

Square dancers shuffle in West despite fires

By LEN IWANSKI
Associated Press Writer

9-5-80

WEST YELLOWSTONE — Despite heavy smoke from nearby forest fires, tourists strolled the streets and patronized shops Sunday in this gateway town at the west edge of Yellowstone National Park.

More than 200 square dancers from four states continued a three-day jamboree at a local community center where the musicians literally fiddled while nearby forests burned.

But the festive mood was not shared by some U.S. Forest Service firefighters, who complained to a reporter about what they saw as serious shortcomings in firefighting policies of the National Park Service.

A Yellowstone park spokeswoman said the firefighters' comments showed a lack of information on their part.

Eugene Kistner of Carmi, Ill., a tourist strolling along the main street of West Yellow-

stone, said, "We've never been here before. We just decided we wanted to see Yellowstone."

His wife, Esther, said they knew what to expect because they had been following the progress of the Yellowstone fires on television, but decided not to let that interfere with their plans.

"We got to see everything we intended to see," Eugene Kistner said.

A few blocks away, about 250 square dancers from Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Utah were kicking up their heels at the 33rd annual Knothead Jamboree, which has been held each Labor Day weekend at West Yellowstone since 1980.

This year's attendance "is about half what we had last year because of the fire," said Betty Rae Bronson of Shelley, Idaho, who is that state's chairwoman for this year's event.

"Square dancers are tough. We can take what they dish out," she said, when asked whether the group had considered canceling the event

because of the fire situation.

"Or else we're Knotheads," she said with a laugh. "That's what we're called."

Some U.S. Forest Service firefighters, in town to do laundry during a break from the fire lines, did not share the upbeat mood of the dancers.

"The Park Service is sticking to its policies so hard that it's let the fires get out of hand," said one, who along with a colleague asked that they not be identified by name or home state.

"They had a few small fires (earlier in the summer) that they could have put out," his companion said. "But they have a 'let burn' policy. That's not the policy to have after four years of drought."

The first firefighter described the current situation, involving massive firefighting resources from across the nation, as "too little, too late."

"We're here to do our job but they're not letting us do it right," he said.