

Southern California Disasters Visited Series

THE FIRES OF AUTUMN 1993

written: November 14, 1993

© 1993 Charles W. Paige

Southland Fires—1993

Fire was to be the theme for the last week of October and first week of November, 1993. Fourteen major fires erupted in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, Ventura and San Diego counties, most of which were caused by arsonists. The Santa Ana winds arrived Tuesday, October 26, bringing hot, dry gusts. That day, the Woodland Hills area in Ventura County began to burn, wildlands at first, then houses.

Wednesday morning, October the 27th, I began smelling smoke at around 6:00 o'clock while eating breakfast at home. I became concerned that the house might be on fire and did a quick inspection. Looking out the kitchen window facing east I could see a great column of smoke emanating, I first thought, from Lake Avenue nearby. Yet when I heard fire trucks a minute later, they proceeded up Lake Avenue, past where the smoke appeared to be coming from, and onward north until the sirens could no longer be heard.

I left for work at 7:30 o'clock, and by then the air was permeated with heavy smoke. The winds had increased since sunrise and by now were strong enough to blow dirt, leaves, branches, even palm fronds horizontally across Orange Grove Boulevard, the street I take east to Altadena Drive. Children on their way to school were forced to cover their faces and brace against violent gusts.

The drive to work took about ten minutes. Most of the distance I was in smoke of various densities. Occasionally, however, the car would go through a patch of clean, clear air. When this happened I would look northward for the origin of the smoke. Nothing could be seen from my vantage.

Everybody at work was distracted. A large screened, projection television in the conference room was tuned to the news all day. It wasn't difficult finding news about the fires, since one could scarcely find anything else. It was soon announced that the Altadena fire started in Eaton Canyon, a great drainage area snaking along the foot of the San Gabriel Mountain Range. It started from a campfire lit by a homeless, illegal Chinese immigrant to keep warm. (He was later tried and deported.)

Valerie Mathews, our document librarian, didn't show up that day, or the next, but did show up for a short while on Friday. The house that Valerie had inherited, and in which she and her family lived, was right at the base of the mountain range north of Altadena/Pasadena, next to wildlands that had not burned for as long as she could remember. We found out on Friday that Valerie and her husband had packed all of their most valuable possessions into the husband's collection of cars and vans, and had parked the vehicles around at different locales for greatest protection. Valerie told us that being totally prepared was their "voodoo" against being burned out. "If we do ever get burned out," she said "it will be when we aren't home and there is no warning." (They wouldn't return the vehicles and possessions until more than a week later, and after a separate fire raced down the mountain and destroyed homes of their neighbors to the east.)

I went home at lunch time to check the place. Ash was falling like snow in a Christmas blizzard, and my concern was that an ember might find its way to "Fort Elmira" and then land in something it could eat. The sight greeting me was not pretty. The high morning winds had emptied all nearby trees of their dead leaves, branches and twigs, carpeting everything with dry kindling. The next hour-and-a-half was spent hosing down everything I could, at least making the fuel less tasty to a potential flame.

Besides wetting the yard I spent time prioritizing valuables and loading the car with

Southland Fires—1993

those possessions ranking the highest. It's an interesting process discovering what things one values the most. The downstairs neighbors came home as I was returning to work, so they would keep a lookout from then on.

That night I removed the carpet of kindling, loading two large trash cans for the next day's garbage pick-up. The after dark effort was well worth while, though, as it afforded me a more peaceful night's sleep. Sleep would come eventually despite psychological turmoil aggravated by having watched news coverage of burning homes all evening and having heard dire predictions of gloom and doom from newscasters making their bid for a reputation. Also, difficulty with breathing due to constantly inhaling smoke would do much to delay the sleep process.

Unbeknownst to me, Charlene and Bob (and Mom, who was staying at their house) attempted to contact me that evening. However, their call was intercepted by a recorded message saying that, due to fire alert, out-of-state calls were not allowed through. This message, coupled with the inability to get through, didn't do much to quell their concern.

I had been involved in a program of making photographic reprints, with subject labels, for more than a month. The next step in the project was to include a letter with each unique set of prints (twelve sets in all). However, due to a painfully uncertain future, I spent much of this evening writing short notes instead of letters, and otherwise preparing the envelopes-with-contents for mailing the next morning. This culmination, though not exactly how I had intended it to be, resulted in packets of memories for friends and family, and for me was a welcome distraction from imminence. The distraction would end suddenly, however, when I looked out through the bathroom or kitchen window and saw the ribbons of bright red on the burning mountains behind Altadena and beyond.

The Santa Ana winds mysteriously never again reached their velocity of October 27 despite constant, dire and authoritative predictions to the contrary by newscasters. Yet fire makes its own drafts and chimneys. By Thursday the 28th, the burning continued seemingly uninterrupted despite thousands of firefighters from around the state.

Whole communities were going up in smoke, one of the worst blazes gutting the affluent tourist town of Laguna Beach situated on the Pacific coast. Later, Malibu and its surrounding area would be added to the list of devastated locales. European-born filmmaker Duncan Gibbins was one of the first fatalities. He received burns over 95% of his body while attempting to rescue cat Elsa from his burning Malibu house. Duncan later died, but Elsa was found in the smoking rubble with burnt pads, singed fur and cuts. Last heard, the veterinary facility tending Elsa had received more than five hundred offers to provide her a home, coming from people across America and Europe.

The communities hardest hit were those tucked away in natural surroundings, blended into the hills, shrubs and trees to preserve privacy and much of the beautiful wildness that Nature is forever providing (and Man sweating to cart away). It is easy to forget that fire is also a vital part of Nature. Fire is how she cleans her house of debris while creating nutrients and growing space for new life. In some cases, as with sequoia trees, it is required to make seeds germinate. Fire is necessary and naturally occurring with or without the help of arsonists.

The Altadena fire spread to another small foothill town, Sierra Madre, though it never reached as far south as the town's business and urban center. As everywhere else, these fires tended to ravage most the outlying areas, the places most likely to have expensive houses. These

Southland Fires—1993

locations were especially vulnerable to fire for reasons discussed in the last paragraph, besides difficult accessibility in many cases and a lack of sufficient water or water pressure that normally is not a problem in more urban areas.

Thursday the 28th, when leaving work for home, the street I was taking north the short distance to Orange Grove Boulevard was blocked off at Orange Grove. Driving west on Orange Grove I noticed (how could I help but) that all the major intersections north from this street were blocked off to traffic except for bonafide residents of effected areas. Altadena Drive, Allen Street, Hill Street, all closed heading north. This development was scary indeed. Sirens were everywhere, and fire trucks were not uncommon, traveling north and south on the main drags.

Friday the 29th things began looking up. By then all of the aforementioned streets had opened again. On the way to work I drove north on Lake about a mile to Washington Boulevard, and took this west to see how things were looking up that-a-way. Much to my relief, all streets were open heading north from Washington. Firefighters had stalled the fires and successfully diverted them to unpopulated areas.

I estimate the closest the fires got to "Fort Elmira" was about five miles, which was definitely close enough. In the end, over 200,000 acres of land had been scorched and more than 1,000 houses destroyed. Hopefully some lessons will be learned from all this.

Unfortunately, the Santa Barbara firestorm that burned more than 3,000 homes not long ago, and the horrendous Oakland fire (both in California) did not teach Laguna Beach enough. Lack of water during Santa Barbara's conflagration resulted in a warning to all of her "sister" towns to keep at least seven days of water in reserve. Heeding this admonition, a movement was underway at Laguna Beach to build an adequate reserve system, but litigation had stalled the project. Influential members of the community did not like the idea of scarring the gorgeous surrounding hills. Consequently, Laguna had only two days reserve and ran out of water early in her battle for life. This same philosophy, coupled with an abhorrence of allowing anyone to pollute their pristine air, had killed efforts to conduct controlled burns of the heavily-shrubbed outlying areas.

The 1993 Southern California holocaust is over, leaving many hills and mountains denuded of vegetation. Through the night of November 10/11 we received our first precipitation of the fall rainy season. Landslides occurred in areas where roots no longer held topsoil, and much of what slid was ash and debris from the fires, flooding still-existing houses and clogging drainage systems. It is just the beginning of the season. Could our next disaster be coming so soon?

* * * * *