

Blitzkrieg Against Fire

BLITZKRIEG methods, with streamlined fighting units instead of old-time mass formations, are coming into use in combating one of America's worst economic menaces, the forest fire. Tried out for the first time last year by the U. S. Forest Service, the new tactics proved so satisfactory that their use is now being extended.

Traditional method for stopping a forest fire has been to round up casual laborers and even hoboes by hundreds, arm them with tools which they hardly know how to use, and send them to the fire front. Unsited for the work, usually in poor physical condition, these men naturally work inefficiently, especially under the terrific stress and danger of a forest fire battle. Furthermore, the method of recruiting involves delay, frequently of days, while the fire rolls forward unchecked.

The new tactics involve the building of what amounts to a small standing army, skilled in the use of their weapons, kept in perfect physical trim and ready for instant action. Formations are in companies of 40, each divided into squads of 10. The men are permanently on the payroll; when not fighting fires they are kept busy building roads, bridges, etc. The original 40-man crew, that went into action last year, averaged nearly six feet in height and 170 pounds in stripped weight.

Instead of having each man try to clear and hold one short section of line, such a company moves steadily forward. Each man strikes one blow, with ax or other tool, for every couple of strides he takes. Those following do the same, so that by the time the 40 have passed there is a swath of ground cleared

of everything combustible, and the fire cannot pass.

The forties constitute a *corps d'elite*, sent into the toughest spots and taking pride in their ability to lick the hungriest

fire. Last season's performance indicates that one of these professionals can clear five times as much fire line in a given time as the untrained fighters hastily recruited after the fire has broken out.

Science News Letter, July 27, 1940

ZOOLOGY

Wild Mouse Chews Tobacco; Quids Keep Vermin Away

Two Wild Tobacco Species Grow in Native Habitat, So Strange Practice May Not Be Unnatural After All

A WILD mouse that chews tobacco for a serious purpose is a pet of Ernest P. Walker, assistant director of the National Zoological Park. The tobacco isn't chewed "for fun," but apparently to provide an insecticide to keep his fur clear of pestering parasites.

The little animal, a grasshopper mouse, lives in a cage on the corner of Mr. Walker's desk in his home. His name is Ony—short for his full zoological title, *Onychomys leucogaster*, which is rather too much name for so small a mouse. Every evening he is given several hours' liberty.

"Frequently I have noticed," reports Mr. Walker, "after he had been running about the desk, that very small cigar stubs which I had left in the ash tray had been carried to his favorite location on the desk and completely demolished.

"My first thought was that he was merely amusing himself; but this explanation did not satisfy me. Recently I offered him one of my small cigar stubs after he had been without such material for a short time. He immediately took it, carried it to his favorite corner, held it in his hands and took a small bite from the end I had held in my mouth. He chewed the morsel briefly and then bent around, separated his fur with his hands and placed the chewed tobacco on his skin at the base of the fur. He took another bite, chewed it briefly and placed it similarly. He did the same thing at various parts of his back, thighs, and under parts. This procedure has since been witnessed by both my wife and myself and by visitors on several occasions.

"As he has been kept well supplied with insect powder, I am confident he has no ecto-parasites; but no doubt he does not distinguish between the common itchiness of the skin that occurs on all furry creatures and the

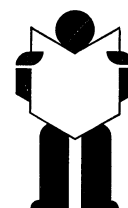
special irritation caused by parasites.

"When I first noticed that he used the tobacco in this manner, I wondered at the instinct or reasoning that prompted him to do so. Mr. Vernon Bailey, who gave 'Ony' to me, reminds me that two species of wild tobacco normally occur in the general range of this grasshopper mouse. It is therefore possible that the use of tobacco as an insecticide is a normal but hitherto unnoticed habit of the species."

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Roasted barley supplies Germany with *ersatz* coffee; *ersatz* tea is made from mixed leaves and shoots.

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