we needed to do were hiking along the phone lines and climbing the trees to mend the breaks (only in absolutely clear skies), and resurrecting the fences to keep cattle out and our stock in. I'm not sure what happened to the mules that Bill had been using. We were told that we had two "new" mules, a brother and sister, named Nick and Nifty, and that it was our job to "get them ready" for their work of packing fire fighting gear up into the high country, and pulling that amazing buckboard from the cabin to the airport and back for our supplies.

We quickly realized how new these two mules were. They were the most lovable and gentle things ever, for being to huge, but they were skittish in the extreme. Getting them harnessed was much like playing with old dynamite. You knew they were going to go off, you just didn't know when.

The harnessing itself wasn't so bad because you kept a hand on them and talked to them softly, but if the buggy behind them creaked too much as you climbed into the seat, they would bolt like lightning had struck and it was all you could do to hang on. For the first 30 yards the reins and the brake had little effect. The first time it happened to me, they took off before I was fully seated, Ron dove out of the way, and one front wheel struck the stump that an anvil was bolted to. We rode over it, and Ron swore that he could see three feet of light between my butt and the seat. I landed on my back with the reins somehow still in my hands. When he was able to breathe again from laughing so hard, Ron came and helped me unwind the rig from around a nearby pine tree. We must have cut three new wagon tongues that summer.

That was the summer I had my first introduction to mortality. One afternoon we had hitched up the wagon to retrieve our supplies at the airstrip, and had just run down the S-curve over where the water tunnel between the creeks had been blasted shut, and passed a group of 3 or 4 fisherman walking back to the camp. Maybe 50 yards past them we suddenly heard shouting and screaming from behind.

Looking over our shoulder we could see one person on the ground and the rest standing around. Ron and I leapt off the buckboard, letting Nick and Nifty free, and ran to them. One of the men had clearly had a heart attack. We immediately began CPR, with me and Ron changing places every so often.

After a short time one of the party took over my place and I ran back to the cabin and cranked up the phone with the signal for the Lone Pine station. I wish I could remember the name of the woman who ran the desk. She was always wonderful to us, and stayed composed no matter what we threw at her. After my breathless story, she ran to get help. The ADR came on the line and I repeated the story, and asked, "When do you think you can get a doctor here?" There was a heavy moment of silence. It seemed that there might be a question of who would pay for the helicopter flight up and back.

This was a stunning development. I began to argue forcefully (for me) that we could not do CPR forever, so what should we do with the body? More silence. Twenty minutes later or so, we could hear the little whirlybird approaching. The young doctor was very nice, had both of us show how we had been doing the resuscitation, and said that the man was gone even though we had done what we could. That he had us demonstrate our methods on the poor man's body itself and then approve of our work has always been a great comfort to me whenever I think back on those moments.

The chopper departed with the doctor and the departed, his friends walked back to the air camp arm in arm, and we retrieved the mules, who had run up to the foot of a lodgepole pine and were waiting placidly. The day had become very still. I don't remember hearing any more about it, but afterward it all seemed terribly strange. Still does.

End of part one.

Joe Tysl
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