Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Matilija Fire	**Incident Date & Time:** September 7, 1932 @ 08:00
Incident Location: Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, California	**Incident Size:** 219,254 acres
Types of resources involved: Federal, state, and local firefighters along with civilians	**# of Fatalities/injuries:** 0 fatalities/numerous injuries

Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:

- Fire is historically significant

Conditions leading up to the event:

The climate of Southern California is characterized by winter rain and prolonged dry summers, with generally little rainfall between May and September. In 1932, Ojai, California, and the surrounding area had endured four consecutive years of below-average rainfall, with August standing out as the driest and hottest month of the year. Months had passed without any rain, causing the vegetation to become brittle and easily breakable.

This part of Southern California is affected by Santa Ana winds. This wind is a strong, dry, and warm wind that originates from the deserts of the Great Basin and blows towards the coast of Southern California. These winds are typically characterized by their high speeds and low humidity, making them significant factors in the area's fire weather. They often occur in the fall and winter months, although they can occasionally arise at other times of the year.

The area is extremely remote and rugged and characterized by rock outcrops, crumbling slopes and steep canyons covered in mostly chaparral vegetation. There were no roads into Matilija Canyon and the surrounding canyons making the area nearly impassable. This greatly hampered any potential response of fire personnel, equipment, and supplies.

Until September 7, 1932, the Santa Barbara National Forest (now known as the Los Padres National Forest) had experienced its quietest fire season on record. On the morning of September 7, the day began clear with fog blanketing the valleys and lower mountain slopes, and a light north wind.

Brief description of the event:

On September 7, 1932, smoke was reported at the upper end of Matilija Canyon in the North Fork about ten miles northwest of the town of Ojai, California. This smoke was reported by La Cumbre Lookout at 10:00. A dense blanket of fog along the coastal plain acted as a background and prevented the Reyes Peak Lookout from seeing the fire, although it was only five miles away.

Within minutes of the report, the District Ranger Baxter and 66 men were dispatched to the fire, and additional resources were mobilized, including crews from an unemployment camp and supervisory firemen from surrounding stations. It took Baxter and the men two hours to get to the fire, traveling 13 miles by auto and five miles on horseback. When Baxter arrived, the fire had already burned 300 acres. Baxter anticipated holding the fire to 600 acres, but at 17:30, the fire exploded trapping firefighters. They narrowly escaped by initiating a backfire to create a draft of fresh air. Strong Santa Ana winds estimated at 50 mph, low humidity, steep slopes and narrow canyons led to the firestorm's rapid spread. The fire burned 20,000 acres within twelve hours, and escalating to 28,000 acres by noon on September 8.

Suppression efforts were hindered by the fire's inaccessible location and adverse weather conditions. Additional crews and overhead personnel were brought in from various regions and agencies, including famous stunt pilot Paul Mantz, who provided aerial reconnaissance. Despite the apparently hopeless situation, crews began cold trailing the fire’s flanks. So wild and unpredictable was the fire that cold trailing was the only safe way to build final control lines.

Between September 10 and September 18, crews were repeatedly driven away from the fireline by shifting winds and fast runs of the fire. During the first 11 days the fire burned between 10,000 and 30,000 acres daily. Three fire camps were destroyed by the fire, and a fourth was saved only by a desperate backfire. On September 13, Reyes Peak Lookout burned. Crews faced constant challenges, with shifting winds and explosive runs of the fire forcing them away from the fireline. There were many occasions of crews being trapped by the fire. Despite setbacks, the crews persisted in building control lines by cold trailing.

On September 18, a shift in weather conditions, marked by increased humidity and southerly sea breezes, allowed firefighters to gain control. Within 36 hours, the fire was cold-trailed and contained.

Forest Service officers from all parts of the California Region, and from neighboring states were called upon to help direct the thousands of firefighters conscripted to fight the fire. California State Division of Forestry officers, county fire crews, and units of city fire departments worked alongside federal firefighters. Seventeen large fire camps were in operation at one time, along with numerous smaller “fly” camps. Due to rugged terrain and remote locations, twelve of the larger camps had to be supplied by pack animals.

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

The final toll of the burned area was 219,254 acres, with significant devastation across five municipal watersheds. Over the course of the fire, more than 3,000 men and women fought the fire, constructing 500 miles of handline. Out of the 17 fire camps were set up, 12 of them had to be supplied by pack animals due to the inaccessibility in the rugged terrain.

The estimated cost of fighting the fire was $120,000 ($2,750,000 in 2024 dollars).

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Despite initial expectations of containment, fire behavior on the Matilija Fire exhibited several characteristics typical of a wildfire under extreme conditions. The fire expanded rapidly, covering 300 acres within two hours of ignition, this suggests a combination of factors such as dry vegetation, high temperatures, steep slopes, and narrow canyons contributing to the fire's rapid spread. The fire's growth was made worse by heavy Santa Ana winds, which are known for their dry and gusty conditions. These winds significantly increased the rate of spread with embers jumping from ridge to ridge further facilitating the fire's rapid advancement, making containment efforts more challenging. This sudden change in fire behavior is indicative of the dynamic and unpredictable nature of wildfires, especially when influenced by weather.

On multiple occasions, fire crews faced dangerous situations, such as being trapped by the rapidly advancing fire. They utilized firefighting tactics like lighting backfires to create a buffer zone and escape routes that demonstrated their resourcefulness and training in handling extreme fire behavior.

On September 10, a conversation between Assistant Regional Forester R. L. Deering and Forest Supervisor Nash-Boulden was captured while they visited the fireline near Wheeler Gorge. It best describes fire behavior on the Matilija Fire. While they stood watching the massive fire surge over vast areas of terrain, the earth seemed to shake. Deering said, *"What's that?"* thinking an earthquake had struck. Nash-Boulden reassured him that it was *"Just the fire."*

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Not applicable

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

The fire is notable not only for its size but also for introducing two new methods of communication: aerial observation and radio communication. Aerial observation from airplanes facilitated the monitoring of the fire's progress, aiding in strategic decision-making such as determining access points and constructing handlines. Although radio use was limited, they allowed for almost real-time communication between fire management personnel and fire crews, enabling quicker adjustments to responses to the fire's behavior.

Another notable impact occurred regarding coordination and management. The Angeles National Forest dispatcher's office served as a central control center for Southern California during the fire. This office organized the dispatch of personnel, supplies, and equipment, and coordinated efforts between various agencies. This informal control center laid the groundwork for future multi-agency control centers, highlighting the importance of collaboration in wildfire management.

This fire is an early forerunner of the many major fires that have burned along the coastal mountain range between Ventura and Santa Maria. This area is renowned for its rugged terrain, unusual east/west orientation of the mountain range; and complex interaction of general Santa Ana winds and the related Sundowner effect. Many of these fires are iconic and three of them (1985 Wheeler Fire, 2007 Zaca Fire, and 2017 Thomas Fire) share some of their footprint with the 1932 Matilija Fire.

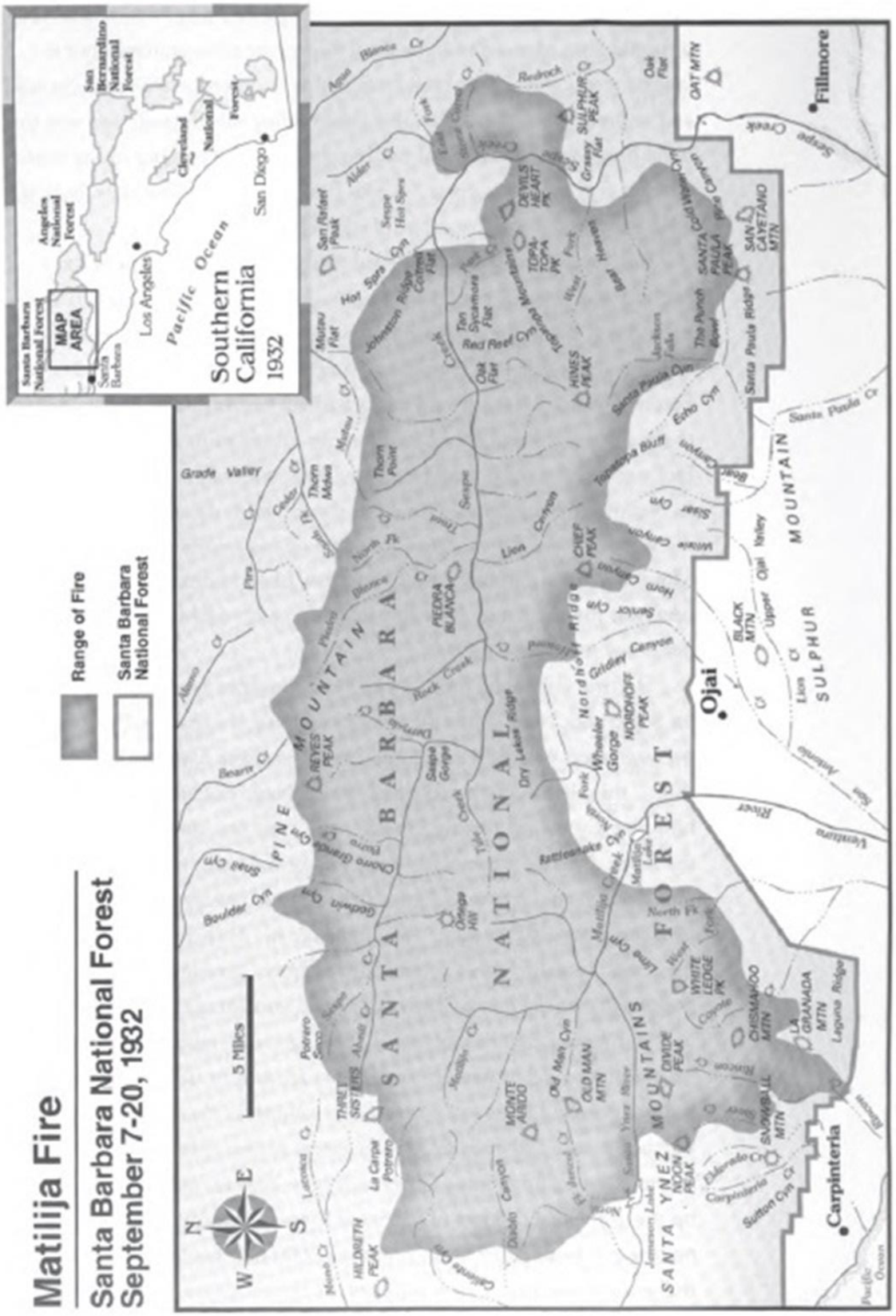
Links to more information on this incident:

http://lpfw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/19450000_Brown_HistoryOfLosPadresNationalForest.pdf
https://lpfw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/19850700_Blakley_HistoricalOverviewLPNF.pdf
https://wifri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/k12.pdf
https://ia903401.us.archive.org/20/items/sim_american-forests_1933-01_39_1/sim_american-forests_1933-01_39_1.pdf
https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_California_Ranger/rUQdiqyzuGgC?hl=en&gbpv=0

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)

This summary page was proudly provided by:
Carol Henson, former Captain Bear Divide Hotshots

February 2024



Map 6. Matilija Fire

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Matilija Fire – September 7, 1932 at 16:00 - Sespe Ridge in foreground

Courtesy Los Padres National Forest

Photograph from Wide World Photos

Although there was no loss of life, hair-breadth escapes were of almost daily occurrence on the Matilija fire. This crew of twenty men have taken refuge on an open rocky point after being forced to drop their tools and run for their lives. They remained in this rough clearing for hours after the flames had passed.

Courtesy of American Forests, January 1933