

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Griffith Park Fire	Incident Date & Time: 10/03/1933 @ 15:00
Incident Location: Los Angeles, California	Incident Size: 47 acres
Types of resources involved: Reconstruction Finance Corporation labor workers	# of Fatalities/injuries: 29 fatalities (some estimates are higher) / 150+ injuries
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>During the early 1930s, the Great Depression was hitting the United States extremely hard. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation was a federal government corporation which funded state and local governments that were hurting financially during the depression. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation funded the employment for nearly 4000 workers who were working for Los Angeles County in Griffith Park. The day laborers working in the park were organized into squads of 50-80 men, each under one foreman. Their main jobs included maintaining bridle trails, roads, and clearing brush. Many of the workers were doing anything to make ends meet and working in poor conditions and under poor leadership. The summer of 1933 was relatively mild in Southern California; however the highest recorded temperature of the year was during the day of the Griffith Park Fire.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>The Griffith Park Fire started on October 3, 1933. The fuels were tall grass, chaparral, and oak trees. A little after 14:00, smoke was reported near the golf course club house by Park Superintendent Frank Shearer and City Landscape Engineer Fred Roewekamp. Shearer and Roewekamp noticed a man running away from where the fire started. He was wearing an unusually nice business suit and did not seem to be part of any of the work forces nearby. When Shearer arrived at the actual source of the fire, he found a pile of debris burning under an oak tree in a rat nest by Mineral Wells Canyon. Nearby there was an empty can and a paper sack. Shearer grabbed 3 men that were working close by and began attacking the fire with only shovels to stop the flames. The men working to contain the fire did not have the resources or experience needed and it quickly got out of control. Shearer then drove off in his truck to gather more men working in the park to come and fight the fire. Very quickly thousands of men who had been working all over the park were converging on the fire scene, which was growing bigger in size.</p> <p>At 14:26, Company 56 from Glendale Fire department was the first wildland fire trained resource on scene. Fire Chief Ralph Scott's initial size up was a 40-acre fire with 3,000 men working to contain the fire. Company 56 was not able to fight the fire effectively and make sure the mass of workers were kept safe at the same time. Around 15:00 the wind switched directions and the fire started advancing on the workers very quickly, taking them by surprise. One witness stated "<i>Suddenly there was a whirlwind and the fire broke loose.</i>" In the confusion that followed, some foreman ordered their workers to initiate backfires. The fire quickly jumped a hastily constructed fire break and workers began to scatter, despite many of the foreman berating them to hold the line. Most of the workers ran away in front of the fire by climbing up and out of the canyon. While others chose to run sideways away from the flames that were moving rapidly upslope. Survivors recounted the chaos and the screaming as the fire overtook many of the workers climbing out of the canyon.</p> <p>Due to the decentralized nature of the work system there was a lot of confusion and disagreement on the death toll, with some groups claiming a death toll as high as 58. The district attorney's office set the official death toll at 29...27 at the scene and 2 at the hospital afterwards. Another aspect regarding the aftermath of this fire was the theory that Communist Party agitators were responsible for intentionally starting the fire. The Los Angeles Times newspaper ran several articles to that effect and the authorities investigated the allegations but no arrests were ever made.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>In October 1933, the weather was extremely hot and dry, this paired with seasonal Santa Ana winds, provided the perfect recipe for extreme fire behavior. Santa Ana winds are a foehn type wind that comes from the north to northeast direction and can gust to over 60 mph in the foothills and mountains of Southern California. These wind events can cause extremely rapid rates of spread and are incredibly dangerous. The backfires, in an effort to stop the flames, were a terrible mistake and contributed to the fire behavior. The fire responded to the wind aligning with topography and extremely dry fuel conditions causing the fire to blow up.</p>	

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Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

The lack of a functional organization led to the chaos that was experienced on October 3, 1933. There are a couple key lessons from the Griffith Park Fire. One being the importance of having a proper command system such as the Incident Command System we use today. Another lesson from this tragedy is the importance of having qualified personnel for the mission assigned as well as having the proper training for every firefighter.

In addition, this incident demonstrates the value of the resources we have today. For example, in 1933:

- Leader's Intent and the Briefing Checklist did not exist.
- 10 Standard Fire Orders and 18 Watchout Situations did not exist.
- LCES did not exist.
- The Downhill Checklist did not exist.
- The Common Denominators did not exist.
- Fire shelters did not exist.
- Neither the Large Fire Organization nor the more recent Incident Command System existed.

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

In 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was another federal program just getting started. The CCCs would become the largest single work force program ever undertaken in this country, putting over 3,000,000 young men to work in the woods around the country. The CCCs became the first dependable source for organized firefighting crews that most state or federal land management agencies ever had access to. The Griffith Park Fire was a cautionary example for the leaders of the fledgling CCC program in regard to providing a higher level of organization and supervision for their crews.

The Griffith Park Fire was the first in a string of major tragedy fires which occurred between 1933 and 1956. Several of the events gained wide public notoriety, which eventually prompted a national task force to be appointed and directed to study these fires and suggest ways to improve the situation. What followed in 1957 was *The Report of the Task Force to Recommend Actions to Reduce the Chances of Men Being Killed by Burning While Fighting Fires*. This work was the original source for the "10 Standard Firefighting Orders" and many other improvements for the wildland fire service.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://www.laalmanac.com/fire/fi07g.php>

http://lafire.com/famous_fires/1933-1003_GriffithParkFire/1933-1003_GriffithParkFire.htm

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1933/10/03/griffith-park>

<https://calisphere.org/item/6d6c9f4f96b06aa82d935dc2b26c6017/>

<https://libraries.usc.edu/article/news-media-feature-usc-libraries-archival-photos-1933-griffith-park-fire>

<https://friendsofgriffithpark.org/griffith-parks-1933-fire/>

Video:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2SjxhaoSNE>

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center offers an excellent site which provides information on many wildland incidents.

[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Incident Review Database \(IRDB\) \(wildfire.gov\)](https://www.wildfire.gov/)

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Workers on Griffith Park Fire prior to burnover

2 CENTS

Chicago Daily Tribune

FINAL

61 DIE IN LOS ANGELES FIRE

U. S. EMBASSY IN
CUBA GUARDED;
FEAR BOMB PLOT

U. S. Navy
Boatmen
Doubt Search

NEWS SUMMARY


200 ARE INJURED
IN PARK BLAZE;
MANY MISSING

Trapped in Cannon
While at Work

Chicago Throngs Cheer March of Vets

THE STEPHENS



Virginia War
Only 4 More
States Needed

LEGION PARADE
SWEEPS ON TELL
FALL OF NIGHT

Threatens the Fate
of Kansas Penn.

WELD FINE LINE
ON BORDER OF
IN TREATY

Plan Big Stick
to Put Over
NRA Codes

PARADING VET
BRING HEAD OF
SILVER BULLET

THE WEATHER



WELD FINE LINE
ON BORDER OF
IN TREATY

10,000
of them are
in the service of
THE IRIS
CONQUEST
of the
TRIBUNE