



THE GREAT FIRE OF 500 YEARS AGO

In our July 1981 issue of the *QDNR&ED Newsletter*, we said that fires in our forest were a phenomenon before the arrival of the white man. Fires did occur about every 150 to 200 years in our westside forests, especially during dry periods. One old Quinault legend, discussed in the July 1979 *QDNR&ED Newsletter* said: "... long ago a great fire, sweeping the whole of the Olympic Peninsula was so intense it drove the people to the sea. There they stayed in their canoes and whale boats until the fire died and the land cooled..."

Indeed today, we find many old Redcedars in the old growth which show remains of char from ancient fires. Most of the ring counts we have done on Redcedar place them between 350 to 450 years of age even though it can grow to be more than 1,000 years old. Many of the dead snags go back further than this and it is these which show the signs of fire.

An article by Sean Sullivan in the July 31, 1963, *Aberdeen Daily World* told about a great fire which swept from the Columbia River to Lake Ozette about 500 years ago. This may have been the same fire of the Quinault Legend. Such a fire would have paled the destruction caused by Mount Saint Helens in May, 1980. The following is taken from Sullivan's article.

"LIKE A PHOENIX, part of the history of Grays Harbor written long before the white man came, rises from the charred evidence of the great fire which swept the area hundreds of years ago.

"Dotting the entire Olympic Peninsula are giant cedars which grew for hundreds of years, died and have stood for centuries, mute testimony to the fierce

tragedy of ages past.

"These trees were killed by a fire 500 years ago and hint of the once great cedar forest. That they were killed at the same time can be told by the age of the trees which grow about them, and the rings of those whose stumps have remained intact.

"Remains of the fire are nowhere clearer than near Copalis. Here, huge Redcedars stand with wounds betraying their mode of death, caked with carbon and deeply etched by fire, wind and insects.

"When loggers reached this part of the country, they found the cedars bare and sticking out like a sore thumb from the vast green sea of trees. As time went by, cedars of similar age were found scattered all along the Washington coast, leading to the conjecture that a huge fire burned from below the Willapa Harbor to Lake Ozette, leveling almost everything in its path. The conflagration burned as far east as the Humptulips River and the Promised Land area on U.S. 101.

"How the fire got started and how it spread may never be known. However, the last rings of the trees killed by the fire show a very small, hard growth indicating an exceptionally dry period.

"It is perhaps a little difficult to visualize the extent of the great conflagration. Or was it one great fire? It could conceivably have been a series of fires in two, three, or even ten years. It is hard to pinpoint the date by counting tree rings. But, unmistakably, there were fires and big ones, raising tremendous smoke columns along the Washington coast sometime before Columbus." 4