

1979 SPANISH RANCH FIRE





Sycamore Ridge

The Spanish Ranch –1979

Located on Central Coast of California off Highway 166.
Known as one of the first Spanish/Mexican land grants of the 1840's.
Known for ranching, and land preservation today.

Spanish Ranch Fire, August 16th 1979

- On August 15th 1979 four men; Captain Ed Marty, and firefighters; Scott Cox, Ron Lorant and Steve Manley responded to a wildfire from the Nipomo fire station.
- They were all from California, from; Tehama, Goleta, Long Beach and La Habra. They all worked for the California Division of Forestry (CDF).
- They all shared the common duty of fighting fire. Captain Marty led his men up Sycamore Ridge just after 4:00 PM
- At 4:25 PM their thin line of defense was cut-off and a retreating bulldozer operator was overrun. Moments later, they tried to escape from the sweeping area ignition, but the fire cut-off their retreat and along with another dozer operator they were all overrun by fire.
- The tragedy that occurred and the subsequent investigation would change the way the state fire agency operated on area wildfires. Area Ignition looks back 30-years to honor the men who fought and died in the Spanish Ranch Fire.

FACTS:

Fire is reported at 2:02PM. Origin is 32 miles east of Santa Maria on Highway 166.

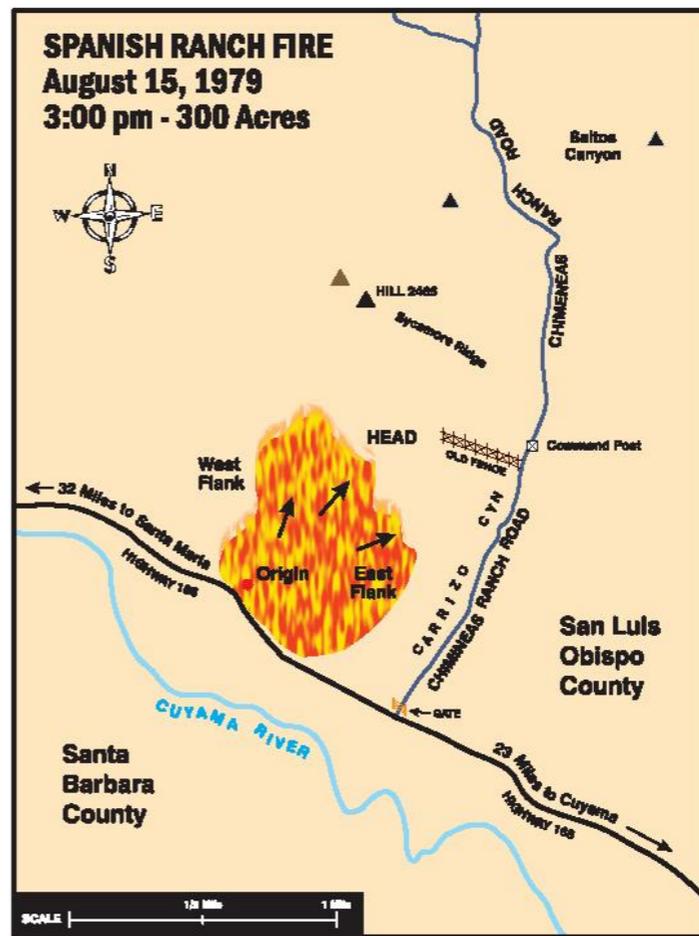
Initial response by Santa Barbara County, California Division of Forestry (CDF), and U.S. Forest Service.

Fire burns as a topography fire. Burns in gullies and open areas.

The fire is attacked on the west and east flanks, but the fire moves to the north.

Intense burning period. Fire burns to the north in light winds and grows to 300 acres. A pyro-cumulus cloud is observed by arriving forces.

At 2:53PM CDF Chief Lew Killion arrives and takes command. He tries to slow down fire with air tanker drops.



Air drops are made with B-17 and S-2 Aircraft.

By 3:00 PM, the fire is estimated at 300 acres.

FACTS:

CDF Dozer Operator Rich Corning arrives at Fire and unloads bulldozer. He creates fire break on east flank.

Firefighters on west flank include Forest Service and CDF personnel. They battle fire on west flank.

Fire burns as a topography fire again. Burns in gullies that are inaccessible.

The fire slows down considerably. Chief Killion decides to surround fire on north flank using steep Sycamore Ridge. Sends Dozer Operator up the ridge to construct fire line.

Engine-5373 crew from Nipomo station arrive. Captain Marty, and firefighters Scott Cox, Ron Lorant and Steve Manley.

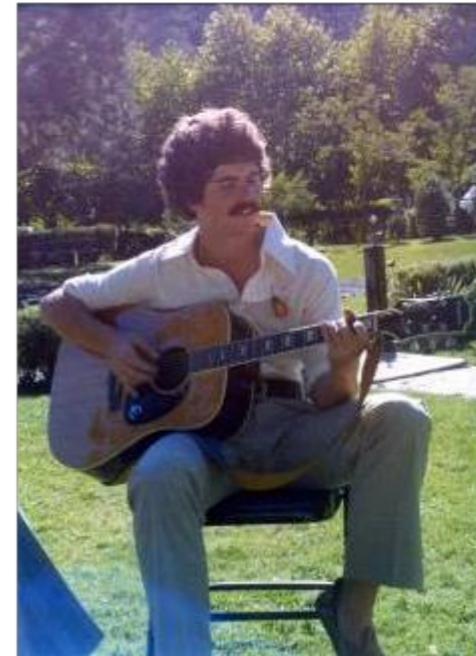
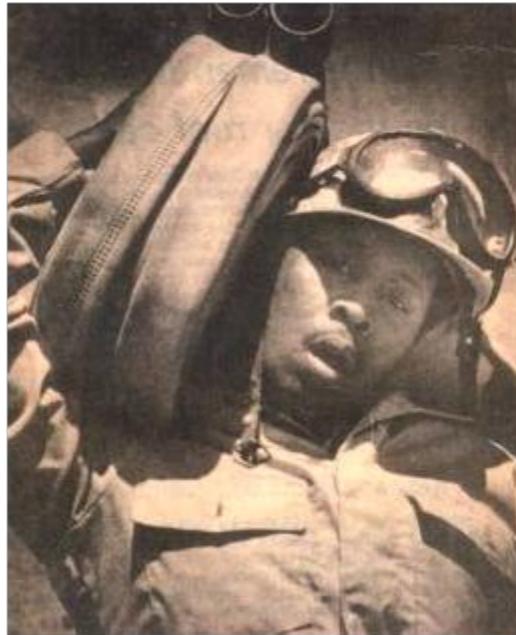
At 3:50PM CDF Chief Killion sends crew up the ridge with two 5-gallon water packs and tools. They provide protection for firing out, and for dozer operator safety.



Engine-5373 Crew from
Nipomo

Top:
Captain Ed Marty
Firefighter Scott Cox

Bottom:
Firefighter Ron Lorant
Firefighter Steve Manley



FACTS:

CDF Fire Captain James McPharlin is sent up ridgeline as a lookout.

Bulldozer Operator John Feazelle from Santa Barbara Co. arrives and is sent up Ridgeline to support operation and widen fire break.

Fire is laying down and burning slow. A Forest Service Firefighter at the command post is concerned about the situation, a discussion is conducted. The concerns are addressed—but not with top level Fire Chiefs.

At 4:10PM to 4:20 PM the fire begins to pick up on the west flank. Cumulus clouds are observed and the winds pick up. Firefighters try to contain fire—but a small portion gets away from them.

The southern slope of Sycamore Ridge is in a high flammability stage—when a finger of fire begins to move up slope to the highest point of Sycamore Ridge.

FACTS:

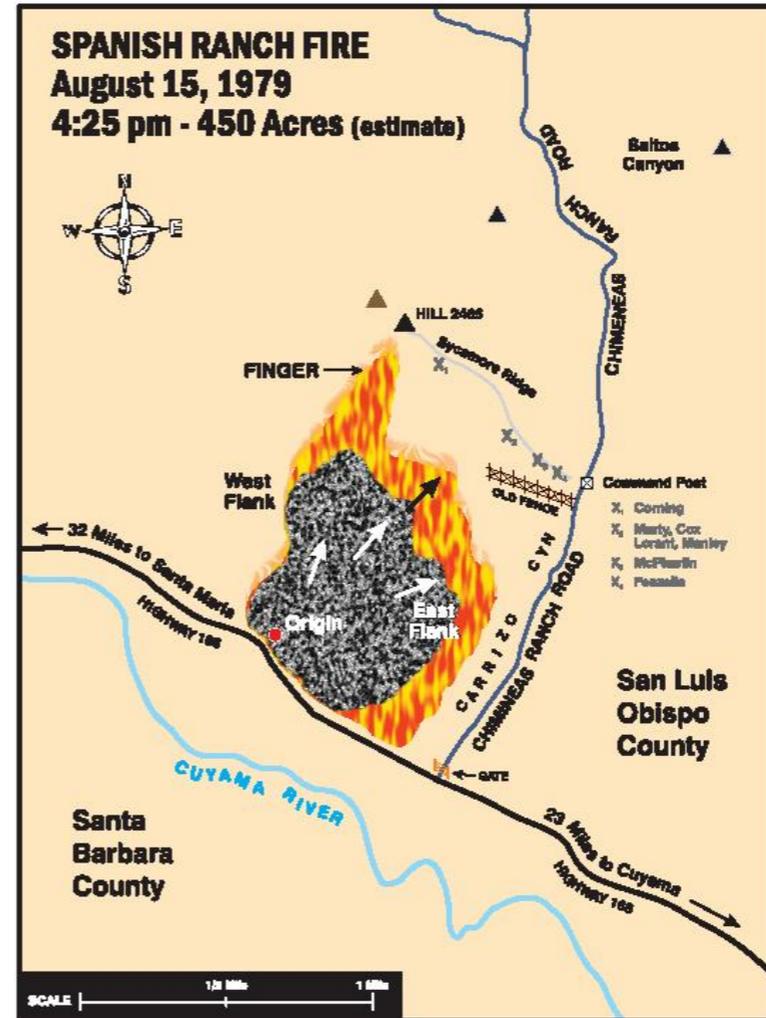
At 4:25PM on the afternoon of 15 August 1979 a combination of factors leads to an extreme situation on Sycamore Ridge.

A finger of fire advances up to the highest point of the ridge.

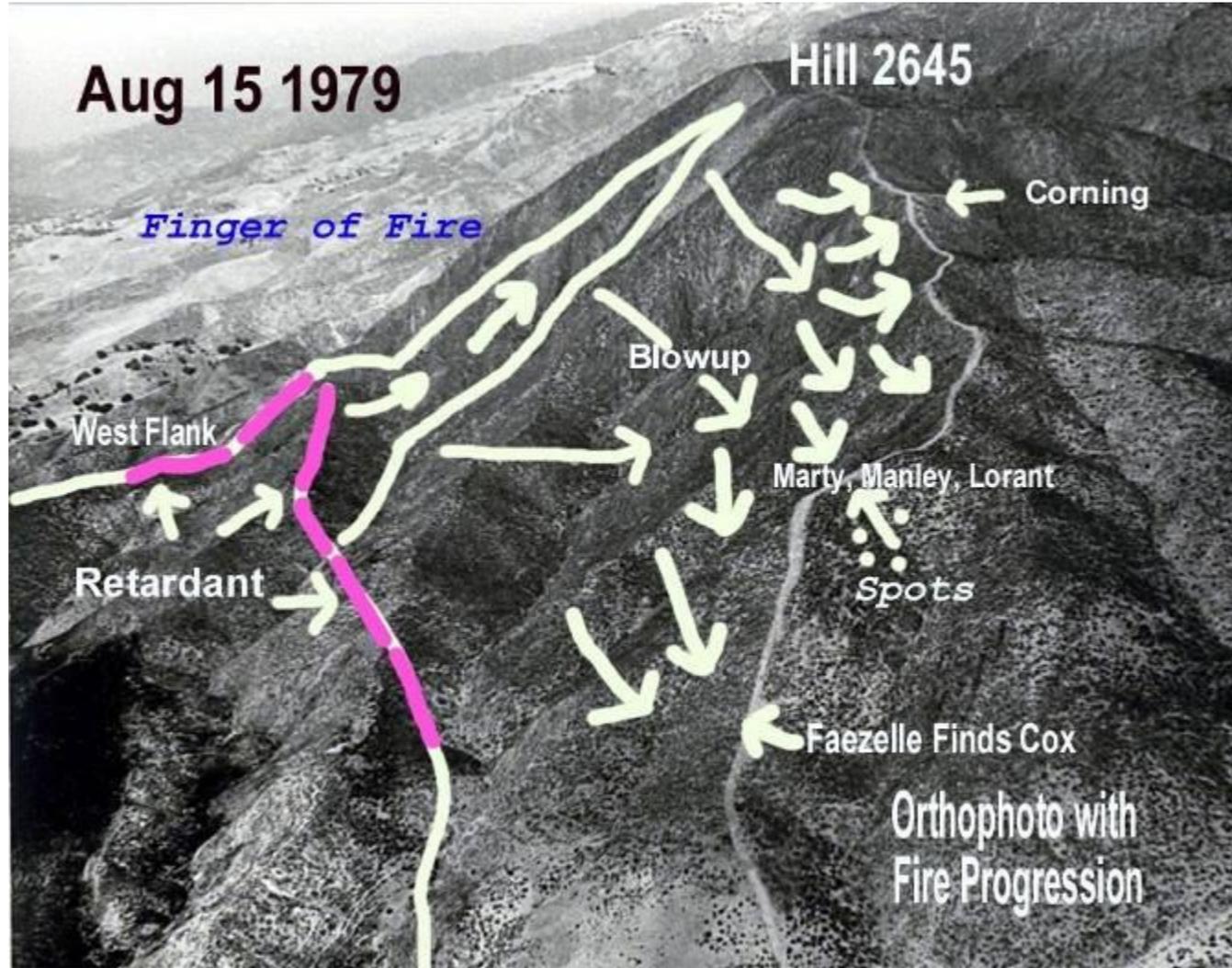
Danger increases as firefighters on Sycamore Ridge react.

A sudden crosswind downdraft acts upon the finger of fire and drives the flames across the entire slope of dry vegetation.

Extreme Fire behavior and Area Ignition occurs along Sycamore Ridge.



Aug 15 1979



FACTS:

CDF Fire Captain James McPharlin escapes and runs downhill.

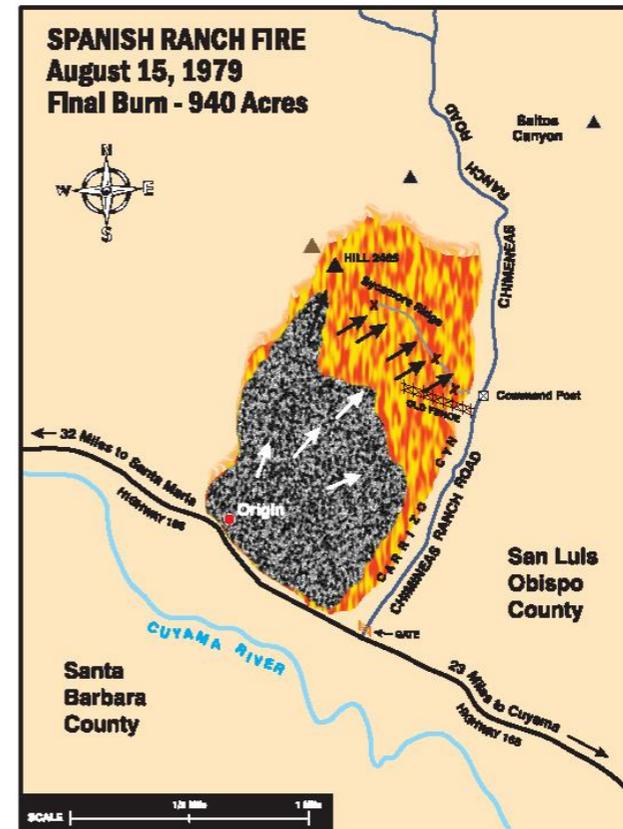
Dozer Operator Rich Corning is overrun and survives.

Captain Marty and three Firefighters are overrun. They do not have fire-shelters. Three die in fire. Scott Cox escapes but dies 202 days later.

Dozer Operator John Feazelle is overrun and survives with minor burns.

Rescue situation continues.

Hotshots arrive, air tanker drops continue and fire is contained at 940 acres.



FACTS:

Wildfire is a part of Central Coast of California's history.

The 1970's decade was a tragic reminder.

Three fires:

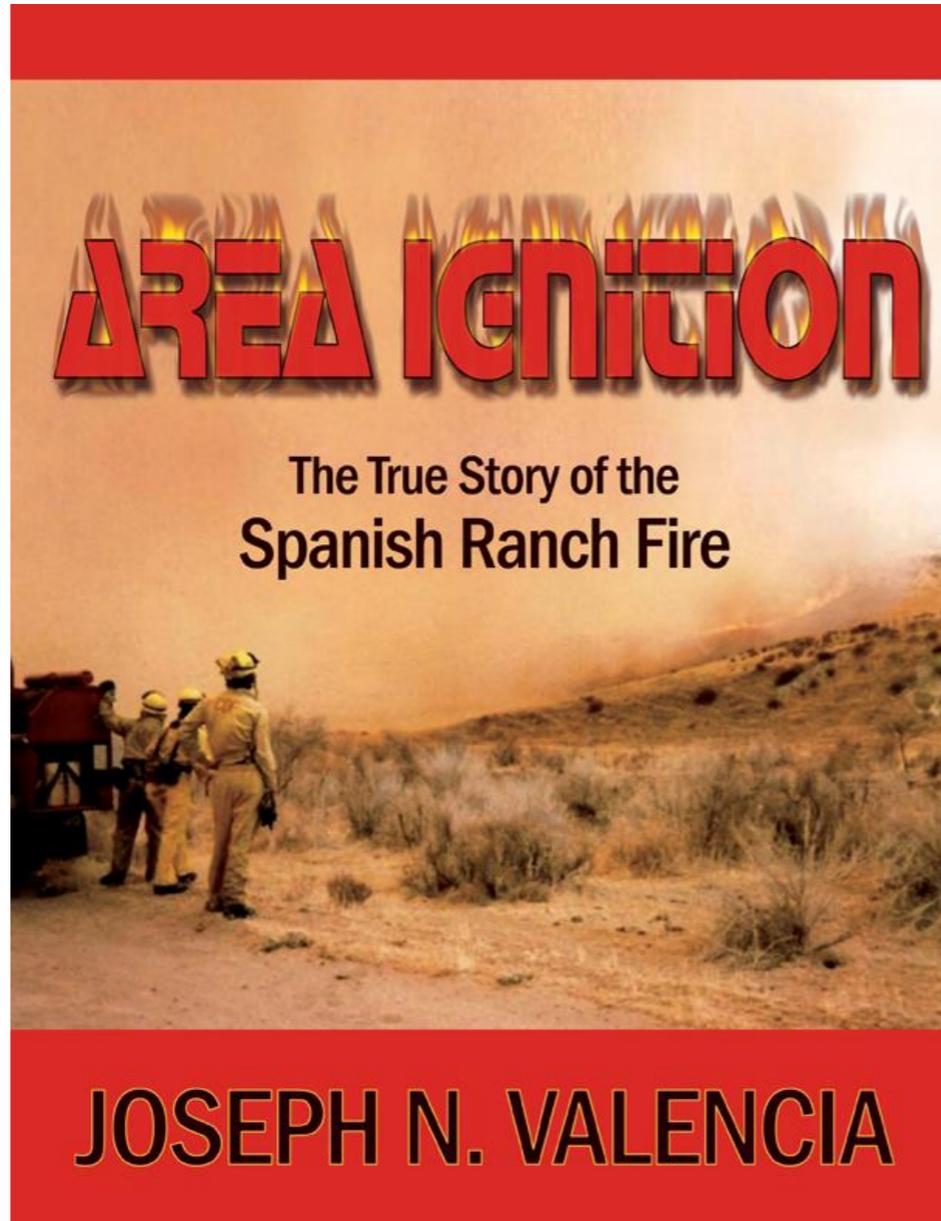
1971 Romero Fire, Sundowner Winds.

1977 Honda Canyon Fire, Santa Ana Winds.

1979 Spanish Ranch Fire, Area Ignition.

Learn lessons from the past fire history. Study wildfire and nature.





Area Ignition

One of the great fallacies of the Spanish Ranch Fire; has always been how small the fire was; how light the fuels were; and how simple of a fire it seemed. This assessment was handed down through the decades following the fire. But it does not tell the whole story of the natural and human condition that occurred there, and it just doesn't add up to actual first-hand descriptions. The Spanish Ranch Fire was quick in its movements; it burned in difficult terrain; it was hard to be at a good location to oversee; and it contained critical factors relating to extreme fire behavior.