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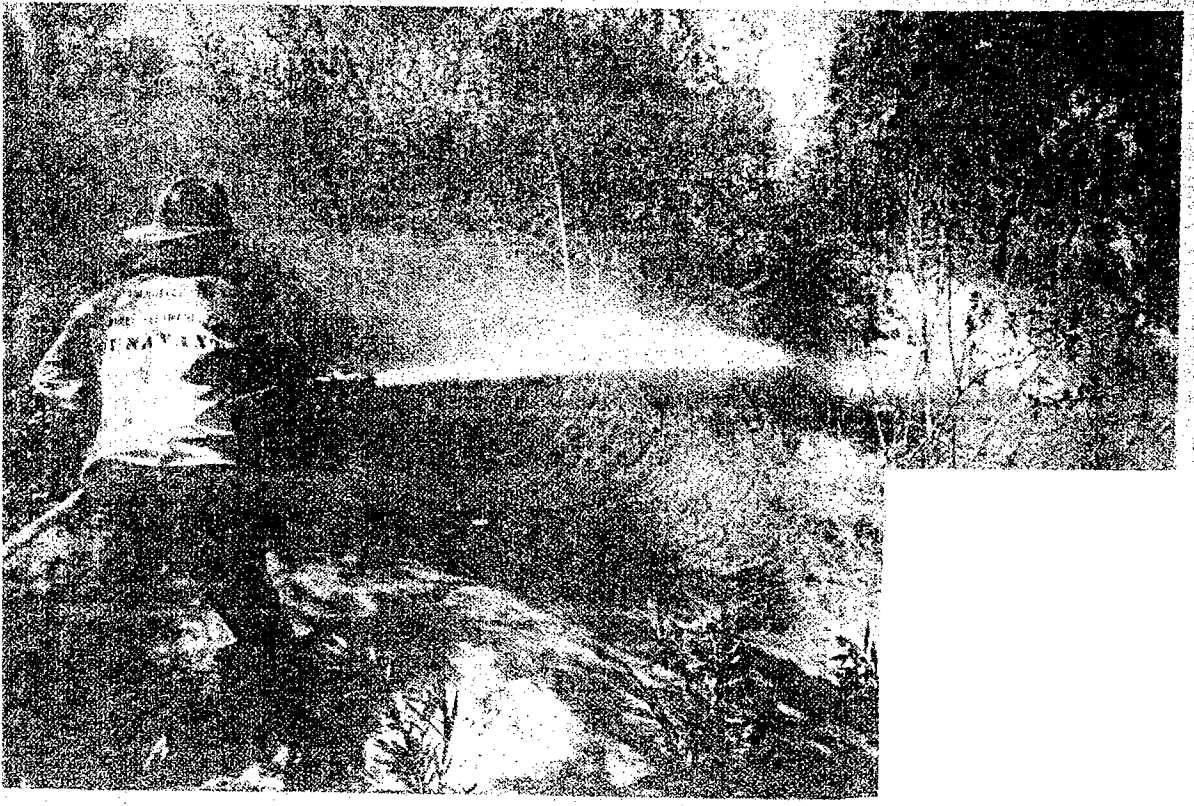
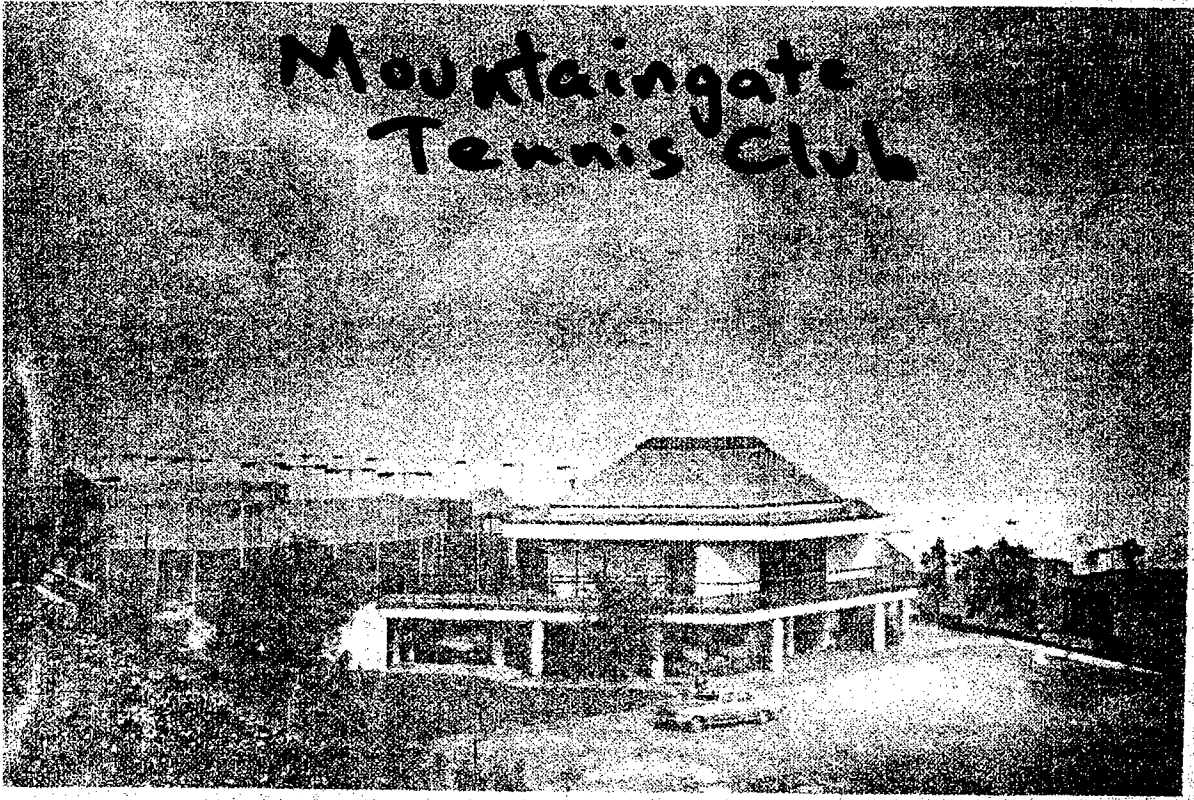
BLITZ OF FIRES DESTROYS 80 HOMES 50 Lost in Agoura-Malibu Sweep, 30 in Mandeville

60-M.P.H. Winds Fan
8 Blazes; Loss in Millions



LEAPING FIREBALL—On a fiery day, flames 60 feet tall soar high above a residence in the Busch Road vicinity, near Zuma Beach.
Times photo by George Rose

Mountaingate Tennis Club



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One of the first structures threatened by the fire Monday morning was Mountaingate Tennis Club (top). Located southwest of the starting point of the fire, the winds blew the blaze past Mountaingate toward Mandeville Canyon. In many cases, only one (above) or two fire fighters were all that stood between the fire and homes. The scene along many Mandeville Canyon side streets was the same. Fire hoses stretched from trucks to homes (right) as the fire moved toward Pacific Palisades by noon. City crews (below) were able to keep the blaze west of the San Diego Freeway as they made a stand along Sepulveda Boulevard.

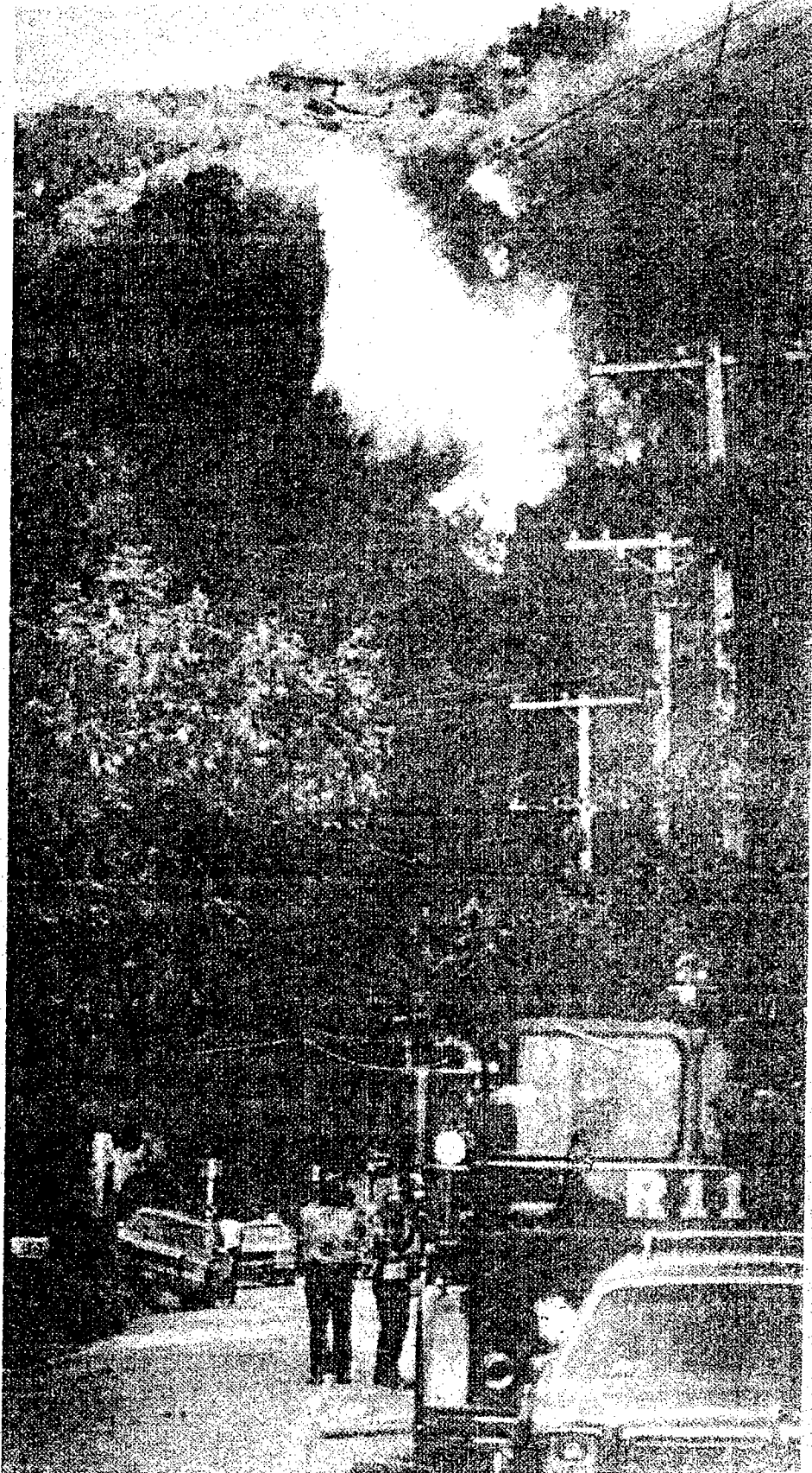


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October, 1978
The Mandeville Canyon Fire

The hour-by-hour battle of \$70 million holocaust

By Molly Burrell

Staff Writer

Six days ago the tinderbox that is Southern California flared into a \$70 million-plus firestorm. Fanned by hurricane Santa Ana winds, 11 brush fires in four counties taxed firefighting resources to--and beyond--limits, charred 38,000 acres, destroyed more than 200 homes, killed three people and injured at least 50.

Miles of watershed were destroyed, paving the way for floods when the rains come.

In the post-mortem, the stunning facts emerge:

--**Had they not abated** Tuesday, the winds could have fanned disaster even further.

--**But for well functioning** mutual aid, fire loss could have doubled.

--**With or without sufficient** and sophisticated resources and backbreaking effort, Southern California is ultimately at the mercy of weather, fate and firebugs--a big, fragile, arterial oasis in a natural desert.

Fighting any fire takes more than muscle and guts. Know--how--cerebral and instinctive--is as important as water and courage. In firestorm like Agoura-Malibu, organization and communication are as important as water and courage, equipment and access.

Wind was the primary enemy and time was its partner Monday, Oct. 23. With one brush fire already out of control in the Elsinore-Perris area Sunday night, Monday brought seven more fires in six hours--four of them major, one a disaster in terms of sheer size and speed.

The Agoura-Malibu fire as a case study is a story in itself--a war story, and ecology lesson, a day-of-reckoning story and a human drama. It is also a keynote, an illustration in mutual aid and how it works and doesn't work.

It was the biggest blaze in the county since Sept. 25-29, 1970, when three fires from Newhall to Malibu converged to consume 75,000 acres--a record loss as far as anyone can remember.

The Agoura-Malibu firestorm, apparently torched by a firebug, swept to the sea in two hours on the path of winds up to 50 mph, taking with it three lives, 230 homes, 254 other structures and 25,000 acres of watershed.

In a day filled with fires, it quickly gained priority--Level 2, it's called--because of its size, speed and danger to life and property.. It pre-empted smaller fires elsewhere in the Southland, commanding resources from as far away as San Francisco. But, even as it raged, other fires sparked the communications networks, charged them with other emergencies and fueled instant decisions.

Chronologically, the Southern California fire log began like this Monday:

9:41 a.m. -- Mandeville Canyon fire erupts on Mulholland Drive. ✕

10:20 a.m. -- Mandeville Canyon declared a major emergency.
 10:40 a.m. -- The first of four brush fires begins in San Dimas.
 10:59 a.m. -- Chino brush fire starts near Aerojet General, heads for Carbon Canyon in Orange County.
 12:11 p.m. -- Agoura fire alarm.
 12:38 p.m. -- Agoura is declared Level 1 (major emergency, fire management organization begins, "war room" procedures include expanded communications and support systems.)
 12:47 p.m. -- Agua Dulce brush fire near Palatable.
 1:34 p.m. -- Glendale fire.
 1:57 p.m. -- Agoura declared Level 2 fire (maximum emergency, calling for everything available.)
 2:30 p.m. -- Agoura-Malibu fire reaches the sea, 13 miles from start.
 3:02 p.m. -- Brush fire starts north of Sierra Madre, heads up the San Gabriel Mountains.

In Agoura, the morning opened in apprehension for Milton Johnson, 50, captain of the four-member squad at County Station 65 on Cornell Road just south of Old Agoura Road. "Big Milt" (6 feet 3 and heavy) has been there since 1961 and knows every road, trail, structure and hydrant. He knows the dryness of the brush, the difficulties of access.

For one thing, the wind was blowing briskly. Then at 9:45 a.m. a small brush fire broke out northeast of his station, and he sent a man to help another company at the scene.

By 10:20, he knew Mandeville Canyon was a major emergency, and an hour later he took a velocity reading outside his office: 24 mph.

12:11 p.m. -- The sound of running footsteps sets him on edge. "I always worry when I hear running. That's trouble!" he says.

He rushes out the door and meets a rumple-haired man in a red jacket who yells, "There's a brush fire just up the road."

Without greeting or thanks, he tells him "We're on the way" and yells "Let's go" to the two men inside.

12:12 p.m. -- The station alarm sounds, and the county fire dispatcher repeats the message on radio: "Brush fire on Cornell Road just north of your station."
 12:13 p.m. -- Big Milt and his two men reach the scene on the east side of the road to find 12 acres involved. Flames and embers, spun by the wind, are jumping the road to the southwest, and simultaneously the fire creeps uphill toward tract homes near the Liberty fire break.

Johnson assesses the situation and radios his commander, Battalion Chief Gary Henery, 12 miles away on a ridge tracking the Mandeville Canyon blaze just over the county line. Henery orders full response: five engines, four camp crews, two helicopters, two patrol trucks and two tractors.

A second alarm on the same fire starts five more engines and four more camp crews.

12:14 p.m. -- Henery orders five more engines from Ventura County

Meanwhile, Johnson's engineer has jumped down to see if they can lay line, and the wind -- now hitting about 30 mph -- scoops his helmet and sails it 100 yards down the road. "Let it go," yells Big Milt.

12:15 p.m. -- Chief John England leaves Los Angeles Airport to take command of the fire.

12:16 p.m. -- Chief Henery sees the smoke and calls for 10 more engines.

"Fire is like an earthquake: It's not a matter of IF; It's a matter of WHEN. People who live in watershed and danger areas have got to protect themselves from the fire that is going to come eventually. Clear the weeds, make your home fire resistant, enclose the eaves and always have it in the back of your mind that there may be a fire.

"Given the velocity of the winds, the dryness of the growth and the nature of the terrain, the Agoura fire could not have been halted even if we'd had four times the men and equipment we used."

*—Ken Lavoie,
Los Angeles County Fire Department
Oct.27.*

Johnson sees the fire jump Cornell Road and tear toward Kanan Road, the freeway exit best known to Renaissance Faire-goers.

Johnson stays to direct the first arriving units to seven homes on and near Caleta Road, just to the south of the site of origin. Then he moves with two camp crews and a Newhall company to the northeast to shovel a break west of the housing tract and link it with the existing 50-foot wide firebreak on Liberty ridge.

12:25 p.m. -- Chief Henery calls for tanker planes.

12:28 p.m. -- Chief Henery arrives at the Cornell Road site and reports 40 arc res engulfed and inaccessible.

12:32 p.m. -- Chief Henery asks for 10 more engines. Within another 25 minutes Johnson and his crews have cleared a break between the fire and the tract homes.

12:38 p.m. -- Chief England declares Agoura a Level 1 operation, and the county's fire management organization takes over. Communication, food, repair, fuel and equipment support services start to move in to Station 65.

12:40 p.m. -- Chief England calls for 20 more units.

By now, men and equipment from the 10 other county stations in the area, augmented by units from Hawthorne, Marina Del Rey, Lennox, Newhall, Chatsworth, Ladera Heights and the state Division of Forestry -- among others -- are on the scene and trying to keep ahead of the racing inferno.

1:57 p.m. -- 96 minutes after the first alarm, Chief England, having viewed the scene in a helicopter and judging it a "20 mile-wide fire front that would reach the ocean in a short time," calls for Level 2 status, and command passes to Chief Don Beckman.

"War room" procedures begin in Station 65, complete with map overlays on which structures and topography are scale-drawn.

2:35 p.m. -- The fire reaches Pacific Coast Highway.

By 10:30 p.m. the county dispatcher estimates 23,000 acres aflame, and firefighters are into a nightmare of a night.

By 6 a.m. Tuesday, 700 men are on the scene, and the northern boundary, just south of the Ventura Freeway, is contained.

Tuesday, 10:30 a.m., several flare-ups throughout the area, and the fire crosses into Ventura County.

Tuesday, 3 p.m. -- Winds have diminished to 5-10 mph, and 80 percent containment is reached, with boundaries at Zuma Beach to the south, the Ventura County line on the west, the freeway at the north, and the west side of Mali by Lake on the east. Fog starts to roll in off the coast, and the temperature drops drastically.

Wednesday, 7 a.m., containment is announced.

Friday the fire is under control.

And even as that fire strained resources in the western part of the Los Angeles Basin, Mandeville Canyon pulled from the same regional pool, and the Carbon Canyon and Sierra Madre fires to the east drew major forces from several jurisdictions.

There were logistic problems in Agoura from the beginning. According to Chiefs England and Charles Wells, resources were being severely tapped, and there was some shortage to the south because they had taken the lion's share of equipment up north where it first began."

Wells, who directed operations in the Malibu Lake area, says:"We were unable to get help from Los Angeles City, our nearest neighbor, because they had their own emergency, and Santa Monica sent all their available help there."

Says England: "When we saw the speed it was moving, we tried to release equipment, but we were spread too thin. It was always a matter of moving to the head of the fire, and we could never stay ahead....Thank goodness Ventura didn't have a fire that day, because they were the ones who sent us a big complement: 27 companies, three ground crews and two helicopters and bulldozers."

When they added it up Friday, county fire officials came up with this total for the Agoura battle: One hundred thirty-six engine companies -- 36 from Los Angeles County, 27 from Ventura County, 20 from nearby cities, 18 from the California Division of Forestry, 30 from the state Office of Emergency and five from Santa Barbara County.

Twenty-eight camp crews -- nine from Los Angeles County, 16 from state forestry and three from Ventura County.

Eight bulldozers from Ventura and Los Angeles County.

Six 500-gallon capacity helicopters -- four from Los Angeles County, two from Ventura.

Six fixed wing tankers with 2000 gallon average capacity, all from the U.S. Forest Service.

Additional planes were available but couldn't be utilized because of the extremely high winds, officials said.

Meanwhile, the same apprehension that Big Milt Johnson felt Monday morning -- plus an evaluation of a heavy commitment of resources on the existing Perris area fires -- had spurred officials at FIRESCOPE in Riverside to call for 25 extra engine crews at 7 a.m. A second, similar request went out about the time the Sierra Madre fire broke out.

FIRESCOPE, a unique coordinating center housed at the state Forestry Division headquarters, functioned with the Federal Forest Services management in the Sierra Madre fire in which 50 engine companies, 32 hand crews, 15 bulldozers, five helicopters and five air tankers battled until the 1,500-acre blaze was controlled Thursday evening. Units from the state and U.S. Forest Service, Sierra Madre, Monrovia, Pasadena, Covina, Burbank, La Verne and Glendale assisted in the operation that employed 1,026 firefighters. The blaze caused a \$1.75 million loss in watershed.

The Carbon Canyon fire began in San Bernardino County and was fought by 550 state forestry, U.S. forestry, Orange County and city firefighters before being controlled Tuesday. It threatened munitions bunkers at Aerojet General, caused evacuation in Sleepy Hollow and raced southwest into Orange County through Carbon Canyon and Brea Canyon.

In all, it charred 5,680 acres but caused no official damage, officials said, since the ground was mainly weeds and chaparral. Officials said the totals were 80 engine companies, 22 hand crews, 14 inmate crews from Chino, 18 bulldozers, 13 air tankers and two helicopters.

Nearer to home, the Mandeville Canyon brush fire, earliest of the Monday series, was touched off by 30 mph winds that apparently thrust and sparked high tension wires together shortly after 9:30 a.m. An hour after the first alarm it was out of control on the west, and a helicopter survey patrol reported "it looks like it will burn all the way to Sunset Boulevard." From Mulholland Drive it flashed into Kenter and Mandeville canyons and on to Pacific Palisades, demolishing 20 homes and badly damaging 16 other homes, a parish school and a church retreat house. Three schools and dozens of houses in the fire path were evacuated.

In all, 157 Los Angeles city companies -- the largest number ever called out at one time -- fought the fire, aided by 30 other companies from mutual aid cities. As it burned, the already overtaxed city firefighting resources were called to 14 other major emergency incidents.

The score box here:5,500 acres in a 15 mile perimeter, fought by 450 firefighters, assisted by Santa Monica,

Culver City, county and state forestry -- plus six helicopters, 16 bulldozers and four tractors.

By Tuesday morning heavy brush was still ablaze in Mandeville Canyon, but containment was announced Tuesday afternoon. It was another two days before control was reached.

An ominous "special interest" note on the Los Angeles Fire Department's official summary issued Tuesday: "At 1830 hours Monday, 149 companies were committed to the fire. Twenty-seven light task forces, two triples and three trucks were left to protect the city. During some periods of time when other fires occurred, the available resources were down to 16 light task forces."

Staff writers Helen Smith and Bob Sanders assisted in the preparation of these stories.

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October, 1978
The Mandeville Canyon Fire

Firemen Get Mixed Reviews On Brush Fires

By **STEVE COMUS**
Herald Examiner Staff Writer

Los Angeles firefighters have been both praised and criticized for their actions during last week's brush fires, which destroyed 38,000 acres and at least 215 homes.

Some residents in the Cornell area near Agoura, for instance, complained that firemen at times seemed confused and failed to leave the roadway when the blaze approached buildings.

But residents in the Mandeville Canyon area, on the other hand praised firemen for saving their homes.

The consensus among state officials and fire experts was that area fire departments did an excellent job in responding to a widespread, disaster-type situation.

A survey by The Herald Examiner revealed that:

The blazes were extraordinary, both in their speed and the wide area they covered. Pushed by hot Santa Ana winds of up to 50 mph, the fast-moving fire fronts ranged from two miles wide in Mandeville Canyon to eight miles across in the Agoura fire.

Manpower was not a major problem, but it took valuable hours for the mutual-aid agreements, by which fire departments from throughout the state can be called in, to go into effect.

Communications broke down at critical points in several mountain fires. The hilly terrain seemed to block radio contact at times. The fire burned out telephone lines. And radio frequencies were often jammed with official and unofficial traffic.

Whatever the problems, firefighters believe they put in their best effort--a conclusion generally supported by local officials.

"As far as we're concerned, it probably was one of the best-coordinated efforts we have ever seen." said R.G. Barrows, head of the state Office of Emergency Services firefighting section.

"For the three major fires Mandeville, Agoura and a fire in the Sierra Madre mountains north of Pasadena) within a 12-hour period, we had 81 trucks and engines, with some of them coming from as far away as Marin and Imperial counties.

Both Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and City Councilman Marvin Braude praised the work of the city Fire Department for the way it battled the Mandeville blaze.

This fire department, operating under the circumstances of one of the largest brush fires in the history of the city, did an outstanding job," Bradley said.

But some Palisades residents complained about the lack of firemen to save their houses.

"You have to make value judgments," Los Angeles City Fire Chief John Gerard said. "It's one of the toughest things I've had to do. I really can't think of anything we should have done differently.

"It's easy to focus on the 18 houses totally destroyed, but we saved hundreds more houses than we lost."

In addition to homes saved in Topanga Canyon, Gerard said any of the houses not damaged along Sunset Boulevard were saved as a direct result of the firemen."

But many residents in the Cornell area, near Agoura said they viewed the work of at least some firemen as not effective.

"We had some bad ones (firemen) in this area." said Ed Savko, whose home he and friends helped save is at 3054 Mulholland Highway. "You've got a lot of mad people up in these hills. I'm one of the mad ones.

"We had two or three trucks sitting out in the middle of the road and I begged them to go back around the buildings (to help fight the threatening fire). One guy told me he was sacred, and the other truck just refused.

By that time, the fire was well on its way to the coast.

In the future, firefighters say they hope to be able to use a satellite to relay radio signals into the rugged areas.

Barrows praised the efforts of the firefighters.

"The efforts were tremendous," he said. "It's hard to know just how much was saved."

The fire raged into the Palisades Highlands, a newly developed housing tract tucked deep into a canyon.

It swept up to Las Lomas Place, down through a back yard and into a home belonging to Dr. James Mead, burning it to the ground.

Next door, Lou Barnes was standing in front of his house, watering plants.

"It was gone in a flash," Barnes said looking toward the charred remains of the Mead home.

"All that's left on this block is my home and the one two doors down from the Mead's. I was told we were lucky because we have gravel rooftops. The Mead's had a shake roof. So did the house next door to them. Both homes are gone.

SANDY BARNES sat on a curb across the street from her home.

"We were leaving," Sandy said. "The windows had begun to explode. Glass was flying everywhere. Next door at the Mead's I heard paint cans exploding. There was no one home over there.

"And then the flames--they came over the hill. They turned the world orange and they roared an awful sound. I can still hear it in my ears."

Tears slid down her cheeks.

At the Marquez Knolls area of Pacific Palisades, across a canyon from the Palisades Highlands, Mrs Bobbie Farberow sat on a small brick retaining wall outside her home on Charmel Lane.

The home was not burned. The fire had crept up the hillside and stopped at an area the Farberows had cleared the year before--at the urging of the fire department as a precautionary measure.

MONDAY night, that precaution paid off.

"The fire stopped right there," Mrs. Farberow said, pointing to an area about five yards from her back door. "This wall of flame moved across the canyon and up the hill and it stopped right by the chain-link fence. Right where my husband and I had cleared the underbrush away.

"The whole thing was like a ghost movie. Like a little bit of hell.

"It created its own wind," Mrs. Farberow continued. "Little tornadoes of hell. At one time, I looked at my daughter and her hair was white with ashes.

"The air was filled with sparks. The smoke was so thick we could hardly breathe.

"The poor animals. Deer were jumping over the 6-foot chain-link fence. They had crazed looks in their eyes. They charged toward my son and he ran up a ladder. They were crazy with fright. You could taste the fear in the air."

Bobbie Farberow hugged her daughter Karen.

"Mama, don't cry," Karen said as her own eyes filled with tears. "Mama don't. It's OK now. We're all together."

Down the street a phone was ringing. No one answered it. The house was gone.

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October, 1978
The Mandeville Canyon Fire

'Little tornadoes of hell' seared posh canyon dreams

By Denise Kusel
Staff Writer

Smoke was still rising from the charred timbers that once held up the roof of a two-story home on Las Lomas Avenue in Pacific Palisades when Greg Hicks put his pet iguana in a wire cage.

When swift-moving flames swept down the hillside behind their home at 1252 Las Lomas Ave. Monday afternoon, forcing Greg and his parents to evacuate, the iguana was in a paper bag. Other family pets were in the car.

"Who knows what you take when something like this happens?" Mrs. Mabel Hicks said. "You take what's living. You take what's alive because life must go on."

Behind the gutted shell that was once their home, a lone deer walked on a charred and ravaged hillside.

"Yesterday you couldn't see that hill through the trees and scrub brush," Mrs. Hicks said. "Now it's nothing. The deer is as orphaned as my family."

Greg Hicks said he heard crackling noises before he heard the sirens.

"There was no warning. The flames came up over that ridge and raced down toward us. There were sparks flying everywhere. That's when we left."

Hicks peered into the living room window.

The furnishings that were left were singed. A piano stood next to a brick fireplace. Sheet music, soaked in water from firefighters' hoses in their unsuccessful effort to save the house, stood limply on the music stand.

Across the street, the wooden skeletons of two homes stood mute, remainders of the inferno that had swept out of the canyons near Sepulveda Boulevard, working its way toward the Pacific and finally stopping one ridge short of the ocean.

"Just when we thought we had it confined, it would turn and hook over into another canyon or sweep into another gully," said Los Angeles City Fire Inspector Willis Martin.

Standing inside the command post at Station House 23, about a quarter-mile from Pacific Coast Highway, Martin used his finger to trace the route of the fire on a wall map.

"We made a two-mile stand along Temescal Canyon. Then the winds whipped up and there was no stopping it."