



BACK COUNTRY HORSEMEN OF AMERICA

Double Diamond Award Nomination



MARCH 20, 2025

LAST CHANCE BACK COUNTRY HORSEMEN CHAPTER
OF BACK COUNTRY HORSEMEN OF MONTANA
HELENA, MONTANA

P.O Box 4008, Helena, MT 59604
lastchancebch@gmail.com

Nominated and submitted by:
Terry Hutton, LCBCH Chapter
T4hockey@gmail.com
406-439-7768

Last Chance Back Country Horsemen Maintain Historic Mann Gulch Fire Site

The Mann Gulch wildfire occurred August 5, 1949. Mann Gulch is near the Missouri River, north of Helena, Montana in what is now the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness. The terrain is very steep, rocky, unstable and has limited access. Fifteen US Forest Service smoke jumpers out of Missoula, Montana were dropped by a C-47 plane at Mann Gulch and met up with one Helena National Forest fire guard who was stationed at the Meriweather Campground area nearby. As the sixteen men headed down the gulch towards the Missouri River, high winds caused the fire to suddenly expand, cutting off the men's route and forcing them back uphill. Later studies estimated that the fire covered 3,000 acres in ten minutes during this blow-up stage. The deadly wildfire claimed thirteen lives of the sixteen firefighters. This story endures and has been presented in numerous news articles, books, documentaries, movies and continues to be of interest.

The Mann Gulch site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places which contains detailed information regarding the incident. The events of Mann Gulch greatly influenced the future of wildfire suppression and fire research. The Forest Service designed new training techniques and implemented additional safety measures for its firefighters as well as increased emphasis on fire research and the science of fire behavior, developing new firefighting techniques and equipment with the goal of never repeating the tragic events of August 5, 1949.

Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest has actively protected the integrity of the Mann and nearby Rescue Gulch where the three survivors were rescued. The Last Chance Back Country Horsemen (LCBCH) has worked with the Forest Service to maintain this historic site over the years since it is basically out our back door.



Mann Gulch Memorial monument located in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness near Meriwether Campground, Lewis and Clark County, Montana

August 1999 marked the 50th anniversary. The Forest Service erected a monument to the fallen near the Meriwether Campground. Members of the LCBCH Chapter as well as Forest Service and National Smoke Jumpers Association continue to maintain, rehabilitate and/or build trails to allow improved access to the incident site. Over the years, additional signs and markers (concrete crosses and granite obelisks) have been packed in and set up by these same organizations.



Concrete cross and
granite obelisk
marker at one site

August 2024 marked the 75th anniversary. The National Heritage Program of the US Forest Service began pre-planning for this Mann Gulch Fire anniversary. Other organizations involved included the National Smoke Jumpers Association, NSA Trails Restoration and Maintenance Projects (TRAMPS), Montana Discovery Foundation, Wild Montana and other interested groups. LCBCH Chapter became an integral part of the preparation for the anniversary.

LCBCH Chapter worked closely with local Forest Service staff to plan the work to be done prior to the August 2024 anniversary events. Some of the concrete cross markers that identify where the firefighters died were deteriorating and needed to be replaced. In early May of 2024 the LCBCH Chapter had a fun, social gathering event. Also at this event, members determined the best way to sling and tie the crosses onto pack saddles with lumber bunks and did some practice runs. The crosses were covered with lumber to protect the concrete edges and corners. Mid-May 2024, a trail crew of eight LCBCH Chapter members first did a reconnaissance trip in the steep and challenging terrain to ensure the trails to be used to pack the crosses and supplies into the drop-off site were cleared. The following week, six LCBCH Chapter members with seven pack stock went into Mann Gulch drop site with four, 75-pound concrete replacement crosses as well as water, quickcrete and some hand tools.



Packing up concrete crosses, supplies and gear.



Packed and heading into the Mann Gulch drop site.



There was limited space to turn animals around on the steep terrain, so some members left their mounts at the top of the gulch and followed the pack animals on foot for the remaining mile. At the designated drop site, on steep terrain with limited space, the pack animals were unloaded one at a time and then turned around and moved out of the way for the next pack animal to unload. From there the Forest Service and Montana Discovery Foundation volunteers took over, digging holes and replacing the crosses that had deteriorated.

After this monumental task, LCBCH Chapter worked through June and July 2024 to clear and rehabilitate other trails in the Gates of the Mountain Wilderness to enable easier access for the public to visit the Mann Gulch area. Members of the National Smoke Jumpers Association also cleared trails to the top of Mann Gulch and built a mile and a half trail from the saddle above Mann Gulch to down near the crosses.

Annually the LCBCH Chapter monitors and maintains trail access into and within the Gates of the Mountain Wilderness and will continue to work closely with the Forest Service and other interested organizations to maintain this historic site. It is our privilege and honor to support the ongoing efforts to memorialize the thirteen fallen smoke jumpers of the Mann Gulch Wildfire of August 5, 1949 in Montana.