

Portrait of the West



fire fighters

Words and photo by Pat Ratliff



Only the flag remained after the Waterfall fire in Carson City, Nev. Seventeen homes and 51 vehicles were lost while 8,723 acres burned.

They work 16-hour shifts and sleep when and where they can. The meals are infrequent and showers are few and far between. They never know where they will be tomorrow, but this summer they will be fighting wildfires all over the West.

Bob Elliott and Jason Matheson are like thousands of other firefighters all over the West. Pictured taking a break while fighting the Timber Fire near Tionesta, Calif., they exemplify the modern wildfire fighter. They share a special camaraderie, a history of fearlessness, service, duty and honor in the face of danger.

Snakes, mosquitoes, firebugs and all sorts of larger animals frightened by fire are always in the way. The tourists and sightseers are just as bad. They speak a different language, where a coyote is not a coyote and a

Pulaski is...well, a Pulaski. Smoke eaters, hot shots and thunder cells, it all makes sense to them. They come from all over to fight the fires. Big cities and small towns, prisons, farms, ranches, reservations and universities.

They save timber and livestock, homes and livelihoods, wildlife and pets, and acre after acre after acre of our public lands. They do it on a daily basis.

They have a special kind of spirit—that great western spirit. ■

Pat Ratliff is a reporter, columnist and photographer for the Klamath Courier and Pioneer Press newspapers, as well as several periodical publications throughout the western states. He is at <klamathcourier@aol.com>