

Early Radio Days

BY ART NELSON

The two-way radio we take for granted today in our protection and harvesting operations did not become available to private owners until the practice of forestry was almost a half-century old. The U.S. Forest Service pioneered the development of radio that could be used in the woods. In the summer of 1937, I was fire weather dispatcher for the western side of Region 1, located at the Priest River Forest Experiment Station at Priest River, Idaho. By that time, the Forest Service had a network of AM (amplitude modulated) stations connecting all ranger stations, and the "project fires," fires that lasted more than one day, had base station communications. My job was to gather all this information and send it by radio to regional headquarters in Missoula, Montana.

As I began my work in private forestry in the South, I realized that we were never going to get a handle on the fire control situation until we had a two-way radio. The problem was, no provision had been made for the private use of radio.

During World War II, great strides were made in radio communications, and reliable two-way frequency modulated (FM) mobile units were developed. These were made available for civilian use at the close of the war. The Galvin Manufacturing Co., now Motorola, offered two-way base station and mobile equipment that was suitable for forestry work.

The Mississippi Forestry Commission adopted this equipment for its use. Jim Craig was chief of fire control at the time and was responsible for this development. I attend-



Gifford Pinchot National Forest, 1937. Forest Service photo.



Radio equipped Jeep, Flintkote Forestry, Mississippi, 1951. Mississippi Forestry Association photo.

ed a conference at Jefferson City, Mo., along with Assistant State Forester Lee Sessions. The governmental forestry and conservation organizations worked out an allocation of frequencies to minimize interference, and we selected those frequencies which would serve us best in Mississippi. Since there were no frequency allocations for private use, these forestry operations were allowed to use frequencies assigned to the Forestry Commission as "cooperators."

I established a radio system for the Flintkote Forestry Department in January 1946. As useful as the system was, we still were not allowed to use it for any administrative or harvesting operations. Many other private forestry operations had the same problem. A group of West Coast forestry interests went to Washington to petition the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to allocate frequencies for private forestry use.

After being persuaded that private forestry operations really did need radio, the FCC allocated some frequencies, but with the caveat that private industry set up an organization to handle problems of interference. As a result, in 1949 Forest Industries Radio Communications was organized, with headquarters in Eugene, Oregon. Elmer Surdam, a forester with considerable military radio experience, was named manager. Each region—West Coast, South, Lake States, and New England—elected its own chairman and frequency coordinator. I was asked to be fre-

quency coordinator for the Southern Region, and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Within a few years, practically all the major forest operations in the South had two-way radio. In east Mississippi, four companies, Flintkote (Art Nelson), A. De Weese Lumber Company (Dick Allen), D.L. Fair Lumber Company (Davis Fair), and Barge Timberlands (Charlie Barge), all established radio systems using the common frequency of 29.73 Mc. This enabled us to provide mutual assistance when fire situations developed. On large fires, and there were several in the early 1950s, crews from several companies would join the state crews in suppression efforts. This joint effort proved very effective, and much of the timber in this area today is there because of this cooperative effort.

Today, the organization is called Forest Industries Telecommunications (FIT), since the radio spectrum is used for purposes in addition to voice transmissions. The service also includes many private nonindustrial tree farm operations. The current chairman of the Southern Division of FIT is Ken Faint, International Paper Co. Charles Burkhardt, Mississippi State University, is a member of the board of directors of FIT, as well as a member of the Southern Division Committee.

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