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Harry Gisborne was quite a man... He didn't tip the scales very much but in matters of the mind, he was a real heavyweight. I knew him first in 1946 by which time: much of his work and his reputation, one could even call it fame, was: well, established. He was the first: and preeminent in matters having to do with the outbreak and spread of forest fires - fire danger.

There was the matter of forest fuels - how much, what kind, where located, topography, strength of forces required these and other factors had to be determined and classified and mapped for the whole region, an enormous task that could only have been accomplished with participation and funds of administrative forces. Lloyd Hornby and Clayton Crocker made major contributions in this phase of the work.

There was the matter of calendar date to be considered, indicative of the usual stages of green, curing and cured vegetation; relative humidity indicative of moisture content and hence flammability, especially of fine fuels such as weeds and tree moss; fuel moisture content of large forest fuels; and wind velocity, one of the most significant factors affecting outbreak and spread of fire in the woods.

Gisborne was the first to identify and measure these and other factors, to devise equipment for these purposes, to quantify their combined effect, and to devise a fire danger meter with which- forest officers and even temporary employees could determine fire danger. The reading was a signal to man the lookouts, to recruit and train and: disperse men for standby duty, and otherwise prepare for fire control action. The first meter was tested and revised and improved numerous: times. Instrumentation was relatively simple and: inexpensive and widely dispersed. Every lookout, ranger and guard station, side camp and Supervisor's office was equipped so, the region and every part of it could be on the alert when conditions warranted. Gisborne's: ideas and equipment, often modified to suit local, conditions, came to be: used in all Forest Service regions, most states and even Canada.

I have presented the barest highlights of some of Gisborne's accomplishments:. Others who know more and were with him longer, will I am sure enlarge: greatly on what Gis did and with what results. But I was as close as anyone in a couple of Gisborne episodes and would like to recount them.

One had to do with Dr. Vincent Schaefer, research chemist at the General Electric Research Laboratories at Schenectady N.Y. He had originated a means by which moisture laden atmosphere could be made to release it's moisture by seeding with dry ice crystals. It worked in the laboratory but significant for Gisborne and the Northern Rocky Mountains was the possibility that cloud seeding might be the means by which thunderheads could: be dissipated before sufficient potential built up to result in a lightening flash. In those years + 90% of Region 1 fires were lightening caused. So Gisborne got in touch with Schaefer. Schaefer was interested in a practical application of his work, and that same summer of 1948 arrived in Region 1 to remain several weeks in July and August.

The Regional Office made available the use of a C-47. The side door was removed and with Gisborne and a couple of others aboard, they headed for a threatening black cloud over Evaro Hill. But the cloud was rising rapidly. At about 30,000 feet it outpaced the plane's ability to get on top. The crew's oxygen supply, or rather the equipment was: crude and inadequate. With tubes in their mouths and movement difficult, a sack of dry ice crystals was somehow spilled out the door and a rough perilous: descent of the plane was begun. But on the: ground and on the highway an appreciable amount of snow fell. Quite a few motorists who didn't know what happened had quite a story to tell that summer afternoon. Schaefer and Gisborne
had: demonstrated something brand new. Techniques and equipment were improved and− today rain or snowfall induced by similar means , though not important in fire control, is more, extensively used in critical watersheds to augment and extend streamflow, to dissipate fog over airports, etc.

Though it's sad, an account of Harry's passing deserves to be told. Came the Man Gulch fire of 1949 in a drainage on the east side of the Missouri River between the Gates of the Mountains and the Canyon Ferry dam near Helena. The fire started in the upper-reaches of Man Gulch in mostly dry grass and scattered timber. Smoke-jumpers were dispatched from Missoula. They all landed without incident, gathered up their gear and headed for the fire. But before reaching it there was a sudden change in direction of the wind, and fire racing through the dry grassy cover enveloped 13 of the 16 members of the crew. What happened? Why had it happened? Might it have been foreseen? These and a myriad questions were calling for, yes demanding answers, locally and in Washington. The man thought most knowledgeable and capable of providing answers was none other than Harry Gisborne.

But Harry was not a young man. Moreover he had a heart condition and knew it and his limitations, and was prudent about what he undertook. At the time I was Director of the Northern Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station and Gis' superior. Reluctantly I approved the trip but on condition that he make it and the inspection of the area and the fire line by jeep. This was quite practicable considering the open cover and relatively gentle slopes throughout much of the area. So Gis started out. From Helena he proceeded by jeep and got quite far up the mountain 'til he encountered that Montana gumbo made slick by a light rain the night before,; which stalled the Jeep. Gis proceeded anyway by foot, saw what he wanted to see and made his way down the gulch toward the Missouri River. He sat down on a log for a rest, had a smoke and expired.

We were all stunned. I proceeded to−do. what he had asked me to do if anything of the kind ever happened. He had given me a key to a desk drawer he always kept locked. I was to open it and destroy several folders (he was a great one to make notes and record impressions he regarded as private). But right on top was a large photograph of the south end of the Mission Range. It had: been taken from the west side of the valley and showed a realistic profile of a reclining person. There were notes and pen lines all over the picture which gave the viewer specific instructions respecting just where, if anything ever: happened to him, he wanted his ashes to be cast − right in
the old man's eye.

Driving north on highway 93 one may easily identify the nose, but only from a restricted area on the west side of the valley are all the features discernible. This because some are on different ridges. Anyway, at the first opportunity Forest Service pilot Floyd Bowman and Clayton Crocker and I did the best we could to locate the eye and carry out Harry's instructions.

Years later Harry's wife Alice passed away in Portland Oregon, and in due time her ashes too were strewn over the same area. The Gisbornes were really great people. Alice played the piano and accordion like a professional and was indispensable at the Experiment Station parties we used to have. In time a larger group formed around her and "The Old Time Orchestra" became well known and in demand. Alice carried the group on the piano, Jean Lindh and Margaret Tebbe played violins, Charlie George the trumpet, Jack Nash the mouth organ and accordion (simultaneously) and Agnes Crocker and Katherine King filled in neatly with ukuleles.