

# The Smoke Chaser

A story about Burt Edwards in Glacier National Park  
by Debo Powers

I must have missed the Loop Trail, Burt thought, it is so dark that I can hardly see anything. Maybe I'll just keep going the way I'm heading and hike out that way. Burt's flashlight had burned out a while back. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and get his bearings.

He thought back over everything that had happened since he woke up at dawn. He had put in a hard day's work on the pipeline at Many Glacier. As he worked, he couldn't get Thelma out of his mind. She would be leaving for Inter-Mountain Union College on Monday and this weekend was the last time that he could see her until Christmas. How can I get from Many Glacier to Kalispell without a car? He pondered. Slowly a plan began to form in his mind as he worked on the pipeline. If I hike over Swiftcurrent Pass to Granite Park and out the Loop Trail to the Sun Road, I can hitch a ride to Belton and catch the train at 8am tomorrow morning. But can I hike that far in time? It would be relatively easy in daylight, but can I do it at night after a hard day of work?

You had to be a great hiker to be a Smoke Chaser. In 1929, when Burt got his first job in Glacier National Park, a Smoke Chaser was someone who was sent out to track down a lightening strike or a wisp of smoke that had been spotted by one of the fire lookouts stationed on many of the highest peaks. A Smoke Chaser tramped through the wilderness on foot using a compass and the coordinates reported by the lookout. He carried tools to put out the smoldering fire once he found it.

As he caught his breath on the dark trail, Burt's mind wandered back to an eventful day chasing smoke. He was near the right spot. He could smell the smoke before he ever saw it. Sure enough, the ground around the lightening-stuck tree was smoldering. Thankful that it was not flaming, he threw down his 45-pound pack and began to dig a ring around the area using his shovel and Pulaski. The sweat poured off his face as he labored to clear away as much of the duff as possible in order to keep the fire from spreading. When he finished, he sat down with a canteen of water to survey his work. His kaki shirt and black suspenders were drenched. He removed his narrow-brim felt hat and sensed the cool evening breeze against his sweat-soaked hair. Looking down, he wiped the dust off his bronze badge that said "Fireguard: U.S. National Park Service, Department of Interior." He noticed his gnawing hunger and reached for his pack, pulling out his cooking kit and some field rations in tin cans. That's when he saw the huge elk entering the clearing. The antlers on the old bull were like branches of a tree. The giant ungulate sniffed the air and pawed the ground that Burt had disturbed as though wondering what had happened there. Burt sat as still as a shadow and watched until the elk moved out of sight. It was sightings like this that made Burt grateful of this job.

Burt was cut out for the job of chasing smoke. He was 160 pounds of solid muscle and one of the best hikers around. He could hike all day in his calk-shoes chasing down

smoke. Nothing stopped him, not the grueling, steep mountainsides, not the biting mosquitoes, not the cold rain or hail. He loved being in the Montana wilderness.

Here he was two years later, still working at Many Glacier and still as strong a hiker as ever. Yes, I can make it, he had decided. I have the weekend off and I'm not going to sit around here when I can see Thelma. The thought of Thelma propelled him through the day. When he finished his work at 4:30 on Friday afternoon, he threw a change of clothes, a flashlight, and some food into a backpack and headed off toward Swiftcurrent Pass.

The world was beautiful that evening. The last rays of the setting sun shone against the larch trees that had not yet begun to turn their autumn yellow. He was going to Thelma. Wouldn't she be surprised and happy to see him? His heart swelled with the thought of holding her hand, maybe even kissing her.

He had pondered momentarily about grizzly bears. He would be hiking most of the night right through the middle of prime grizzly country. The chances of a bear encounter were great, but he was willing to risk it to see Thelma. Burt had clocked thousands of hours hiking alone without seeing many bear. He would never forget his closest encounter with a grizzly. He had been crawling on hands and knees through some thick alders to reach his fire coordinates when he came face to face with a grizzly. Luckily, the bear had turned and run, crashing through the bushes. Burt could feel the ground shake in that peat bog as the bear ran away. He hoped that he would never see a griz that close again.

On the long hike up to Swiftcurrent Pass, he had time to think. Burt smiled to himself, thinking about his first day on his job. He had been hired by Ranger Andy Fleutsch. Andy had looked at him skeptically when Burt interviewed for the job, but decided to give him a chance. In order to find out what kind of a worker Burt was, Andy loaded him up with more work than he thought anyone could possibly complete in one day. Burt finished all of his work and returned to the cabin before Andy.

"I'm so hungry. If I had a live skunk, I would eat the rear end out of it!" roared Andy, as he entered the cabin to find Burt at the stove cooking supper.

"Have a seat, it's almost ready!" Burt sang out.

Andy was surprised to see Burt cooking. "How much work did you get done today?"

"It's all finished," said Burt, as he placed supper upon the table.

From that moment on, Andy looked at the 17 year old in a different way. They became great friends after that.

Andy was the one who told Burt that the cook at Many Glacier Hotel had a good-looking daughter. One summer day in 1930, when Burt was working as a lookout at Goose Lake above Many Glacier, three women came hiking up to see the view. He enjoyed talking

to those women. He especially liked the one named Thelma, who told him that her father was the cook at Many Glacier. He whittled something out of alder and all the women signed their names. When the summer was over, Thelma and her dad went back home to Kalispell. Thelma and Burt wrote letters to each other throughout the winter. They had fun together the following summer, horseback riding to Iceberg Lake, dancing at the hotel, taking moonlight hikes. She was a great hiker, that Thelma, and he was going to hike all this night, if he had to, in order to see her.

But now he sat, catching his breath and deciding what to do. He had missed the Loop Trail, all right. Should he backtrack and try to find it or keep going? I know where I am, he thought. If I keep going, I will eventually hit McDonald Creek. I can take the trail to the Ranger Station at the head of McDonald Lake. If I backtrack, I might not find the Loop Trail in the dark and lose valuable time in the process. I'll just keep going, he decided. He was used to bush-whacking to locate smoldering lightning strikes, but this was quite a bit different without light.

The going was hard. There was no trail and the terrain was steep. At times, Burt hurt his toes on boulders and fallen logs that he couldn't discern in the darkness. The moon had not yet risen and dark trees loomed up in front of him with every step. Discouragement stalked him like a mountain lion. At one point, he fell over a log and collapsed on the ground panting and holding his bruised shin. As he lay there drenched with sweat, he wondered why he had not gone back to look for the Loop Trail. What was I thinking? he asked himself. But, the determination of youth returned and he pulled himself up from the ground pausing to listen to a coyote chorus in the distance. Their song calmed him and he resumed his downward journey with a chuckle to himself about chasing love rather than smoke this time. Dodging trees, bushes, and rocks, he finally reached the thick brush that signaled the approach of the creek bed. Stumbling through the brush was even harder work. Bushes grabbed his arms and legs, pulling at his clothing. When he reached the creek, he went down on his belly to drink some water. Refreshed, he kept going. The frigid water soaked his pants and boots as he slogged through the creek to find the trail on the other side.

The going was easier now, but from time to time, he heard bears snorting at him in the darkness. Must be a big one, Burt thought nervously, as something huge crashed through the bushes running away from him. This happened several times before Burt finally reached the Ranger Station on McDonald Lake where Ray Newberry was stationed.

Burt beat on the cabin door. Now that he was here, he felt so tired that he could hardly stand. He just wanted to rest, to sleep, and to lie down for a little while. In a few minutes, the door was flung open and lantern light spilled out into the darkness, momentarily blinding Burt.

"What's wrong? It's 3:30 in the morning! Is that YOU, Burt? What the hell are you doing over here on this side of the Divide? Come in, Come in, boy."

Burt stumbled into the cabin and collapsed into a chair. Ray gave him a cup of water and

sat down to hear his story. He was amazed to hear that Burt had hiked over the Continental Divide on some of the steepest trails in Glacier Park. He had traveled 26 miles in 11 hours to get there. Ray insisted that Burt lay down and sleep for a few hours until it was time to drive him to the train station at Belton.

As Burt drifted into sleep, he heard Ray mumble, "Crazy kid. He must really be in love with that Kalispell gal."