

MESSENGER

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FIRE

in the Mountains

Mr. Graham raced through the flames. His horse's tail was on fire, the horse blanket underneath him was ablaze, and only their combined superhuman efforts to escape this living hell with the skins on their back kept them flying along. The Malibus were ablaze.

1903

Back in Santa Monica, residents were battling with the strong, dry winds and the clouds of dust whistling through the streets.

Some looked west along the narrow strip of land toward Malibu. A wave of smoke and fire was sweeping through the canyons towards the beach and was consuming everything in its path—buildings, farm implements, animals, plants.

Three weeks before Christmas, the 1903 Rindge Ranch Fire was making its dramatic entry into the history books of the 20th century. By burning the Rindge Ranch, portions of the Decker Ranch and other homesteads, it not only left over 8000 starving head of cattle to fend for themselves, but also erased much of the early history of the western Santa Monica Mountains.

1904

By Klaus W.H. Radtke

Fueled by chaparral, the legendary brushfires of the Santa Monica Mountains are as natural, awesome, and relentless as the rising and setting of the sun.

But now—thanks to the record of history, and lately, the contributions of science—they are also becoming predictable...

they were able to wrestle some homes from the enemy.

1911

Temescal Canyon was burning like a huge amphitheater of fire in a scene of awe-inspiring grandeur. Great live oaks two feet in diameter were licked up like reeds, and the flames shot high into the sky. The date was November 15, 1911, and the enemy fire had reinvaded the Santa Monica Mountains one week ago. The army was now attacking the mountain range in a two-pronged pincher move, and was raining flakes of ashes on nearby cities. As evening approached, Santa Monica residents watched Rustic Canyon burning.

One week earlier, the fire had made its entry into the Santa Monica Mountains at Calabasas Summit, swept through Topanga and Dry Creek, and had gathered its western forces into a four-mile-wide front which steadily moved towards Malibu and the ocean. The eastern front moved out of Topanga towards Santa Monica. While Topanga was now out of the fire zone and the eastern forces were advancing towards the city, the western forces were demoralizing beautiful Las Flores Canyon. Additionally, a new fire has joined the campaign to burn the Santa Monica...

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1904

It was five weeks before Christmas. An inferno had already besieged the Solider's Home near Santa Monica for two days and had denuded the mesas, canyons and hilltops south and west of it. The flames were beaten back through backfiring, and unleashed their fury at Santa Monica and Rustic Canyons. In spearheading towards the ocean, they overran and threatened to destroy the Wright Ranch and many of the beehives of foothill bee ranchers. As the flames sped in the teeth of the gale winds towards the sea, they occasionally had to give way to the hit-and-run tactics of volunteer fire fighters who saved homes throughout the canyons.

In Rustic Canyon, residents fought a valiant battle during the early evening until all danger was seemingly over. Most vegetation had burned and the fire front had passed, laid down, or gone into hiding for the night. It was time to get a well-deserved rest. But a brisk wind picked up suddenly at three o'clock in the morning and the flames came back to attack. They overran and sacked the government's experimental forestry station, leaving the windmill as the only survival of this 1904 sneak attack. Today, the Veteran's Administration Building in Westwood has replaced the Soldier's Home.

1906

It was two years later and again five weeks before Christmas. As if pursued by a cavalry force, reporter Bryant of the *Los Angeles Times* was running the race of his life. The sky seemed to be ablaze from Coldwater through Benedict Canyons, and the flames were advancing towards the Soldier's Home. Thirty citizens were rounded up at Sawtelle and deputized by Constable Keenan under a two-year-old emergency ordinance. They were transported like prisoners in two large hay wagons up Burgk Canyon, where they desperately confronted the flames with well-soaked gunny sacks. Teaming up with other men and taking advantage of topography,

But now—thanks to the record of history, and lately, the contributions of science—they are also becoming predictable...



Steel-helmeted U.S. Army troops fight a 1943 brushfire which took 53 homes in Topanga's Old Canyon area. Photo from the *Topanga Journal*, Volume 2, No. 26, courtesy of the Topanga Historical Society.

entry into the Santa Monica Mountains at Calabasas Summit, swept through Topanga and Dry Creek, and had gathered its western forces into a four-mile-wide front which steadily moved towards Malibu and the ocean. The eastern front moved out of Topanga towards Santa Monica. While Topanga was now out of the fire zone and the eastern forces were advancing towards the city, the western forces were demoralizing beautiful Las Flores Canyon. Additionally, a new fire has joined the campaign to turn the Santa Monica's to ashes, and was ravaging through Shoemaker and Escondido Canyons and other canyons north of Malibu.

1935

The fire was moving uphill through Corral Canyon towards Mesa Peak. The fire section leader waited for it with 75 Inyo Kern World War I veterans recruited as temporary fire fighters. In 1935 there were no tractors to cut fire lines, no radios for communication, and the motorcycle dispatch rider, even if he wanted to, could not have gotten to the crew stretched out along the grassy fuelbreak.

The section leader, who could be identified by his badge with its tree insignia as Assistant Fire and Game Warden #27 of the Los Angeles County Forestry Department, evaluated the situation.

His orders were to keep the fire from going over the top into the Malibu Lake areas, but backfiring was not permitted unless precise orders were received to do so. Harvey Anderson momentarily reflected on his situation.

Five years ago he had graduated from UCLA with a major in botany with a background in zoology and geology. Not being able to find a job in his field because of the depression, Anderson had gone directly to Spence Turner, who was heading the County of Los Angeles Department of Forestry (now the County Fire Department). Turner hired him on the spot in June 1930.

Not knowing anything about fire fighting and having missed the Patrolman school fire camp held during May, the new fireman found himself holding a fire hose wearing a "Smokey the Bear" uniform complete with Stetson hat. But fire training would come in the months and years to follow, much of it directly on fire lines.

Anderson's extensive hikes through the mountains during his school years, the long

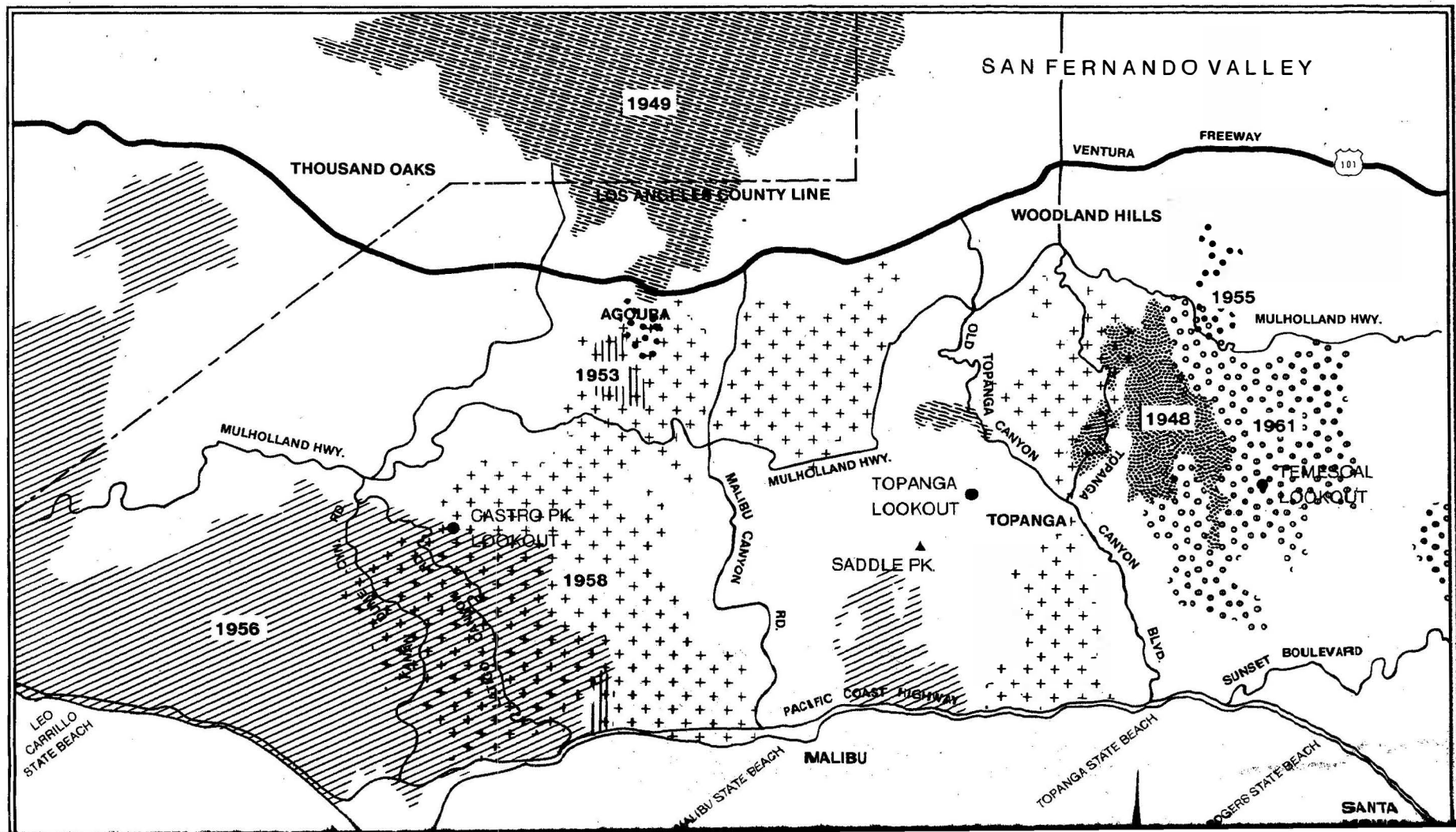
FIRE

in the Mountains

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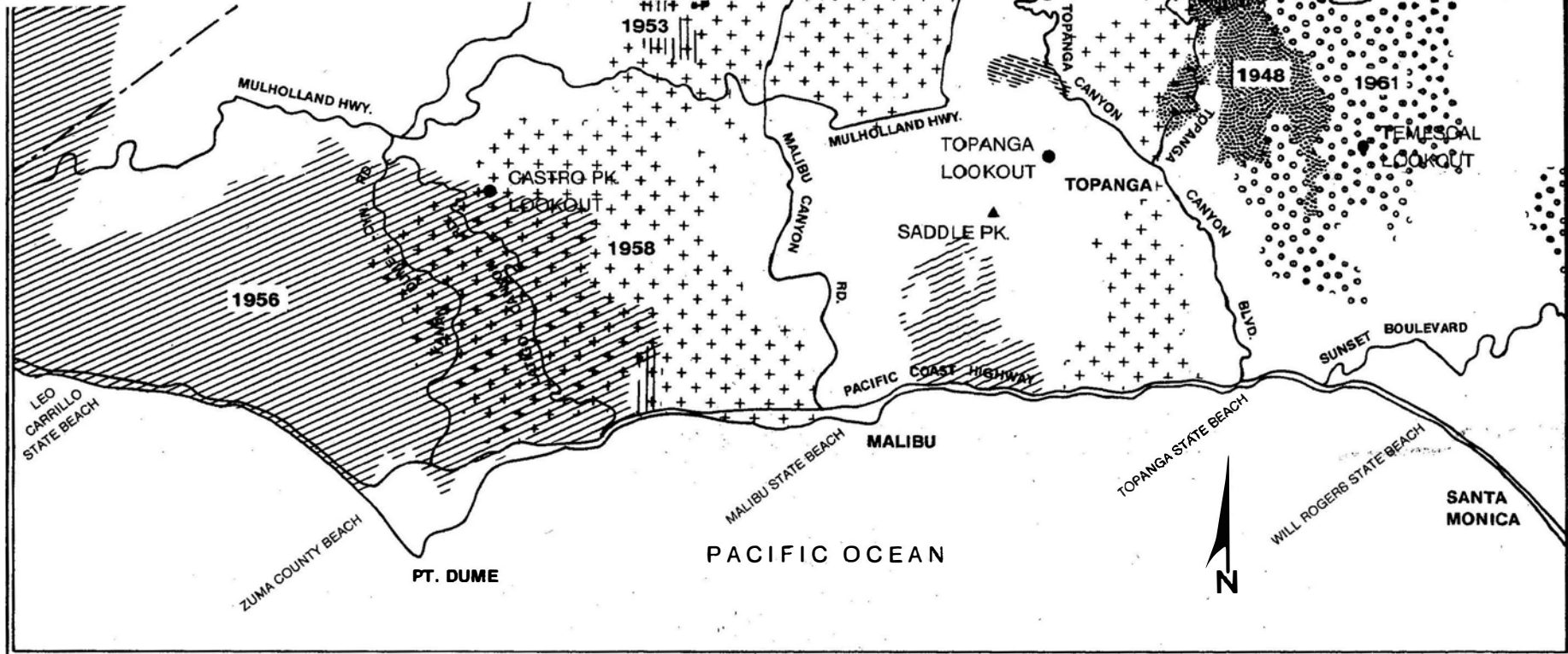
Predictions of future fires are not difficult to make for the western Santa Monica Mountains if one has a basic understanding of fire behavior.

—Klaus Radtke



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messenger map by sandy bell

hours spent cleaning fossils at the La Brea Tar Pits, the inquisitive mind that recorded the vegetation changes in chaparral and questioned the qualities that made the native vegetation burn, surely did not prepare him to be a fire fighter, or did it?

It had conditioned him to stay calm under pressure, quickly evaluate difficult situations, and to see fire as a natural and recurring phenomenon which had to be dealt with effectively as it came along.

When Anderson felt the strong draft of the onrushing flames pulling the wind behind him into the fire, he knew what to do. He backfired along the ridge and out of the saddle. Turner, who watched the successful backfiring from the new Newell subdivision, ordered it continued all along Malibu Creek to the ocean and to Latigo Canyon.

When the 15,297 acre Latigo fire was contained two days later it had been practically controlled by the use of 16.7 miles of backfiring in conjunction with hose lays drawing water from the tank at Castro Peak and the use of nine portable pumps drafting water from Malibu Creek. As reported by Turner, the total equipment, in addition to the nine pumps consisted of 15 tank trucks and fire engines, the largest capacity 750

gallon, and one 50 gallon Ford patrol car. Helicopters and bulldozers had not yet been invented for fire fighting.

While the Latigo Fire was raging and burned the main building of the Rindge Ranch located in Zuma Canyon, it was joined at its western flank by the 13,302 acre Sherwood Fire which had also started October 30.

As these two fires burned together, few realized that fire history was being made in the Santa Monica Mountains and fires occurring 50 years later would be shaped by these events.

Hunters and Settlers

In 1919, the Forestry Department was established as the fire suppression agency for unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County, and began maintaining records of all fires.

For the twenty years prior to its establishment, many large-scale fires had burned intermittent areas between Sepulveda Pass and Ventura County an average of two times each.

Hunters carelessly-set campfires were a major cause of fire starts. Occasionally, they were set on purpose by hunters to keep the chaparral young. Young chaparral means

This odd headline—perhaps the first and last time Topanga Canyon and Beverly Hills will ever be mentioned in one breath—on the front page of the January 1, 1959 Examiner, refers to the New Year's Eve Beverly Hills and Topanga brushfires.

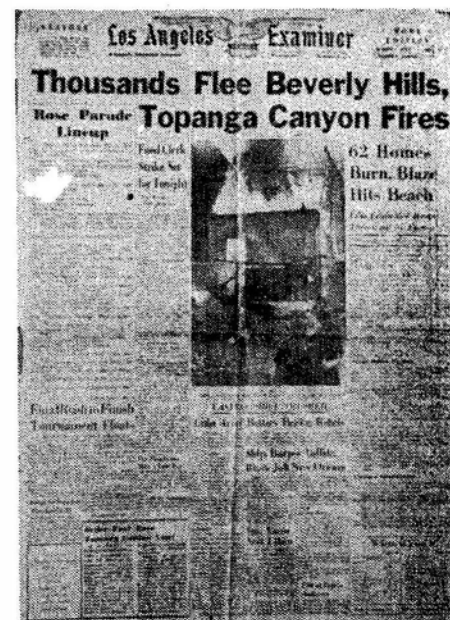
The "celebrity" fire consumed 500 acres, the Mulholland/Topanga fire, 4,982—taking with it more than 60 homes.

more abundant wildlife and more easily penetrable terrain. To the settlers, the damaging effects of wildfires were not tolerable, and the new Forestry Department did an excellent job of keeping fires small and contained. Its men were required to live where they were stationed and thus became a part of the community and its challenges and problems.

As the age classes of the woody vegetation slowly increased due to effective fire control, large-scale fires in the Santa Monica Mountains were slowly taking on a predictable pattern.

History would repeat itself.

The 1935 Sherwood Fire would set boundaries for the 1956 Sherwood Fire, and then for the 1985 Sherwood Fire.



This latter fire burned most of the vegetation which had not burned since the 1935 fire—the oldest class of chaparral in western Malibu.

FIRES OVER 100 ACRES IN THE SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS

1919-1985

(San Diego Freeway to Ventura County Line)

Date	Name of Fire	Acres Burned	Date	Name of Fire	Acres Burned
1921	Station 65	300			
1925	#1 Top. Post Office	150	1956	Newton	26,169
	#2 Brentwood	200	1956	Hume	1,940
	#3 Pacific Palisades	600	1956	Sherwood	9,428
	#4 Ramirez-Latigo-Solstice	4,500	1957	Mulholland/Callabero	413
1926	Montgomery Ranch	175	1958	Hertz	191
1926	Old Topanga	200	1958	Warner	4,040
1927	Cooper #1	3,118	1958	Liberty	17,860
1928	Las Flores	400	1958	Mulholland	4,982
1930	Tuna Summit	156	1961	Bel Air/Brentwood	6,090
1930	Potrero	6,949	1961	Topanga	9720
1933	Agoura	331	1967	Junction	640
1935	Sherwood/Latigo	28,599	1967	Latigo	2,870
	Pt. Dume	150	1970	Wright	27,995
1936	Cold Creek	2,591	1970	Golf Course	200
1938	Topanga	16,500	1972	Mulholland/Topanga	100
1940	Sequit	182	1973	Trippet Ranch	2,770
1942	Las Flores	5,924	1977	Topanga	1,115
1943	Woodland Hills (to Malibu Beach)	15,300	1977	Carlisle	1,360
1944	Woodland Hills	4,410	1978	Trancas	200
1946	Dume	210	1978	Mandeville	6,130
1947	Sepulveda Pass	118	1978	Kanan	25,385
1948	Topanga	3,158	1979	Liberty Canyon	157
1949	Reinde	215	1980	La Virgenes	2,665
1953	Udel	570	1982	Highlands	182
1953	Corral	159	1982	Dayton Canyon	23,000
1954	Triunfo	169	1984	Gun	125
1955	Liberty Cyn.	340	1984	Westlake	228
1955	Taconis (Woodland Hills)	618	1984	Viewridge (Topanga)	404
1956	Encino	138	1985	Sherwood	3,823
			1985	Mulholland	100

I had predicted this fire as the most likely to occur next in western Malibu at the first fire management seminar conducted by the National Foundation for Environmental Safety in Malibu in April, 1984 for 60 representatives of fire fighting agencies and mountain-area homeowner groups.

The *Los Angeles Times* made note of these

predictions in articles such as "Outsmart Fires with Science."

Predictions of future large scale fires and their patterns are not difficult to make for the western Santa Monica Mountains if one has a basic understanding of fire behavior. We hope to convince you that this is the case in this article.



Cover of the November 19, 1943 *Topanga Journal* newspaper with photo showing brushfire advancing towards Fernwood area in view taken from Post Office Tract looking west. Arrow, circles, show threatened homes. County firemen, army troops, and navy Seabees stopped flames at Rocky Ridge, top right of photo, using water pumped from local wells.

Take a look at the chart above which lists the total acreage burned within the western Santa Monica Mountains. The maps show the outlines of fires over 1,000 acres for the time periods 1944-1961 and 1962-1985 respectively.

Keep these pages for future reference.

Since the fire areas are shown in black and white, it is less confusing to show them on two different base maps. If interested, you can trace the 1962-1985 fire period outlines on a clear sheet of paper and use it as a graphic overlay for the 1944-1961 time period.

Map #1

Map 1 from right to left shows the following major fires: 1961 Bel Air/Brentwood and Topanga Fires which burned on the same day, 1958 Mulholland (hour glass) Fire, 1956 Hume Fire, 1958 Warner Fire, 1958 Liberty Fire, 1956 Newton Fire and the adjoining western 1956 Sherwood Fire. Shaded areas show the overlapping areas of adjoining burns.

Map #2

Now compare the above fire patterns with map 2.

Again, starting from right to left, note how the 1978 Mandeville Fire burned the area between the 1961 fires, and how the 1973 Trippet Ranch Fire burned the area between the 1958 and 1961 fires.

Also note that the 1958 fire helped define fire boundaries for the 1970 Wright Fire.

The 1978 Kanan-Dume Fire then burned much of the area not previously burned during this time period. Its upper western flank was contained as it slowed down when reburning the 1977 Carlisle Fire. Here, the dead grasses of the ryegrass which was seeded the previous year, provided most of the flash fuel that supported the fire.

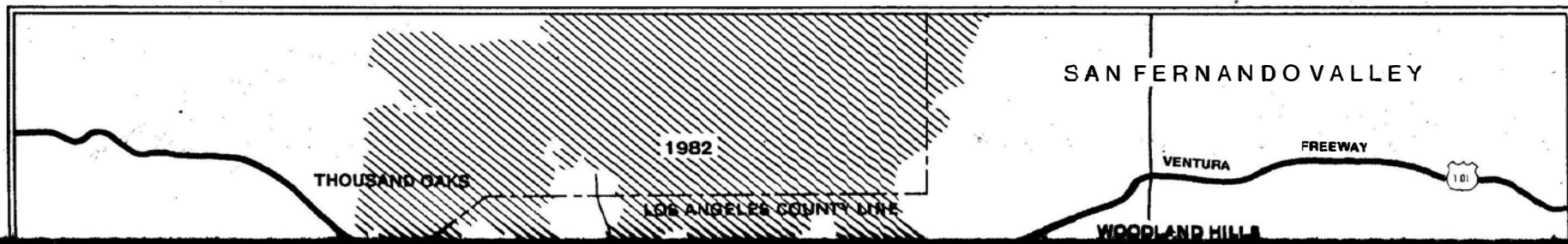
Along the Ventura Freeway, the 1982 Dayton Canyon Fire reburned much of the grassland as well as the ryegrass-seeded chaparral areas of the 1978 Kanan-Dume Fire before exploding in old-age woody vegetation between the 1970 and 1978 fires and burning like a fuse to the ocean. Notice that on its eastern flank, younger-age classes of woody vegetation prevented it from burning to the ocean.

The 1985 Sherwood Fire then reburned the woody vegetation left unburned since the first 1935 Sherwood Fire, and was easily extinguished as it ran into the younger age classes of the 1978 Wright Fire.

Hello Science

Wildfires are a natural part of California's fire-adapted ecosystem which depends on winter rains to sustain life, and on summer and fall fires to rejuvenate it periodically.

page 11 >



1954 Triunfo	169	1984 Westlake	228
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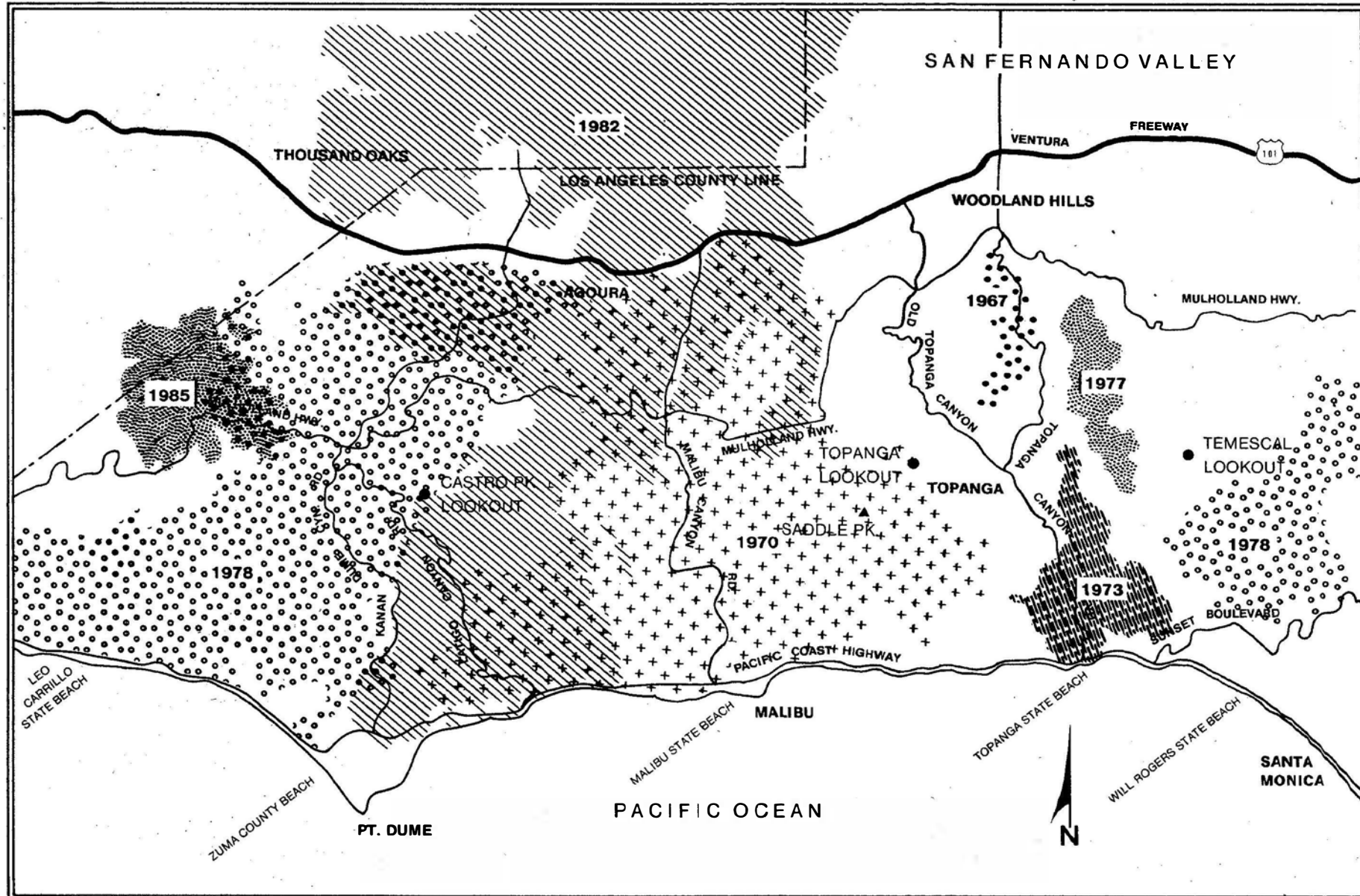
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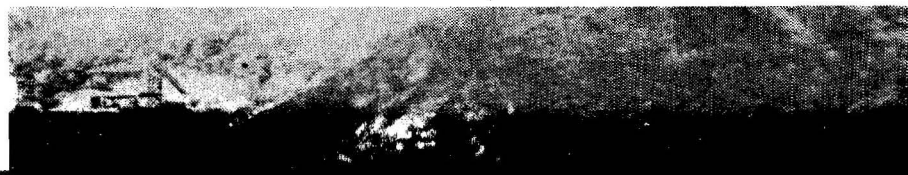
FIRE

in the Mountains

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Ominous black smoke advances ahead of November 6, 1943 brushfire at junction of Topanga Canyon Boulevard and Old Topanga Canyon Road. Building at left of photo on the site of today's Post Office was, in those wartime days, the Topanga Defense Headquarters, where volunteers fed almost a thousand weary firefighters during a three-day battle with the forces of nature. Fire was turned back less than 100 yards from today's Center.



SASSAFRAS

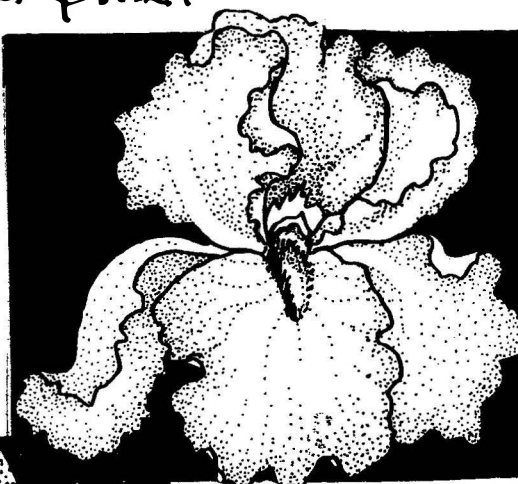
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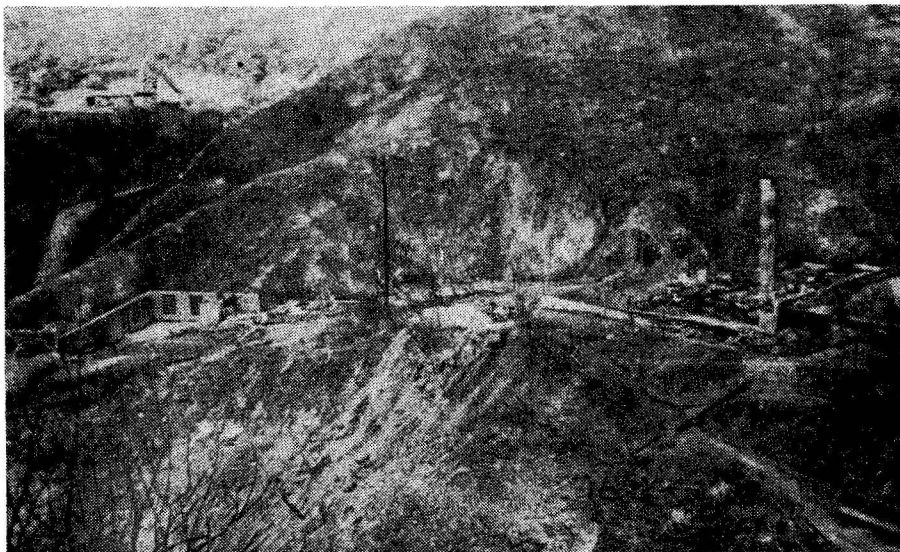
9 AM - DUSK

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WE DELIVER



...worry investigators during a three-day battle with the forces of nature. Fire was turned back less than 100 yards from today's Center.



Los Angeles Times photo taken from Old Topanga's Skyline Drive after 1943 brushfire which burned from Woodland Hills to the coast consuming 15,000 acres. The ruins of 4 of the 53 homes destroyed can be seen here. According to the Topanga Journal, the local paper of the time, total value of homes lost was \$150,000!

Fire, controlled, helped him in conquering the earth.

Fire, uncontrolled, is still his most feared enemy.

Year after year man therefore became more determined in directly confronting and subduing wildfires.

However, whenever the enemy was faced head-on, heavy losses were the result.

It finally became clear that even an army of men and equipment could not confront a fire successfully as long as nature was in control and would support the fire with highly-flammable vegetation, move it about at will with wind, and, as temperatures rose, occasionally explode in fury with firestorms.

Science then came along and showed that while nature will be in control when it wants to be, its behavior can be *predicted*. For example, the wildland fire history of the Santa Monica Mountains demonstrates the predictive effects of land use, climate, vegetation, topography, fuel loading and fire suppression activities on fire patterns and fire behavior.

But while rejuvenating the plant life, fires threaten man's existence. For the most part man had invaded the mountains with little understanding and appreciation for the laws of nature.

In future articles, we will explore the changing fire history of the Santa Monica Mountains.

- We will show how predictive individual fires are at different times of the year and for different parts of the mountain range, and why some vegetation burns like a torch during a wildfire while seemingly similar vegetation nearby cannot be effectively ignited even during backfiring attempts.

- We will look at present and past fire and watershed management concepts and will examine how they are changing the vegetation of the area and with it its fire history.

- We will isolate and identify areas of high fire frequency and examine them in relation to homes lost.

- And how infrared aerial photography as a management tool, and fire ecology as a tool, are keys to understanding vegetation succession and die-back of vegetation. ■

Klaus Radtke, Ph.D. is one of the nation's leading experts on fire management and control.

A former Senior Deputy Forester with L.A. County's Forestry Division, he is a founding member of the public interest group the National Foundation for Environmental Safety.

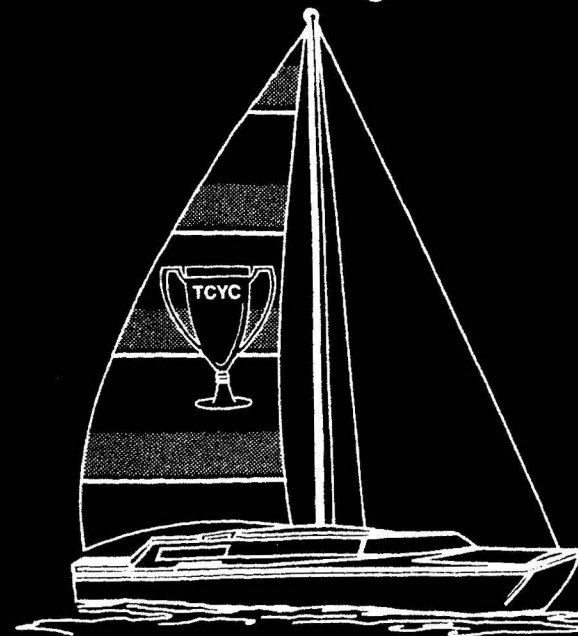
President of GEO SAFETY INC., a private consulting and management firm, he has

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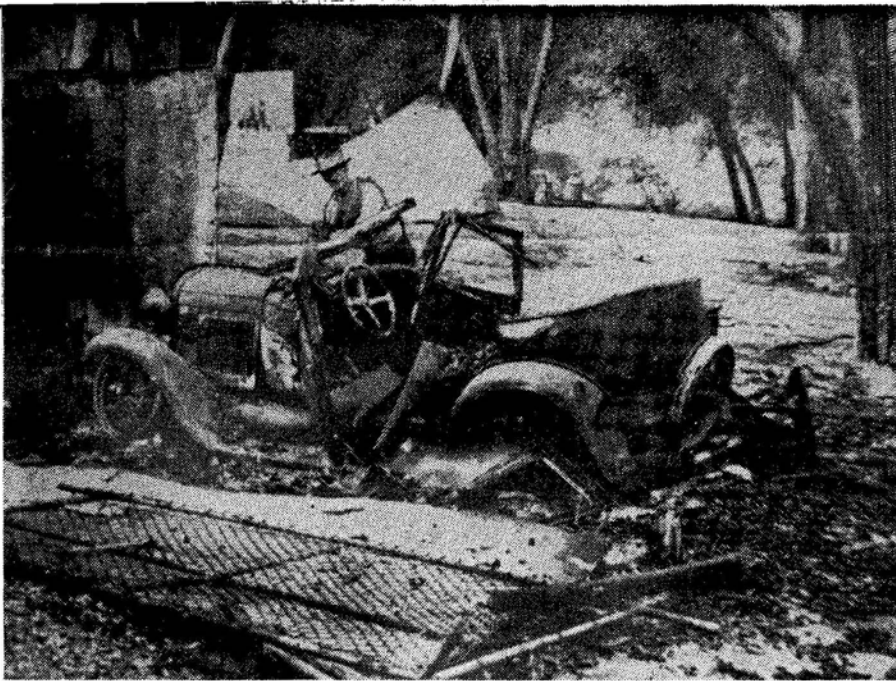
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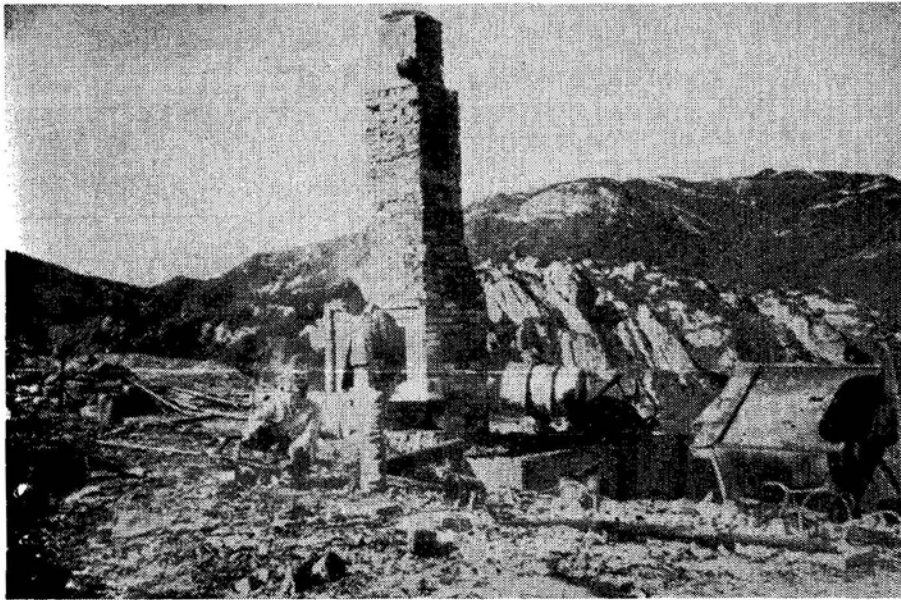
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What would it be worth today? Oscar Hiltbrand stands next to burned-out auto in Topanga Canyon's Bonnell area in wake of 1943 fire.



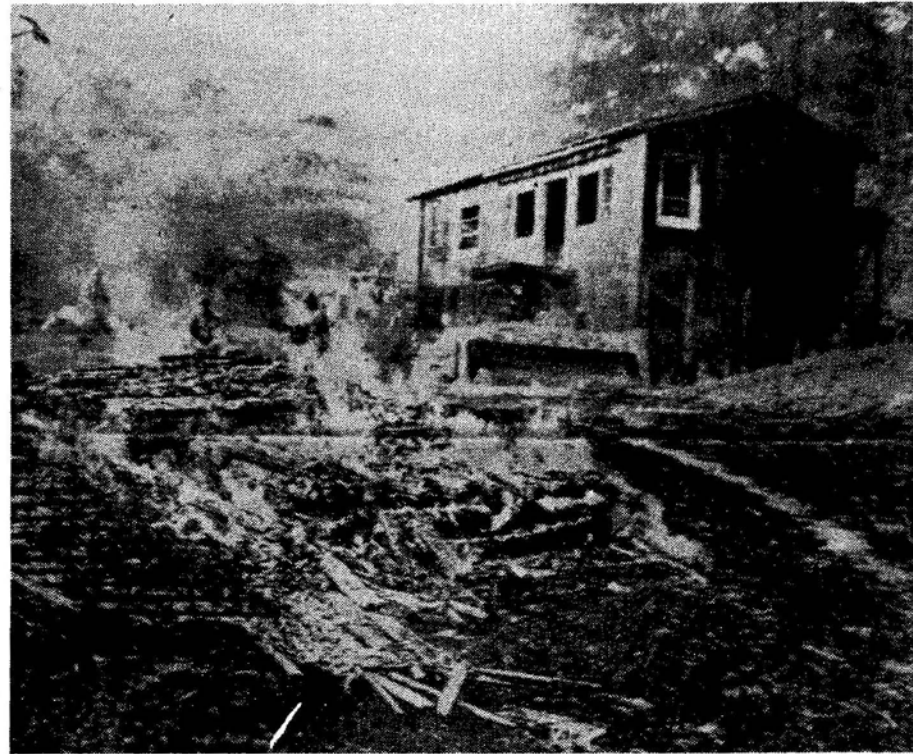
With Big Rock and Saddle Peak in the background, Mr. and Mrs. George Hemmlar examine remains of their Skyline Drive home destroyed in 1943. Caption to photo in local paper described the property, valued at \$7,500, as "electrically equipped."

FIRE

in the Mountains

*Photographs courtesy Topanga Historical Society.
Special thanks to Louise York.*

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1943: Flames surround the Larson home on Old Topanga's Monte Vista Drive just north of the Center. Louise Larson—a leading woman journalist of her time—now retired, and son Dan, an archeologist, live in same house to this day.

