

Smokejumpers fought fires in the Applegate: 1972 was a bad year

BY MAUREEN FLANAGAN BATTISTELLA

The summer of 1972 was a long, hot, dry summer with temperatures reaching 108 degrees in the "Applegate District" of the Rogue River National Forest. There was no rain for weeks on end, and dry lightning sparked fires in the Siskiyou, Klamath, Six Rivers, Rogue River, Winema, Umpqua, and Shasta-Trinity national forests. All summer long the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base sent crews throughout the Fire District 8 region chasing fires.



Smokejumper.

Smokejumpers parachute into remote areas as an early and fast response to contain forest fires. The Siskiyou Smokejumper Base, at the Illinois Valley Airport west of Cave Junction, Oregon, was one of the first bases in the country to be established because it was a central location for Pacific Northwest wildfires.

"We launched and just followed the lightning strikes around, looking for smoke," recalls Gary Thornhill, who jumped that year into the Applegate District. That summer there were 22 lightning fires in the Applegate District alone, in timbered areas like China Gulch, Billy Mountain, Dutchman Peak, and Sheep Camp.

By late summer, Siskiyou Smokejumper Base crews were exhausted. Some smokejumpers had returned to college or winter jobs. When lightning strikes began on August 30, Siskiyou requested reinforcements from the North Cascades Smokejumper Base (NCSB) in Winthrop, Washington.

The jump log for August 30, 1972, is telling: "We requested reinforcements and received 16 NCSB Smokejumpers; they were needed for the new lightning storm on the Rogue River Forest. The Applegate had been hit hard. A DC-3 was launched to drop on small fires. Ewing and Kwarta in N344 made the flight with McMinimy and Buck as spotters." Spotters would stay in the plane, scanning for smoke and figuring out the movement of the wind and fire, and identify the best approach for smokejumpers to go into a fire. Spotters were critical to safety and operations.

"Most of them [fires] didn't get very big because we were just on them. We were jumping in to get the fire lines set and then the ground crews would take over. We'd pack out, get back to the base, and get on another airplane," Thornhill says.

Smokejumper Gary Buck remembers that summer, saying "The Applegate has big trees, but it always seemed there was a

place to land—a field or on brush."

Lightning strikes continued that season, and on September 3, 4, and 5, Siskiyou jumpers were dispatched to Klamath, Gasquet, Pelican Mountain, Prospect, and the Applegate. The log reports, "September 5 was another busy day with jumpers dropped on 9 fires on the Applegate District. The DC-3 was dispatched with Sthor and Gummer piloting and Swift spotting." That long day was far from over with four more fires starting up in the Applegate before dark.

Between March 16 and October 27, 1972, District 8 smokejumpers made a record 384 jumps on 97 fires and five jumps on three rescues. A small fire could be contained quickly with a fast response with two to four men jumping in teams. That summer, DC-3, Twin Beech, and Twin Otter aircraft dropped smokejumpers into as many as 15 fires a day.

The US Forest Service decommissioned the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base in 1981 and reassigned the crew. In 2006, the base was named to the National Register of Historic Buildings. Volunteers restored its historic buildings and reopened the base as a museum in 2007.

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) Division of Fire Protection reports that in 1972, southwest Oregon (the area served by the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base) saw 215 fires that burned a total of 2,318 acres, an average burn of 10.78 acres. The ODF reports that in 2017, District 8 saw 350 fires that burned 40,365 acres, of which 1,003 acres were designated by ODF as protected acreage.

Thanks to funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library Services and Technology Act, Southern Oregon University's Hannon Library is digitizing many of the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base Museum's historic photographs and documents. These materials, including a series of images that constitute "The Anatomy of a Jump," are found in the Stories of Southern Oregon Collection at soda.sou.edu.

The Siskiyou Smokejumper Base Museum is located at 30902 Redwood Highway, just west of Cave Junction on Highway 199. The Museum is open from May to November.

For more information, visit facebook.com/siskiyouSmokejumpers.

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Smokejumpers from the Siskiyou Smokejumpers Base in Cave Junction.



Farewell Rat Race, hello Applegate Open!

BY DAN WELLS AND KATE VANGELOFF

For the last 15 years, pilots from around the world have poured into the Applegate Valley to compete in the prestigious Rat Race Paragliding Competition on Woodrat Mountain. This June, pilots will be returning to the valley to compete, but this time they won't be attending the Rat Race—this time, they will be competing in the new Applegate Open. Practice day is June 9, with races from June 10 through June 16.

After a fantastic 14-year run, event organizers Mike and Gail Haley announced early last year that the 2017 Rat Race would be the final competition that they would produce.

Immediately after the announcement, a small group of pilots from the Rogue Valley Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association (RVHPA) started meeting to see if it would be possible to continue the tradition of hosting a paragliding competition in the valley. Not only is Woodrat known internationally as one of the premier flying sites in the US, but the annual competition is also a great boon for the local economy. After several planning sessions, the club voted to carry on the tradition and sponsor a new event. The Applegate Open was born!

The next task was to find a venue that could host such a large, ambitious event. Luckily, local winery LongSword Vineyard, a longtime supporter of RVHPA, was also interested in seeing the tradition continue and offered to serve as headquarters. The property at LongSword is a favorite landing zone for pilots and is often used as a goal during the competitions.

With the club's approval and the venue secured, the Applegate Open is beginning to take shape, but putting on a paragliding competition is no small task. It takes a lot of intricate planning and hours of hard work to make a paragliding competition a success. Fortunately, a number of the local club members have been competing or volunteering in the Rat Race for years and were ready for the challenge.

After months of hard work, including launching a website, creating a local rule book, obtaining a Bureau of Land Management special use permit, securing event insurance and approval from local landowners, and untangling millions



Top photo: Pilots on launch on Woodrat Mountain.
Bottom photo: Glider landing at LongSword Vineyard.

of details and logistics, this year's event organizer, Dan Wells, is proud to announce that 130 pilots are currently signed up for the competition with more sign-ups expected in the near future. With such a wonderfully large turnout for the first year of the new competition, the Applegate Open is looking for all the volunteers they can find. For instance, local Applegate residents with their knowledge of the area make great retrieve drivers. They are also looking for help with event registration, photography, headquarters drink and snack monitoring, water and ice delivery to the launch site, and updating social media and event status. Anyone interested in volunteering should visit wingsoverapplegate.org/volunteers for more details.

Community members interested in seeing the competition are invited to visit LongSword Vineyard any day of the competition during business hours to enjoy some wine and watch the paragliders. LongSword will be hosting viewing parties on Saturday, June 9, and Saturday, June 16, to celebrate the competition. Guests will enjoy live music, good food from food trucks, and the excitement of watching the pilots land at LongSword.

For more information about the competition, please visit facebook.com/WingsOverApplegate. For more information about public events, visit facebook.com/LongSwordVineyard.

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