**At first, it looked like a small brush fire. And there seemed to be almost unlimited manpower available to put it out. Both workers and foremen figured it would be batted out quickly.**

# The Fire of '33

***Note: This is the first of three articles that appeared in the Glendale News-Press, Oct. 1, 2 and 4, 1993.***

## PART ONE 40 Cents an Hour--and Plenty of Takers

The summer of 1933 was abnormally cool. But by early fall, hot dry winds began to blow into Los Angeles from the desert. Already parched from months without rain, the chaparral in Griffith Park became dry as tinder.

The park was alive with activity. Although the Great Depression was at its depth--because the Great Depression was at its depth--literally thousands of men were maintaining bridle trails and roads, cleaning up scrub brush and weeds and building a new road through the undeveloped upper park.

These men were in Griffith Park because of a governmental partnership designed to help the nation muddle through its economic collapse. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation loaned the county money to pay the out-of-work men 40 cents an hour, six hours a day.

Forty cents an hour sounds a little less ridiculous when one considers that in 1933 a complete dinner at the Boos Brothers Cafeteria cost 25 cents, a brand-new Studebaker Dictator cost $645 and a comfortable home in Glendale could be purchased for under $5,000.

The workers registered with the county Department of Charities, which hired foremen (who were variously called straw bosses, shift bosses and trail bosses), paymasters and others, and managed the funds. The city provided the tools (in this case shovels, mostly) and proposed projects that would keep the workers busy and benefit the public.

Each man--women were eligible for welfare jobs, but male heads of households were given priority--received work days according to his number of dependents. More mouths to feed, more work days. The average worker labored about 10 days a month.

Not everyone got work. Foremen and other bosses had broad authority to reduce or revoke work permits. A bad attitude could leave a man without work. So could the wrong politics. According to the Los Angeles Examiner, a number of workers believed to have communist leanings had been "ejected from the park and their names removed from the county charity lists" that summer.

Big as it was, the welfare work system was decentralized and fairly impersonal. The 3,784 workers in Griffith Park on Oct. 3, 1933 were split into 108 squads, most having 50 to 80 men. Each squad had its own foreman and time keeper. The time keepers kept track of the workers through cardboard tickets that were issued for each day's work. At the beginning of the shift, the ticket was torn in half. Half went to the time keeper and half went to the worker, who turned it in at the end of the day. But the system was impersonal enough that men could gave away their work permits to friends or relatives with little fear of detection.

Tuesday, Oct. 3 looked like a good day to go to the beach, not labor in the hot sun in Griffith Park. The day began without a fog and the early sun combined with a dry wind from the desert. By noon, L.A. Civic Center reported a temperature of 100 degrees.

Other than being hot, the day proceeded pleasantly enough in Griffith Park. During the noon hour, some of the workers listened to a radio set up in one of the picnic areas. They heard Carl Hubbell and the New York Giants defeat the Washington Senators 4-2 in the first game of the 1933 World Series, played at the Polo Grounds in New York.

But a little after 2 p.m. workers began to think about more than Hubbell's screwball. At 2:10, Griffith Park Golf Professional Bobby Ross said he and several companions spotted smoke arising from a nearby hill as they stood at the first tee. Frank Shearer, a parks commissioner, and city landscape engineer Fred Roewekamp were about to hike up a sloping canyon from the golf clubhouse to inspect a campsite. At 2:15 they saw smoke spurt halfway up the slope of Mineral Wells Canyon. The smoke was about 150 yards from the golf clubhouse and only 80 feet or so from a crew working just above what was then the main highway through the park.

Shearer said the smoke was billowing at least 100 feet in the air. It looked dense and oily to him, more like a car fire than a brush fire. Brush fires, which were common in the park, tended to produce lighter smoke.

Shearer ran about 300 yards toward the fire. Roewekamp dashed along the road to the clubhouse to phone in the alarm. A man in a dark business suit crossed Roewekamp's path, running away from the vicinity of the fire. The man was not part of the nearby work group. George Snow, a road construction foreman, was running to report the fire to his bosses when he also saw the unusually well-dressed man running from the vicinity.

When Shearer arrived at the source of the fire, he found a pile of debris burning under an oak tree. He believed the debris was a pack rat's nest, although he found an empty coffee can and a paper sack nearby.

Shearer called to some men working by the road. Three responded. The four men went to the oak tree and tried to put out the fire by beating at the dry, burning grass with their shovels. Despite their efforts, the fire soon spread 50 feet up the canyon and into the tops of trees, showering the men with glowing embers. Shearer left to get more help.

Although the large number of welfare workers presented a fire hazard--one carelessly tossed match or cigarette butt could cause catastrophe--they were also a potentially-huge fire fighting force. Although the men were not trained to fight fires, they had shovels. And shovels were key fire-fighting tools in areas not piped for water.

Most of the workers were building a new road on a hillside above the fire. Clyde White, a carpenter employed by the Park Department, was driving along this road inspecting curbs when he spotted the fire below. White, who had the city seal on the door of his tan Ford sedan, drove along the road, yelling out the window to the workers, "Fire in the park! Get your shovels!"

Foremen reacted quickly. The big question later would be, did the foremen urge the workers to volunteer to fight the fire or did they order them to fight it. Afterward, everyone in a position of authority denied ordering any of the welfare workers to fight the fire. Shearer said that he merely asked for volunteers to help him put out the fire under the oak tree. White testified that he drove along spreading the alarm more for the workers' safety than anything else.

Four welfare workers told the Coroner's Inquest that they heard orders to fight the fire. They reported that foremen threatened workers who balked at fighting the fire, telling them they would lose their work permits if they refused. The foremen's power over work permits could account for the four workers' inability (or unwillingness) to identify who had issued orders to fight the fire. It would also explain why no more than four came forward.

Nevertheless, a sizable number of workers chose not to fight the fire. But most of them--whether it be through coercion, civic responsibility, peer pressure, sense of adventure or a desire to pick up a couple of hours of extra pay--responded. Many of them hiked down a twisting, narrow trail from the new road into burning Mineral Wells Canyon below. In some places they had to walk single-file.

Confidence was high and concern was low. It seemed a small fire and the welfare workers presented virtually unlimited manpower to put it out. "It was just a lark to us," said a survivor. "It didn't look dangerous then. We laughed about it and started down, to bat the fire out in a hurry."

**Suddenly, the wind shifted and the fire began to chase the workers. Those who ran across the path of the advancing flames to the road below generally found safety and help. Those who tried to run directly away from the flames--downwind and uphill--were in many cases less fortunate. This was the scene on the road between the Golf Clubhouse and Girls' Camp.**

## PART TWO Fighting the Fire

Men poured into Mineral Wells Canyon and spilled onto the nearby ridge. Without piped water, the ragged army of fire fighters were left to bludgeon the fire to death with shovels, wet sacks and their bare hands.

Sidney Heyser, an off-duty county fire engineer, saw the fire from a point near the intersection of San Fernando Road and Colorado Boulevard and immediately drove to the scene. He saw thousands of men running around the fire, apparently leaderless. Heyser estimated there were two or three times more men fighting the fire than was necessary.

The fire department had arrived by now. They received simultaneous calls from Roewekamp and the Glendale Fire Department at 2:26 p.m. Company 56, located on Rowena Avenue in Silverlake, was the first dispatched.

Fire Chief Ralph Scott said the fire fighters found an estimated 3,000 workers in a 40-acre fire area that included Mineral Wells Canyon, nearby Dam Canyon and the ridge that separated the two. The workers were making well-intentioned but often inefficient efforts to contain the blaze. Chief Scott said his men could not effectively fight the fire and ensure the welfare workers' safety at the same time, largely because they had no way to control the workers' actions. "It was absolutely impossible for firemen to control them because of their great numbers," he told the Coroner's Inquest.

Around 3 p.m., the wind--which had been blowing gently and steadily down the canyons from the northwest--shifted. The fire advanced on the workers quickly, taking them by surprise. Said Richard D. Meagher, a foreman, "Suddenly there was kind of a whirlwind and the fire broke loose." It jumped a fire break some workers had hastily made in the canyon.

Some of the foremen rode their workers hard to hold the line. One worker said he and his work gang were "being yelled at like a bunch of cattle." When another worker, L.J. Green, decided to retreat from the flames, a foreman yelled at him to "get the hell back in there." Worker Frederick Alton saw a man running away from the fire struck on the jaw by a foreman and knocked down.

But as the flames crept closer, survival instinct took over. Most of the men ran directly away from the fire, climbing up and out of the canyon. Others chose to run sideways to

the rapidly-advancing flames. This route required no climbing and provided fairly quick access to the main road. As it turned out, this second choice--for the workers who had a choice--was the better of the two.

Running directly away from the flames meant running downwind and uphill. This was a deadly mistake. Even the most able-bodied men could only climb up and out of the canyon at two or three miles per hour. Witnesses said that the wind was pushing the fire up the canyon wall at up to 20 miles per hour.

Men scrambled madly up the canyon wall, trying to outrun the advancing flames. Workers watching from the new road above heard a particularly grisly transcript of the proceedings. "You could tell the progress of the fire by the screams," said John Secor. "The flames would catch a man and his screams would reach an awful pitch. Then there would be an awful silence. Then you would hear somebody scream and then it would be silent again. It was all over inside of seven minutes."

It was a few minutes after 3 p.m. That much is well pinpointed because in some cases the dead workers wore watches that stopped when the flames reached them.

Meantime, some of the men in Dam Canyon weren't just being chased by the fire--they were surrounded by it. "I didn't know if I was going away from the fire or toward it, because we were hemmed in by flames," said G.B. Carr. Just how some of the workers became surrounded was a key topic of the inquests.

Some of the men tried diving through the advancing wall of flame like it was an ocean wave. "I heard someone yell "Look out!" and a wall of flames was on us," said Anton Schaefer. He was cutting away brush in a ravine with some other men. "It was exactly like the big waves of the ocean came over you, except it was fire. The only way out was straight up the hill in front. It looked like a cliff."

Some survived in unique ways. Miguel Holquin, originally listed among the dead, survived by jumping into a stone planter he was building around an oak tree and covering himself with sand. Several men dove into the swimming pool at what was then the girls' camp, and survived.

Fate, intuition or maybe just luck played a role. Foreman H. N. Claypool was about to order his 20-man crew to cut a fire break, then decided against it. "Something told me to stop," he said. Shortly afterward, a tornado of flame swept over the place they were headed. "Six or eight men in the squad just beyond us were trapped," Claypool said.

Then it stopped. The fire department had the blaze under control before nightfall.

While the sun went down for the rest of Los Angeles on Oct. 3, Dam Canyon and Mineral Wells Canyon remained aglow. Warner Brothers-First National Studios brought in klieg lights. Welfare workers searched for lost friends. Wives and families arrived at

the park when their loved ones did not arrive home. The Glendale Salvation Army set up a relief station and served coffee and food.

The decentralization and impersonal nature of the welfare work system made matters worse. There was no accurate way to tell just how many were dead or if there were injured still laying out on the hillside.

Early death estimates were high. Coroner Frank A. Nance placed the death toll between 70 and 80. Park Foreman S.G. McCullogh believed at least 58 were dead. T.J. Brennan, supervisor of time keepers, set the death list at 52.

Arriving at an accurate death toll wasn't easy. A hasty survey of the 108 time keepers was made to see how many names were on the payroll. But its size, decentralization and impersonal nature made the welfare work system susceptible to payroll padding. How many of the missing were truly missing and how many of them were phantom employees whose wages were being quietly pocketed by a time keeper or foreman? One possible phantom was Peter Derus of Mar Vista. Originally listed as missing, Derus not only turned up alive and well, he told puzzled authorities that he had never worked in any capacity for the Bureau of County Welfare.

Furthermore, in the smoke, horror and confusion, work groups became divided and mixed. Foremen had no opportunity to count noses. Shift Boss Roy Stockton said that in the wild scramble to get out of the canyon, "all of the gangs got mixed up and you couldn't tell what men got in or got out."

Adding to the confusion, not all of the workers had the inclination or energy to attend the mass roll call held Wednesday morning at 8 a.m. at the golf clubhouse. And it's possible that some of them simply didn't hear about it.

Finally, 347 workers were serving their last day of work in Griffith Park on Oct. 3. It is possible that some of these workers--many of whom were transient--had simply left town.

Three weeks after the fire, the Grand Jury was still trying to find out if all the men working in the park on Oct. 3 were accounted for. More than a month after the fire, the District Attorney's Office set the official death toll at 29--27 dead at the scene and two dead in hospitals afterward.

A group of the fire victims' dependents told the County Board of Supervisors that the actual death toll was 52, not 29. The International Labor Defense League, described by the Coroner's Inquest and local newspapers as a communist organization, claimed a death toll of 58. William H. Schraeder, chairman of the organization's investigating committee, accused the District Attorney's Office, the Coroner's Office and sheriff's deputies of burying many of the casualties in the park soon after the fire. Schraeder, who made the accusation before the Coroner's Inquest panel, was unable to provide evidence to back up his charges.

But all could agree on one point. It was the deadliest fire in the city's history. It still is today.

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## PART THREE Aftermath: Heroes and Villains

The county morgue wasn't big enough to handle all the remains, let alone the victims' grieving families and the inquisitive press. A temporary morgue was set up in a county warehouse downtown.

The bodies were laid in a row on a concrete floor under a huge canvas shroud. Most were so badly burned that they could not be identified, except by their belongings, which were kept in an old apple crate. This odd, macabre little collection of trinkets included two inscribed belt buckles, a high school class ring, a chauffer's badge, a Ford ignition key, a collapsable cup, a little square glass bottle, a blue sunglass lens and a human foot.

But identification through belongings required belongings, which were scarce among men getting paid 40 cents an hour. Observed the Herald-Express, "Most of the dead wore no jewelry. Many had pawned all personal ornaments before appealing to the county for aid."

Furthermore, some of the dead were not who their work permits said they were. Several days after the fire, 32-year-old Fernando Valenzuela was officially listed as dead. Actually, Valenzuela (who had also been listed as injured in some accounts) had gotten a job in a vineyard and lent his work permit to his nephew, William Lozano. It was Lozano who had not come home from the fire.

The Los Angeles Times reported the tale of an unidentified good samaritan who met an "emaciated and hungry" man on the morning of Oct. 3. He took the man to a diner, bought him breakfast, and gave him his work permit. It turned out to be a death sentence.

The city was shaken and stunned. Newspapers and authorities looked for villains. The Times speculated that "the blaze was caused by some Red, some half-unhinged firebug or some person with a fancied grievance against society." For several days after the fire, a 29-year-old unemployed studio technician named Robert D. Barr looked like he fit the Times' description perfectly.

Barr set a fire in the park on the night of Oct. 3, but police eventually concluded that he did not start the big fire. According to police, Barr was at home in Culver City, drinking, when the fire started. That evening, he heard about the Griffith Park fire from the radio. He decided to go help fight it.

Still tipsy, Barr arrived at Fern Dell, on the western edge of the park, several miles from the fire site. Around 10:30 p.m., Ernest and Jack Borchard, father and son, were sitting on the porch of their home overlooking Fern Dell. They saw Barr stop his car, get out, and light a small fire. The younger Borchard walked down to the road and got the car's license number before Barr drove off.

Police apprehended Barr elsewhere in the park shortly after midnight. He told authorities that he decided to set a fire of his own, since he couldn't find the big blaze. "I was just drunk enough not to realize what I was doing," Barr told police. Barr's fire burned two acres, threatened no structures and caused no injuries.

Police were convinced that Barr was not the man in the dark suit who had been seen fleeing the vicinity of the fire shortly after it was first spotted. That man was never identified.

Back fires ordered by foremen apparently were much more destructive than anything Barr might have done. Several workers claimed that back fires were started shortly before 3 p.m. These fires were quickly caught by the wind and caused more than 300 workers in Dam Canyon to be surrounded by flames.

Although the back fires appear to have been well-intentioned, setting them was a lethal mistake. The Coroner's Inquest panel, comprised of nine fire fighting experts, concluded that many of the dead were killed not by the original fire, but by the back fire.

One worker, Frank George, admitted setting a back fire. He said he and two other workers set fires in order to stop the main blaze. "The fire was advancing," George told the Coroner's Inquest panel. "It looked like the next best thing to do."

George said he lit the fire at the direction of his foreman, Frank Thompson: "He said, 'Who's got any matches?' I said, 'I have.' He said, 'Let's start a back fire," so I went to work and started a back fire."

Thompson denied instructing anyone to start a back fire. But others lent credibility to George's account. Charles Chandler, a crew boss, said he saw Thompson set a back fire that was soon caught by the wind. James McGuire said Thompson admitted setting the back fire, telling him afterward, "I thought it was the right thing to do."

There was just enough evidence pointing toward a communist plot to torch the park to get the authorities and newspapers--particularly the staunchly-conservative Times--interested. LAPD Captain of Detectives Tom Murray investigated the possibility that the fire was set by communists angry about being ejected from the park and having their

work permits revoked. A few days before the fire, police overheard several communists at a downtown hunger march say that something "was going to happen soon." The Times added that "agitators also were reported to have been busy among the county welfare workers in Griffith Park shortly before the fire began." No arrests came from this, however.

But perhaps more than anything, the carnage was the result of basic tactical errors by welfare work foremen not trained to fight fires. "It was a mistake to let anyone down in the bottom of that canyon," Fire Chief Scott said the day after the fire.

Worse, the foremen flooded the canyons with workers, bringing them down narrow, twisting paths. Quick evacuation under such circumstances was destined to be chaotic, if not impossible.

Most of the professional fire fighters battled the blaze from higher ground, while a few did what they could for the workers in the canyons. According to Police Inspector David Davidson, "One fire captain took up his position in the bottom of the canyon and as fast as these green men were sent down, he sent them back."

The newspapers and authorities found a few unlikely heroes amidst the chaos. One was Marvin Page, a park employee. He was cutting a fire break with other men on a steep slope when he saw the fire coming over the ridge. "It was hissing and roaring terribly," he told the Park Commission inquiry. Page ran out of the canyon and saw a man parked alongside the road in a Model T. "I jumped in and made him drive me like hell, around to another canyon, where I had my bulldog tractor."

Page said he drove the tractor "full blast" to the top of the ridge. "I put the scraper blade down and gave her the gun. The blade ripped up the brush and dirt just ahead of the fire, which was nearly to the top of the ridge.

"The heat was awful. It was blowing right at me and sometimes the flames rolled around the tractor. But I got across to a place where an old fire break was and the fire stopped."

Page received a framed commendation from Mayor Frank Shaw for his heroism.

Mayor Shaw proposed "a suitable and lasting monument" to commemorate the 40-cent-an-hour workers who lost their lives protecting Griffith Park. The Los Feliz Women's Club suggested to the Park Commission that a deodar tree and a bronze plaque be placed at the Vermont Avenue entrance to the park. On Nov. 23, 1933, the tree was planted and the plaque dedicated.

Years later, after several re-landscapings of the park entrance, the plaque was impossible to find. Like the 29 men it commemorated, the plaque was lost in Griffith Park.

But a fitting epitaph for these men resides in half-forgotten spools of microfilm that contain the Oct. 4, 1933 issue of the Los Angeles Herald-Express. Reporter Caroline Walker wrote:

They were unemployed men working there in Griffith Park. They were laborers and clerks and executives and even ministers. In their hearts a little candle of hope had been burning again because they had a chance to earn a little money.

It was only a brush fire that they were asked to extinguish. It was the sort that skilled fireworkers know how to handle. But the men in the park weren't fire fighters. They did not know that canyons become flutes in a brush fire, or that flames travel with such deadly swiftness over grass and trees grown brittle with the summer drought.

It was work. That was all that mattered.