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## **Built on the Shoulders of Veterinary Giants: “Your Forest – Your Fault – Your Loss”**

**BY: DR. STEVE JOSEPH, KCVMA HISTORIAN**

One of the most remarkable public service campaigns to prevent forest fires started in the 1940s. In 1944, Smokey Bear joined that campaign, appearing for the first time on a forest fire campaign poster. But Smokey was catapulted to true fame with a forest fire in the Capitan Mountains of New Mexico. In 1950, a bear cub was found clinging to a tree and taken to the Santa Fe practice of Dr. Edwin Smith (CSU 1938) with severe burns. Today the bear is recognized as the fire prevention icon by a majority of Americans.

As the young bear recovered it was reported he would run to greet Dr. Smith for treatments. The fame of Hot Foot Teddy, as he was first known, grew. Dr. Smith and his wife spread the message of forest fire and wildfire prevention and conservation in schools and service organizations. Today that work is continued by Smith family members.

Following recovery from his burns, a letter was sent to Washington offering Smokey as the living symbol of fire danger in our forests. He took residence at the National Smithsonian Zoo where he lived until his death in 1976. Smokey was returned to New Mexico and is buried in Smokey Bear Historical Park.

To understand Smokey’s involvement we must look back to WW2. In an attempt to win the war the enemy fired shells from a submarine into a California forest near Santa Barbara, and later released gas filled balloons into Oregon to start fires. Neither effort was successful, but it got our attention and emphasized our forests’ vulnerability. A fire prevention campaign was initiated, and in 1942 Walt Disney authorized use of characters from “Bambi” in publicity materials. When that authorization expired in 1945, a new animal representative was needed. Hot Foot Teddy came along at just the right time to fill the role of Smokey.

In 1952, a popular song was written that resulted in a long standing debate. Smokey was known by law as Smokey Bear. However, in order to maintain the correct rhythm, writers added “the” between Smokey and Bear. Hence “Smokey the Bear”, a name many grew up with, is today recognized by most young adults and children.

To honor Smokey’s 40th birthday anniversary a postage stamp was issued. Three years later National Smokey Bear Day was held and celebrated by major league baseball teams in the US and Canada.

The Junior Forest Ranger program was started in the 1950s to encourage children throughout the nation to express their interest in forest fire prevention. In return for their support, youngsters received a Junior Ranger Kit. By 1965, the volume of mail was so great that Smokey received his own zip code – 20252.

In a marketing textbook, Richard Earle wrote the Smokey Bear campaign is recognized as “among the most powerful and enduring of all public service advertising.” It is simple, strong and straightforward.



*Dr. Smith treats Smokey. Used with permission from the Forest Service U.S. Department of Agriculture.*