

Mountain of youth: Retired smokejumpers return for summertime ritual of work

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By KIM BRIGGEMAN of the Missoulian

Photographed by KURT WILSON of the Missoulian

Former smokejumpers Doug Wamsley, left, and Richard Trinity use pulaskis, a general tool of firefighters, to shore up a trail across a hillside of shale rock. Wamsley is a retired prosecuting attorney from Denver and Trinity a surgeon in Red Oak, Iowa. Both are returning veterans of the National Smokejumper Association Trail Maintenance Program, in its 10th year.

KURT WILSON/Missoulian

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NICHOLIA CREEK - You know these guys. They speak of horseflies in the abstract, if they mention them at all, even as they're buzz-barded by the things.

Come bugs or high water, there's nothing in these mountains they're going to bitch about.

The old smokejumpers strung out comfortably last Monday morning on a four-mile hike up to base camp in the deepest southern cirque of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. There was conversation - a razzing here, a man-would-you-look-at-that there. But not a lot of it.

This was new country for most, but they'd been here before. Each was a

veteran of the National Smokejumper Association's Trail Maintenance Program, which is in its 10th year.

They followed the willow-lined creek through sage country and aspen groves, snapping photos and rousing a bull moose along the way. Each repaired into a private world of reflection and, oh, what images they must have been.

The nine of them averaged 67 years of age. Spud DeJarnette, who grew up in Missoula and taught music in Sacramento, Calif., for most of the last 50 years, will turn 80 next May. A rookie jumper in 1949, he missed the call to a fire at Mann Gulch north of Helena by one plane load. A high-school friend, Eldon Diettert, didn't and was among the 12 firefighters to perish in the upslope rush of flames.

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