

Fire on Palomar Mountain

Peter Brueggeman 2024



1928 Beauty Peak fire on Palomar

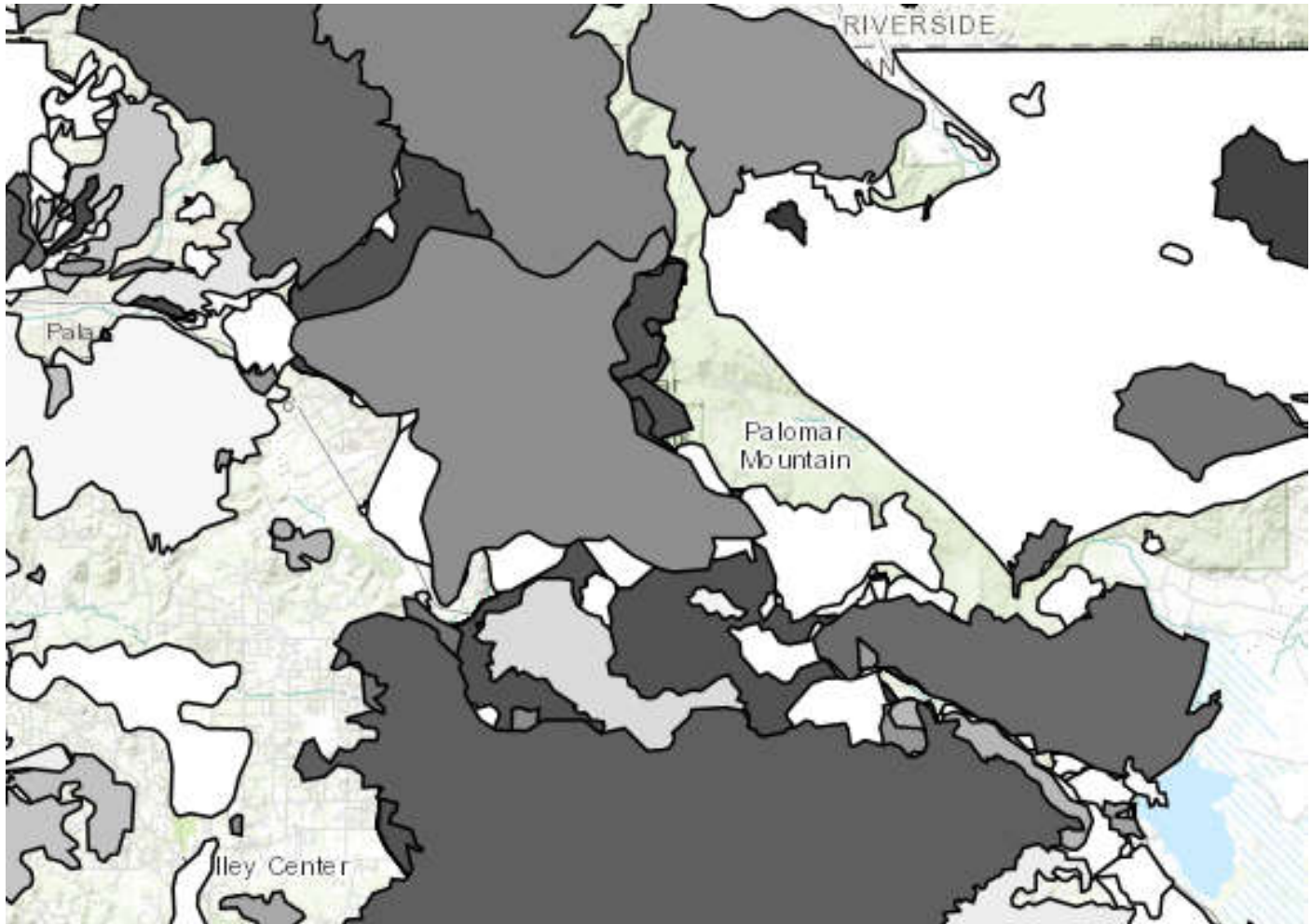
Los Angeles Herald Examiner photo, 29 September 1928

Palomar Mountain is a mountain ridge extending west from Lake Henshaw through the Agua Tibia Wilderness. Most of Palomar Mountain has burned, and undoubtedly all of it has burned reaching back in time.

This Palomar Mountain fire history will reduce its geographical scope on the west to the mountains above Pauma. Names misspelled in newspaper accounts are corrected in this history. For many years, Smith Mountain was an alternate name for Palomar Mountain, and early newspaper accounts can have either name.

Three Internet fire maps show Palomar's mapped fire history, with their first mapped Palomar fire being in 1910 [1].

This September 1910 fire was on Palomar Mountain's west side in the Pauma Creek canyon, north of the lower Nate Harrison Grade; it was started by two American Indian boys chasing a rabbit into a hole beneath a bush, trying to frighten the rabbit from the bush and disturbing a rattlesnake, and then setting fire to the bush to burn out the snake [19].



1910 through 2023 Palomar fires on the WIFIRE map [3]

There were Palomar fires before 1910, which are thus unmapped. For example, an 1899 Palomar Mountain fire burned French Valley and these fire maps, which start later, show the upper French Valley unburned [3,8].

PALOMAR MOUNTAIN AKA SMITH MOUNTAIN

FIRES BEFORE 1910

FIRE MAPPING STARTS IN 1910

1861 FIRE

An 1861 fire on Smith Mountain is referenced in an 1885 news item in the San Diego Sun ^[76]:

Louis A. Rouen of Temecula, aged eighty-six years, appeared before County Clerk Dodge this morning and obtained his naturalization papers. Mr. Rouen was naturalized in Detroit, Michigan, in 1834, but the papers were destroyed by fire at Smith's Mountain, in 1861, and the records at Detroit failed to corroborate the statement. He took up a homestead near Temecula, and was not able to prove up on it in consequence of the loss of his naturalization papers.

1877 FIRE

On June 12, 1877, the San Diego Union reported ^[10]:

Extensive fires are burning on Smith's Mountain, contributing no little to the heat of the atmosphere in the northwestern part of the county. At Poway the smoke from the distant fire blew down in the valley yesterday. The thermometer marked 114 in the shade at Paine's house.

1878 FIRE

On September 13, 1878, the San Diego Union reported ^[15]:

Extensive fires are burning in the country northwest of this city, and the scent of the distant smoke is very plain after sundown. We learn from Mr. Rice, who brought in the mail from Temecula yesterday evening, that on Tuesday last a fire broke out in the mountains north of Pala, and was advancing rapidly in the direction of Major Utt's place. It was thought, however, that the wind would turn it aside from his bee range, if it should continue to advance. A big fire was also reported to be raging on Smith's mountain, near George Dyche's place, extending toward Bear Valley. The mountains are also on fire near Charley Thomas's place. The heat is intense, both men and animals suffering from its effect. Ashes from these fires are carried by the wind and scattered all along the road from Bear Valley to Temecula. The hot air was so exhausting that it was with much difficulty the mail got through to Temecula. The settlers along the road are very much alarmed and fear that a great deal of damage will be done unless the fires are

soon subdued. For two days all work has been suspended. At San Bernardo no work is done beyond what is actually necessary, the heat being too intense to permit of the least exertion. Great heat is also reported at San Luis Rey and other interior points.

Major Lee H. Utt, a Civil War veteran, owned the Agua Tibia Ranch, upstream from Pala. George Dyche lived on the east end of Palomar Mountain in Dyche Valley. Bear Valley is an older name for Valley Center.

1881 FIRE

On September 10, 1881, the San Diego Union reported ^[5]:

Extensive forest fires are raging in the neighborhood of Julian. One large one is almost across Smith's Mountain; one on the Cuyamaca, and one on the Volcan Mountain.

1882 FIRE

On September 9, 1882, the San Diego Sun reported ^[11]:

From Wednesday's Daily. --- Quite an extensive fire has been raging for the past few days on Smith's Mountain, extending to Santa Ysabel. This district is densely wooded with pine, oak, and other large timber, and the loss must be serious. The heat was felt in this city and neighborhood intensely yesterday, and the smoke at times nearly obscured the sun.

On September 15, 1882, the San Diego Union reported ^[14]:

The fires have done considerable damage ... to stock feed and forests in the San Bernardino and Smith Mountain regions. They are dying out now, and we hope they will soon cease.

1886 FIRE

On July 15, 1886, the National City Record printed an item from a Murrieta newspaper ^[14]:

A fire on Smith's mountain, some twenty miles away, for a night or two this week looked like a beacon to the tempest-tossed mariner – mebbe it was. – Murrieta Era.

1894 FIRE

On November 22, 1894, the San Diego Weekly Union reported ^[16]:

Extensive fires have been burning on Palomar mountain during the week, according to the Fallbrook *Observer*. No damage to crops or occupied premises is reported.

1898 FIRE

On September 9, 1898, the San Diego Union reported ^[17]:

FIRES IN THE COUNTRY

One on Palomar, and Two Others Further South

Edwin A. Wells, who returned yesterday by wheel from Escondido and Palomar mountain, reports that wildfires are numerous in the country. A large fire has been raging among the trees near the Cook ranch on Palomar, and another not far from San Marcos has affected the temperature of the surrounding country very perceptibly. ...

The Cook ranch was on the east end of Palomar Mountain in Cook Valley.

1899 FIRE

On September 24, 1899, the Riverside Morning Enterprise reported ^[9]:

Word reached this office yesterday to the effect that a big forest fire was raging on Smith mountain and in that vicinity. It was stated that the flames were running wild and that the foliage, trees and underbrush were being destroyed by the flames by the acre. The fire has filled that part of the country with a dense smoke, and some of it has no doubt drifted over this way to make the weather hotter than it otherwise would be. The party who brought the news stated that there were quite a number of men at work trying to control the flames, but they were not succeeding very well. The fire was set by campers, it is believed, and the people over there are said to be considerably worked up over the act of carelessness, which is causing so much damage to pasture, fences and other property.

A few days later on September 28, 1899, the San Diego Union reported [5]:

TERRIBLE FIRES BURNING ON SMITH MOUNTAIN

Graphic Story of the Heroic Efforts of the Fire Fighters by an Eye Witness

Fighting the Flames for Days without Food or Sleep – Over Four Miles of the Choicest Timber Destroyed and the End is Not Yet

In letters received by the Rev. H.B. Restarick, Mrs. Restarick gives a graphic description of the big forest fire which has been raging on Smith Mountain. Writing on September 22 she says:

“The one exciting topic is the big fire raging on the north side of the mountain. The fire started in Oak Grove and has been creeping up the mountain since Monday. The roof of my tent is covered with ashes and the heat is great. Mr. Mendenhall and his two boys have been fighting fire in Frenchman’s Valley since daybreak yesterday without a bite to eat until 6 o’clock this morning. Mr. Ready and Mr. Clark went out this morning. It was a terrible sight last night, when the great flames would rush to the top of some large pine tree. The fire seems to be about four miles long.”

Frenchman’s Valley is now known as French Valley. Names are J.H. Ready and Newton A. Clark.

On September 24 she writes: “The excitement and suspense of the last three days has been something dreadful. Lemuel Clark (a boy 14 years old) left for the scene of action yesterday morning early, and when night came on he did not return, nor did Mr. Clark, nor could we get any news, only see what seemed to be the whole upper end of Doane’s Valley, and the high peaks above it, on fire. During the day the roar of the flames was something terrific. It seemed to Mrs. Clark and all of us that the fire had crossed Doane’s valley and was headed this way. Mrs. Johnson was nearly frantic, and would keep saying to me, ‘What shall we do? What can we do? Nothing on earth can save us if [it] starts in this heavy timber.’ There is no fire break any where between here and Doane’s, except the road, and the fire. Night came on, still there was no news. Poor Mrs. Clark was nearly paralyzed with fright. We all went to bed except Mrs. Clark, in spite of the fearful spectacle. But we didn’t sleep much. Mrs. Clark paced the road as far as the clearing, back and forth all night. Poor Arthur was so frightened he said, ‘Oh mamma, let us pray, that’s all we can do now.’ The smell of smoke we were conscious of, even when we dozed off. When morning came, Mrs. Clark could endure the suspense no longer, and she and Lillian started on horseback for the Ready’s, but they only got to Bougher’s, for there they

found the scene of the fire. On the west and north side four men were at work making back fires to save the Bougher's home."

Names are George Doane and William E. Bougher.

"But I must go back to Friday night. Mr. Ready fought the fire all alone until Mr. Clark came to him; then they succeeded in saving the Quigley place by working all Friday night. Doane joined them early Saturday morning and they all worked like mad men all day yesterday and last night, to save Ready's crops and house. Mrs. Ready climbed to the roof and her mother and the children handed up buckets of water to keep the sacks saturated while burning debris was flying all around them. They saved their house and orchard, and most of their corn, but their fences are destroyed, which is a great loss. Those men fought like superhuman creatures without a bite to eat, and nearly famished with thirst and heat, and suffering from the terrible smoke. Shortly after noon Saturday Mr. Scott and Mr. Bougher arrived home from Escondido. They joined the other men and soon saw that it would be a desperate fight to save the Todd and Pearson places, as the fire leaped from point to point, and was then in the Rainbow waterfall canyon, so after working all night making firebreaks at Ready's, Quigley's and Todd's, they decided their only hope was to back fire beginning near Bougher's on the west side of the road. They thought if they could keep the fire to that side of the road, we should all be saved on this side.

Names are James W. Quigley, Benjamin F. Scott, William F. Pearson, and S. Todd.

Mrs. Clark got there just as they began back-firing, and she and Lillian and Mrs. Bougher and Mrs. Scott wore themselves out carrying water back and forth to the famishing men. At one time it seemed certain that Mrs. Pearson's house would go, and her fine orchard and everything, but they saved it. When Mrs. Clark came back at noon she said: 'There is little chance for us; the men have but little hope that they can keep the fire on the west side of the road. In about an hour they will be able to tell, and if not, Mr. Clark will come home at once and begin back firing here.'" She said the women were working with the men, carrying water and fighting fire. Lemuel Clark is a perfect hero. The men left that boy stationed at various posts during the night, telling him to watch and control the fire at his point, and he did his duty unflinchingly every time. Tonight (Sunday) he is still at it and he has not had a wink of sleep for two nights, working like a man for two days and nights.

"When Mrs. Clark told me the state of affairs, I got on the white horse and took some aromatic spirits of ammonia, some other remedies and a flask of whisky, for I found no one had any. I took also some provisions. Lemuel had

nothing to eat all day except a pilot biscuit burned to a cinder, which he found at Ready's. I also took some raisins for the men to carry in their pockets, which are good to allay thirst. I tell you my heart ached when I saw those poor women toiling up that steep hill with water buckets, with palpitating hearts, lungs catching for breath, and perspiration streaming down their faces. A burning tree had fallen across the road and the women and Mr. Scott chopped it to pieces and threw it down the west side. They were so glad I came and so glad to get all I had brought, for they needed the whisky and the provisions.

"I tried to get Mrs. Pearson to leave and come home with me, and then go to her daughter, Mrs. Ready, who had utterly collapsed, but she had to go to see if she could help save her own house. Mr. Clark got home at 7 this evening, the most tired [*illegible words*] but he brought the good news. 'We are safe, unless the fire should get away from the men tonight.' Poor Mr. Scott was so tired that he could not get to Boucher's except by crawling on all fours. The others are watching and fighting fire tonight, when they hope the worst will be over.

"D. Nichols and party of fourteen were camping at Doane's Valley. They decamped yesterday. The smoke was so suffocating they thought they would soon be burned out. Mr. Mendenhall says in thirty years there has never been such a fire on the mountains. They are so few men up there to fight it; there is the trouble. The fire had driven snakes and animals hither and thither. A big one was killed near our tent yesterday, and today Margaret was playing with a kitten and heard a hissing, and saw a young rattlesnake. She came running to Mrs. Clark, who soon killed it. The men saw four or five deer while fighting the fire. The poor birds have been driven out and many are around us, and of course mountain lions and other wild animals are driven out and may come our way."

Monday night, Sept. 25 – "Lemuel got home this morning, perfectly exhausted. He spent all his third night helping the men watch the fire. He reported the fire under control unless adverse winds should spring up. The men are still keeping watch. It is not spreading over the high range to the northwest. I wish you could see it. It is grand! It still looks very threatening. Mr. Clark says the finest timbered portion of the mountain is devastated. He went to the fire this afternoon and says that all is safe for us on this side.

The next day on September 29, 1899, the Riverside Morning Enterprise reported [9]:

SAN DIEGO FOREST FIRES

Twenty-five Square Miles of Choice Timber Destroyed

SAN DIEGO, Sept. 28. – The forest fires in the mountains of this county, which have been raging for the last two weeks are the fiercest ever known here. Reports today from Palomar give graphic descriptions of the great devastation of timber being wrought in that beautiful park region. Men and women have been fighting fire day and night, many going two and three days without food or sleep. Almost twenty-five square miles of the choicest timber land of Smith mountain are utterly destroyed. Many settlers had to make bitter and stubborn fights to save their homes. A large number of cattle are known to have burned. Deer, snakes and mountain lions have been driven down to the settlements. The fire is now practically under control, although that burning on Cuyamaca mountains, thirty miles southwest, are still raging.

Several days later on October 2, 1899, the San Diego Union reported [18]:

HEMMED IN BY FIRE

YOUNG MEN IN DIRE STRAITS

EXPERIENCE OF COURTNEY AND HEYLMANN ON PALOMAR

While Viewing the Forest Fire They Are Surrounded by the Flames – Resolved to Shoot Themselves, but Later Broke Through the Fire.

Hemmed in on all sides by the fierce, raging forest fires on Palomar mountain, George Heylmann and Fletcher Courtney of this city agreed to shoot each other rather than be burned to death. As the flames drew nearer, however, and the heat became almost unbearable, the two young men grew desperate and made a dash for liberty through the burning brush and trees. Fortunately, both escaped alive, although Courtney badly scorched his hands, and Heylmann had some of his clothes burned from his back. The two young men have returned to the city, and will hereafter keep at a safe distance from mountain fires.

It was last Sunday that Courtney and Heylmann had their narrow escape. They had been camped on this side of Palomar mountain for several weeks for the purpose of enjoying an outing and prospecting on the mountain. Beside a good stock of provisions, they had a prospecting outfit and burro with them. Last Sunday morning they saw the large forest fire which had been raging for several days on the northern side of the mountain appear on the summit, and the flames shooting up the pine trees for a hundred feet or more afforded such a grand spectacle that the young men decided to ascend

the mountain for a better view of the fire. They left their tent and provisions behind, and had soon climbed to within a short distance of the fire. The flames spread with such rapidity, and burned the dry brush and trees so fiercely as they swept onward that there was a roaring like that made by the breakers of the ocean. It was a scene well worth going to see, the flames jumping from tree to tree and shooting upward more than a hundred feet. There was a strong wind blowing, and this only made the fire burn all the faster.

The two young men were so impressed with the wonderful spectacle that they were entirely unconscious of any danger, until one of them chanced to look around, and, to his horror, saw that they were hemmed in by the flames on all sides. The wind had carried sparks over their heads into the brush beyond, and a complete circle was formed by the fire. Escape was apparently impossible; and as the flames drew nearer and nearer to the prisoners, each moment lessening the unburned area, they were ready to give up hope. Rather than be roasted alive, the two agreed to shoot each other if it was found that they could not escape. Both had their shotguns with them. As the heat became more intense each moment, they were goaded on to desperation, and decided to risk a dash for liberty through the flames. They were not ready to lay down their lives without an attempt to save them, so they prepared to make the dash. Each man took off his coat and tied it around his head, and with gun in hand they started on a run toward the fire. They made a wild dash as they approached the flames. They were almost overcome by the heat, but they kept on and plunged right through the burning brush. Their clothes caught fire but they did not stop to extinguish them.

Heylmann, as luck would have it, got through the fire area with only a part of his clothes burned from him, but Courtney was not so fortunate. With his coat tied around his head, he could hardly see where he was going, and stumbled over a rock in the burning brush. He fell to the ground, but jumped to his feet in a moment and was off again. He burned his hands severely and broke his gun, but he did not stop to pick it up. He was soon by the side of Heylmann and had his burning clothes extinguished. They considered themselves lucky, and started for their camp. The fire had been there, too, however, and nothing was left of their tent and provisions but a pile of smoking ashes. Even their burro could not be found. Being without anything to eat or a place to sleep, they set out for San Diego on foot. After walking for twenty-five miles, they caught the stage for this city and arrived there the next day.

On October 5, 1899, the San Diego Union reported ^[13]:

FIRE ON PALOMAR

FLAMES' DESTRUCTIVE WORK.

MILES OF VALUABLE TIMBER WERE BURNED

Exciting Times for the Ranchers – Mr. Bougher's Deliberate Firing of His Timber Tract in Order to Save His House and Orchard

Mrs. H.B. Restarick and children returned yesterday from a four months' outing on Palomar mountain, much refreshed by the clean, pure mountain air and their stay among the pine trees. The most important incident of their sojourn was the forest fire of last week and the week before, which swept over the west end of the mountain for a distance of eight miles and along the north side for fifteen miles, destroying the best part of the timbered portion of the mountain. Mrs. Restarick says that the fires died down last week, and although a wreath of smoke may yet be seen here and there, there is no fire, and no danger now. Just how the fire started is not known. It was first noticed in the direction of Oak Grove, and swept up the north side of Palomar mountain, burning furiously among the pine trees. It was a week before it reached the summit, and there its southerly course was stayed, probably by the canyons, but it continued east and burned for a number of days longer. On the west end of the mountain it came clear over and swept down the south side, almost reaching Pala. By backfiring along the road leading over the mountain the fire was prevented from spreading along the south side and through the inhabited part of that section.

Those were exciting times for the residents of the mountain. The men worked night and day to fight the fire fiend and the women helped by carrying water. The men confined their efforts principally to backfiring in order to turn the course of the flames. A Mr. Bougher set fire to his own timber in order to save his house and orchard. He said that the striking of the match and the setting on fire of his own property was the hardest thing he ever did in his life. It was an unusually fine tract of timber and was of considerable value. It was realized that if the timber were not burned the fire would destroy the house, and it was therefore arranged that Mr. Doane should set fire to the tract. Mr. Doane declined to strike the match at the last moment, and Mr. Bougher was therefore compelled to set fire to his own property. The timber burned but the house and orchard were saved.

The home of the Misses Frazer on the northeastern part of the mountain was saved by the heroic efforts of the Cook brothers. The Misses Frazer live

alone on that part of the mountain, and by hard work have brought a fine ranch cut of the wilderness. Each took up a government claim, and with pick and shovel built a road three miles long down the mountain into the valley where their property is located. They make a living by raising cattle, chickens, and bees, and one of them carries the mail between Nellie and Jessee postoffices. The fire swept directly toward their place, and had it not been for the work of the Cook brothers in backfiring, the premises would undoubtedly have been devastated. A great many people have timber claims on the mountain, and the trees on a number of these claims were destroyed. The beautiful Waterfall canyon was burned out and Doane valley was only saved by backfiring. The flames swept along the northern end and west of the valley. The only buildings destroyed were two small uninhabited houses. Last week the ashes from the fire fell in Escondido, twenty-five miles away, and even the heat was felt at that place. A Mr. Scott, who assisted in fighting the fire, has been dangerously ill ever since, and doubts for his recovery are entertained.

Mrs. Restarick says that the burning trees, especially at night, presented a grand and beautiful sight. The red glare of the fire could be seen for miles, and the flames as they shot up the trees were also visible from nearly every part of the mountain. ...

Names are Maria and Elizabeth Frazier, and Hiram and George Cook.

1902 FIRE

On January 4, 1902, the San Diego Sun reported ^[77]:

FIGHTING FIRE

Lively Time of it on Smith Mountain

Experiences Related by O.H. Bailey – Weather Was Also Wintry on the Heights of Palomar

O.H. Bailey returned yesterday from his home on Smith mountain to resume his studies at the Russ High school. On Thursday and Friday of last week Mr. Bailey was actively engaged in the exciting occupation of fighting mountain fires, for there were two of them on Palomar mountain and both were big enough to demand immediate and constant attention of every able-bodied man on the mountain. Altogether the fires burned two days and two nights before being subdued, and during that time no one slept more than a few little cat-naps to get their breath, so to speak. Mr. Bailey reports that

very little damage was done to standing timber, most of the district having been burned over recently, but a large amount of underbrush and dead trees were destroyed and on the second day one of the fires swung around and destroyed the church building before it could be headed off. During the progress of the fire a strong east wind blew most of the time and so cold was it that the wet sacks used to fight the fire when held out in the wind would stiffen with frost in a few minutes. The recent cold snap was the coldest ever known within the memory of the oldest settler. Some thermometers dropped to 9 above zero and heavy frosts occurred all over and down the sides of the mountain. No rain has fallen there for some time, but the grain is still growing nicely.

1908 FIRE

On August 1, 1908, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported [20]:

DISASTROUS FOREST FIRE IS RAGING AT PALOMAR

ALL MOUNTAIN IS THREATENED

Unless Rain is Received, It Is Feared Damage Will Be Great

Blaze Started This Morning on West Side of Mountain – Three Hundred Acres Thus Far Burned Over – Strong West Wind Blowing – Many Summer Cottages Are in Danger.

What threatens to become one of the most disastrous forest fires in the history of San Diego county is now raging on Palomar mountain and unless rain is received this afternoon or tonight it is probable that the damage done will be great. The fire broke out early this morning on the west side of the mountain and by 11 o'clock had burned over 200 acres of territory. At noon today the fire was raging fiercely and was reported to be spreading rapidly.

Forest Supervisor Marshall was the first to receive the news of the fire in San Diego. One of Mr. Marshall's rangers called him on the long distance telephone shortly after 10 o'clock and informed him that the fire had broken out and that despite all efforts being made was rapidly spreading. An hour later the ranger again called on the phone and stated that more than 200 acres had been burned over up to that hour and that it was impossible for the force of firefighters to make any headway against the flames. The ranger at that time expressed the opinion that, unless rain was received this afternoon or tonight, that the entire Palomar mountain would be burned over, causing great loss.

As soon as he received the news of the fire Mr. Marshall called Pala on the telephone and made arrangements for the sending of a number of men to the scene of the fire. As large a force as possible is being rapidly concentrated to fight the fire, and provisions are being sent to them from Pala. What makes the situation all the more serious is the fact that a strong west wind has been blowing all day. This is materially aiding the progress of the flames and the heavy smoke is proving quite a handicap to the fighters. Palomar mountain is covered with some of the finest trees on the Pacific coast. Most of the trees are eastern oak and pine. The mountain is a favorite vacation spot with San Diegans and Los Angeles people, many of whom have built summer cottages there. There is also a hotel which is always filled during the summer months. During the past few weeks the forest has been the Mecca of scores of campers, and it is supposed that one of these parties are responsible for the starting of the fire this morning. It is believed that the breakfast fire of one of the parties of campers was left burning after the people had left camp and that the heavy wind caused the fire to spread.

“The reserve on Palomar mountain is one of the finest on the Pacific coast,” said Mr. Marshall this morning. “If the fire spreads over the mountain the loss will be great. All my advices are to the effect that, unless rain is received, there is small chance of the fire being put out. There are a great many campers in the vicinity and they, of course, will suffer.”

According to word received from Pala at 2 o'clock this afternoon the fire had burned over more than 300 acres and at that hour was spreading even more rapidly than before, with every indication that the flames would sweep the entire mountain. At 3:15 o'clock this afternoon word was received from the force of firefighters to the effect that it had been raining heavily for more than half an hour and that it appeared as though the fire started this morning had been extinguished. The danger does not appear to have passed, however, for it was stated that with the coming of the storm lightning had started a fire on the east side of the mountain. This fire, it was stated, appeared to be more fierce than the one started this morning. At the time of the latest telephone message the fire appeared to be gaining headway rapidly, though the hope was expressed that it would be extinguished by the rain.

On August 2, 1908, the San Diego Union reported ^[21]:

RAIN QUENCHES FIRE ON PALOMAR

Threatened Disastrous Blaze on Mountain Averted by Act of Providence

Probably at no time in the history of San Diego county did rain fall more opportunely than yesterday morning, when a forest fire on the west side of Palomar mountain broke out about 9 o'clock, and after burning fiercely for about an hour and a half, was extinguished by a thunder shower. Lightning striking a tree near the Palomar ranch house started the fire, which raced half way up the mountain, burning to a line some distance above the residence of John Frye. At about the same time lightning caused a fire to break out on the north side of the mountain. Reports yesterday afternoon from Palomar were to the effect that, through the aid of the elements, both fires had been extinguished.

That the conflagration would undoubtedly have proved one of the most disastrous in the history of San Diego county forest fires had it not been for the opportune thunder shower, is manifested by the fact that large numbers of San Diego and other people are at present encamped at different places on the mountain. Many of these were in the direct path of the fire yesterday, and only the rain extinguishing the flames saved them from losses of their camping effects, and possibly their lives. It is even believed the fire might have spread to such an extent as to have consumed the Palomar hotel and other summer residences on the mountainside had it not been conquered so quickly. As it is, residents of that section, together with the forest rangers, are offering up thanks for the timely arrival of rain. An area of approximately 300 acres was burned over before the flames were extinguished, according to information from Pala yesterday.

John Frye is probably Jefferson Frye.

1909 FIRE

On July 28, 1909, the San Diego Union reported [22]:

WARNS CAMPERS AGAINST FIRES

Recent Conflagration at Palomar Causes Forest Supervisor to Act

MUCH PROPERTY MENACED

Indian Boys Who Started the Flames Dismissed; Were Not Criminally Careless

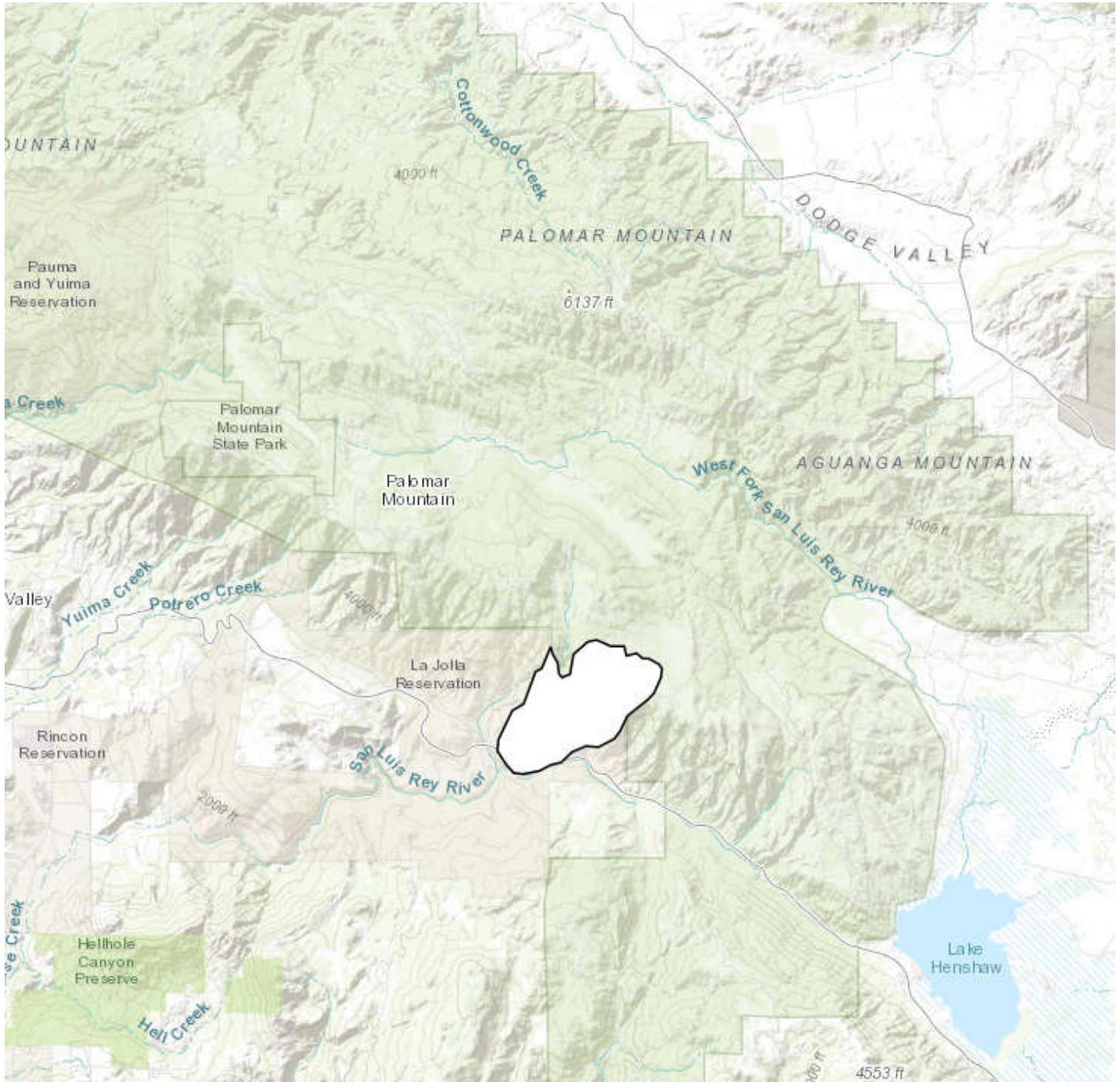
Following a big brush fire that burned over between 700 and 800 acres at Pala, foot of Palomar mountain, and threatened the destruction of the magnificent stand of timber that covers that eminence from foot to summit,

Harold A.E. Marshall, supervisor of the United States forest service for San Diego county, is pursuing a strict investigation with the idea of making an example that shall serve as a warning to picnickers and others in the matter of the careless handling of fire.

In discussing the matter yesterday Supervisor Marshall ... “It was last Wednesday that the fire at Pala mountain broke out,” said the supervisor, “and it was started by two Indian boys, who, in cutting and smoking out a swarm of bees from a tree, in some way lost control of their fire. The brush became ignited and the blaze spread rapidly. Eugene C. Batchelder, half proprietor with Frank Salmons in the Indian reservation store, and resident manager, soon saw the danger, as the flames were rushing before a smart breeze toward the Mount Palomar forest reserve line. He at once hired a lot of men at the expense of the forest service and started to fire the fire. Nearly 800 acres had been burned over before they got it under control, at a point very near the forest reserve line. Had they been unable to keep it out of the timber the fire would have been a most disastrous one, as the mountain bears one of the most magnificent stands of timber to be found in San Diego county, and good stands of timber are scarce here. The local forest officer took the case before the Pala justice court, but that official decided that the evidence of criminal carelessness against the Indian boys was insufficient and they were discharged. ...”

The fire maps on the Internet start with a 1910 Palomar fire. Following are news reports on several large Palomar fires after that. These are not encyclopedic for 1910+ Palomar fires; there were more. Browse the fire maps for complete review [3]

1917 FIRE



1917 Palomar fire on the WIFIRE map [3]

On September 17, 1917, the San Diego Union reported [27]:

Fierce Fire Eats Way Over Palomar Mountain

MANY OUT TO FIGHT BIG BLAZE

Baffled Forest Service Men Reinforced by Volunteers; Damage Thought to Reach Thousands of Dollars.

SWATH OF MILE AND HALF CUT OVER LOFTY RIDGE

Ranches, Orchards, Homes Near Path of Flames, but No One Lost, Late Report Says; Smoke Clouds Area

One of the most serious forest fires which San Diego county ever suffered cut a swath a mile and a half wide yesterday up one side of Palomar mountain, and then swept down the other side in a path equally wide, through some of the finest timber in this part of the state. The flames were being fought last night by scores of volunteers, assisting the forest service men, a call having been sent for help to Warner's, Oak Grove, Angels' camp, French valley and other places in the vicinity of Palomar. At a late hour last night it was feared that the fire was beyond control. Fanned by a brisk wind, the flames were sweeping towards the ridge of the mountain into the heavier timber. The conflagration was described as highly spectacular, and it is estimated that the damage will run far up into the thousands. Forest rangers last night back-fired half a dozen times, without success. The fire at that time was not only spreading towards the crest of the mountain, but was eating its way through the timber down the Rincon canyon.

All day dense clouds of smoke rose from the raging flames in the heavy timber, and the roar of the fire could be heard from a distance of several miles. At night the lurid glare of the fire shot through the smoke in a terrifying way. Although no loss of life was reported last night, those in the path of the flames having had plenty of warning, it was said that there must have been some damage to ranches and orchards, of which there are many in the vicinity of Palomar. The fire started, according to reports sent from Warner's last night, in the La Jolla Indian reservation, west of Palomar, on Friday. It was then a small brush fire, and it was thought that it would be easily controlled. On Saturday and yesterday, however, it developed under the stimulus of a stiff breeze, and soon became such a menace that the forest service men had to call for help.

As the flames spread, the news traveled quickly through the surrounding country and hundreds of ranchers, Indians from the reservation and others volunteered their services. Near the path of the flames is located the new home of Louis Salmons, brother of Frank Salmons of this city, with fine acre-and-half orchard and wheat fields. It was feared last night that these would be destroyed. Forest service men and volunteers were endeavoring yesterday afternoon to beat back the flames sufficiently to keep them from homes and ranches. The home of Winbert Fink and the Joe Miller place

were in danger. Both have nice orchards, which the fire would ruin. The fire last night swept down the canyon towards Warner's, but was not expected to reach the valley. Valleys on all sides of the mountain are thick with smoke. The La Jolla Indian reservation, where the fire is supposed to have started, is eighteen miles southwest of Warner's Hot Springs. The fire swept up the west of the mountain and down the east slope. The heat was terrific several miles away, and the entire country thereabouts was illuminated. Palomar mountain, also known as Smith mountain, is one of the tallest mountains in San Diego county. It is still in a primitive state, heavily timbered and a paradise for hunters and vacationists. The hotel on the crest of the mountain is not thought to have been in the path of the flames. This hotel has done a heavy business this year and has just closed its season. Numerous San Diegans spent their vacations on Palomar this year. Careless campers may have caused this fire, it was said yesterday.

On September 17, 1917, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported [56]:

BIG FIRE BURNS ON PALOMAR'S SHAGGY SIDES

TWENTY-FIVE HUNDRED ACRES BURNED OVER, BUT ONLY
SMALL PART OF THE GROUND WAS OCCUPIED BY
IMPROVEMENTS OR EVEN BIG TREES – BARRING EAST WIND
THERE IS NO DANGER

The biggest range fire the Escondido country has witnessed since the San Pasqual and Ramona hill country was burned over four years ago, came Sunday and Sunday night on the wooded and brush-covered sides of Palomar mountain and over rough canyons and nearby sections. According to Forest Supervisor Norman H. Sloane, of the Cleveland National forest, a tract of 2500 acres was burned over, aggregating about four square miles. Other reports, some of them greatly exaggerated, have been in circulation through various mediums. The fire was started, probably by careless campers, near La Jolla reservation Saturday afternoon. At first it did not appear to amount to much, but was soon fanned into a fierce blaze and spread over a half-mile edge, climbing the mountain to its top and reaching the big trees as it passed some of the wooded canyons.

The orchard and grain fields of Louis Salmons were burned over, but the house was saved. No other property is known to have been burned. Rangers at work in the fire district are John Simmons, district manager; Arlie Bergman, ranger on Palomar; Ranger Strong, of Palomar; Ranger M.V. Leonard, of Escondido; Ranger Phil Angel, of Palomar, and his brother, Ranger Newt Angel, of Mesa Grande; Ranger Jones, of Ramona, and many

volunteers. In all, between thirty and thirty-five men were busy fighting the fire Sunday night.

The flames were about under control by midnight Sunday, but on Monday morning, when an east wind blew for three hours, they broke out afresh. Ranger Leonard, of Escondido, had returned home, but he went out again with four additional men Monday afternoon to begin work at night. Most of the fighting is done at night, for very little can be accomplished in the daytime when the sun is hot and the wind is usually blowing. Supervisor Sloane says that it is his opinion that very little timber has been burned and very little damage done, except to Mr. Salmons, as stated above. He believes the fire will be held in check without much damage, unless a hard east wind should come. ...

On September 18, 1917, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported on the status of the Palomar fire, a nearby fire on Pine mountain, and a new fire by Lake Elsinore [28]:

BIG FOREST FIRE CONQUERED BY HARD WORK

Palomar Mountain Country Believed to be Out of Further Danger; Ranches Lost Much Property

The forest fire which has been sweeping Palomar mountain and adjacent territory for the last three days is practically extinguished, according to late advices from Forest Supervisor N.H. Sloan at government headquarters in Escondido. The smoldering area is being closely guarded to prevent a repetition of the conflagration caused last night by a treacherous east wind which fanned the dying flames into new life, causing runners of fire to eat up the canons and devastate a still greater stretch of timber and brush. Before the already exhausted fire crews could organize an effective counter attack on the newly wind-whipped blaze, a valuable portion of the ranch of Louis Salmons, near Palomar, was ruined. About two acres of his apple orchard and most of his hay fields were left in embers, causing a loss of about \$5000.

The Pine mountain fire is still sending up monster puffs of dense black smoke Rangers and crews from every station within 20 miles of the fires are persistently attacking the different blazes with wet sacks, hoes, shovels, and back-fire. A small but persistent blaze has broken out near Elsinore about 18 miles west of the inland highway to Los Angeles. It is rumored that these numerous fires are of incendiary origin, being the act of a group of alien enemies against the government in an attempt to curtail the water supply and cause serious and damaging floods during the approaching rainy season.

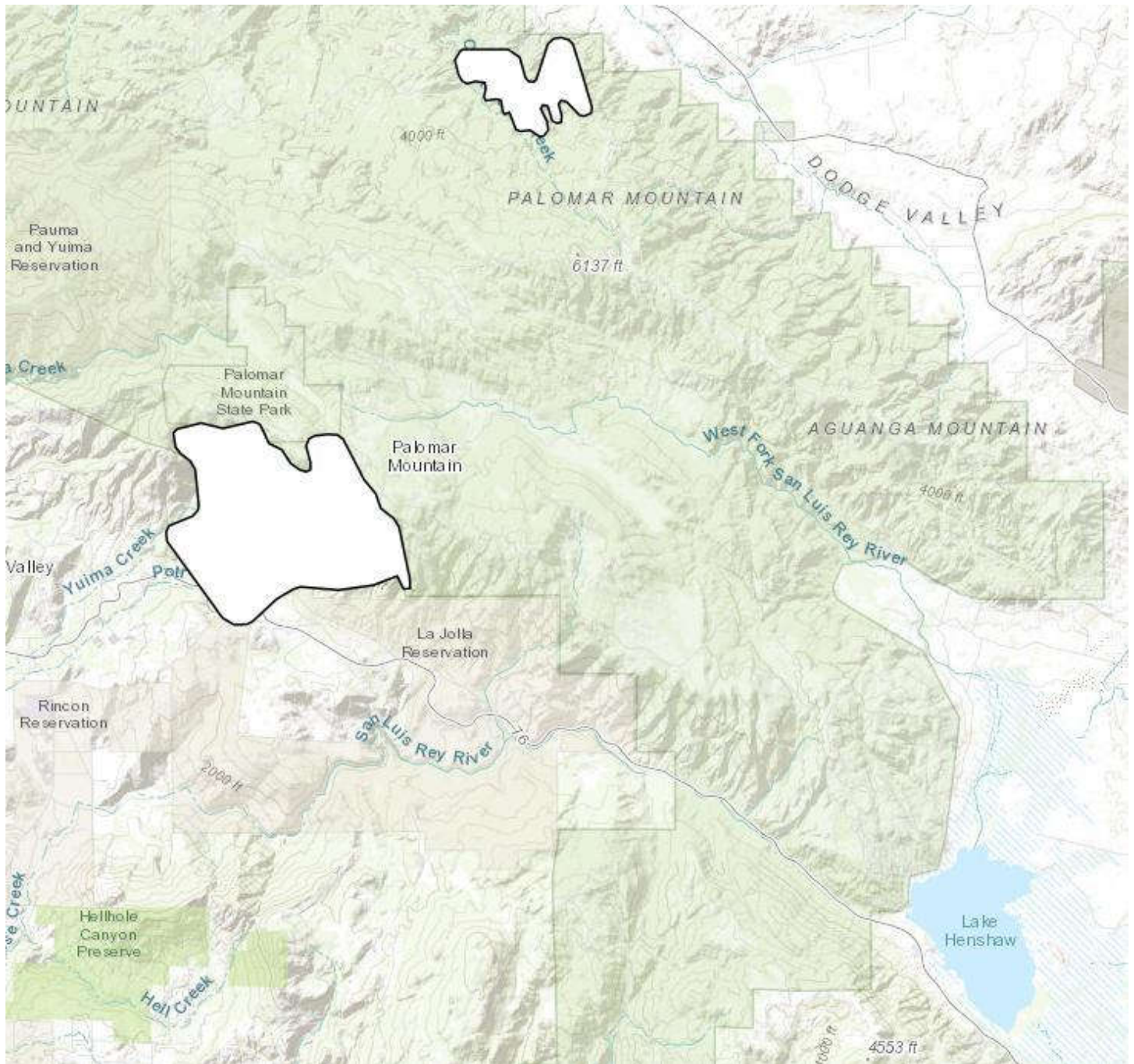
On September 19, 1917, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported on Palomar news, and articulated the damage to Louis Salmons property [57]:

... badly scorching Louis Salmons' apple orchard, burning his wheat crop, which was headed and piled in small stacks in the field, and destroying the grass on most of his grazing land. All his buildings were saved. ...

On September 19, 1917, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported on the status of various fires, including Palomar [29]:

... The Palomar fire is reported fully extinguished, so that the fire fighters are now divided between Pine mountain and Elsinore fires. ... An estimate of the ground burned over in the Palomar fire was given as 1600 acres. ...

1924 FIRES



1924 Palomar fires on the WIFIRE map [3]

On October 2, 1924, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported on the Palomar fire at left center in the 1924 WIFIRE map above [58]:

FIRE IN BRUSH OF SILVERCREST

**FLAMES SPREAD OVER WEST END OF PALOMAR MOUNTAIN
AND CONTINUE TO THREATEN BIG TREES**

Palomar mountain continues to be one of the brush fire centers of the country and the flames were still taking brush and some trees in the canyons of the west end of the mountain. ... The fire on Palomar spread over the brush near Silvercrest Wednesday night and, under a change of wind, started northwest across the top of the mountain, at the west end. About thirty men were taken out from the Escondido country Wednesday evening to fight the flames.

On October 3, 1924, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported [59]:

BRUSH FIRES UNDER CONTROL

BIG BLAZE AT DESCANSO IS OUT AND PALOMAR FIRE NOW OUT OF DANGER OF FURTHER DAMAGE

The brush fire situation in the county was much improved Friday, following the big fog of Thursday night. The fire at Descanso was reported entirely out Friday morning and the Palomar fire under control. W.S. Clark, store keeper at Rincon, was here Friday afternoon and stated that the Palomar fire was under control, without further danger to the big trees. Compared with the total acreage of the big trees and various kinds of evergreen trees on the mountain, only a small acreage was burned over, he said. The fire fighters on Palomar are under the direction of his son, Ranger W.R. Clark. Forty men came out from San Diego Thursday night, headed for Palomar to help fight the fire. They were in two trucks and one of the cars broke down at Lake Hodges. A committee of Escondido citizens ... went to the fighters. They were taken on to Palomar in the truck of Harold Boyle the same evening.

On October 4, 1924, the San Diego Union reported [24]:

PALOMAR FIRE STILL RAGES BUT IS NOW UNDER CONTROL

Blaze Which Has Burned Over 2500 Acres, Gains Slightly on East but Is Held in Check on South and West; Fear West Wind Driving Flames Toward Henshaw Dam

The forest fire on Palomar mountain, after having burned over more than 2300 acres, still was raging last night, but under control of forest rangers and 500 civilians who have been fighting the blaze for several days. This was the word received from Palomar mountain last night. The fire Thursday night, gained a little ground on the east, but was held in check by the fire fighters on the south and west sides, it was stated at Pala. Should a west wind spring

up, it was said, the fire is apt to get out of control and sweep toward Henshaw dam, and it is this possibility that the rangers fear. The flames are easily discernible at Cuyamaca peak, about 40 miles away, and at Temecula, last night, but were invisible at Escondido.

The fire last night was raging fiercely along the old mail trail, about two and a half miles southeast of Nellie. The fire also was reported burning on the edge of Doane valley. W.S. Clark, who went from Palomar mountain to Escondido, reported that the rangers and firefighters had the situation well in hand and unless a wind should come up, the fire would burn itself out within a couple of days. So far, according to word received yesterday from S.A. Boulden, supervisor of the Cleveland national forest, no private property has been damaged, although a wind would place the Wallace cabin sites in the path of the flames. ... The Palomar fire, it is said, has covered a district between 12 and 14 miles long and seven to eight miles wide. Three fire-fighting camps have been established and a Red Cross outfit has been located near Palomar lodge to give medical aid to the fire-fighters. ... No charges will be filed against the arrested men who volunteered to fight the fire at Palomar, it was announced yesterday. They were given an opportunity to volunteer, it is said, and without exception did so. On completion of duty at the fire all charges will be dismissed.

The old mail trail was the Trujillo Road, a steep road built in 1891 which came up Palomar on the south from Cuca; it was replaced by County Highway S6. The Wallace cabin sites are the Crestline cabins around the Lodge.

On October 6, 1924, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported [23]:

FIRE SITUATION UNDER CONTROL

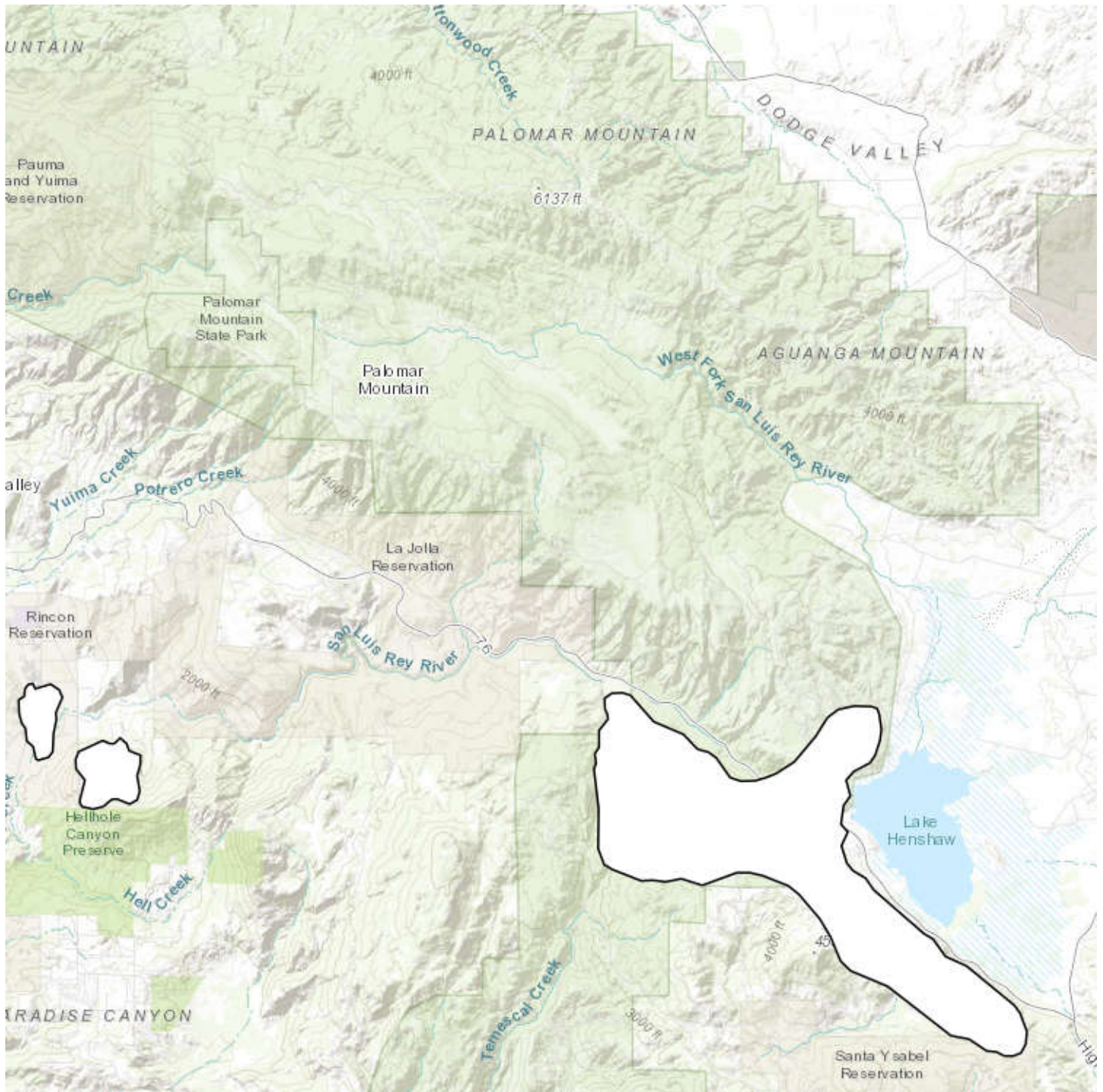
ABOUT SIX SQUARE MILES BURNED OVER IN PALOMAR FIRE – SMALL AMOUNT OF TIMBER DESTROYED

With the La Posta, Descanso and Deer park fires out, and the fire at Palomar under control, the fire situation in the Cleveland national forest reserve was much better Sunday night, rangers declared, than at any other time this week. A fog, drifting over the hills early Sunday morning, lent encouragement to the authorities. At Palomar, according to Milton Bailey, owner of the Palomar resort, the fire is under control, although about 150 men, some on horseback, are patrolling the burned-over area night and day to prevent the blaze from breaking out again. The area burned over, Bailey said, was only about six square miles and the fire fighters managed to check the blaze in time to save practically all of the timber. The fire started at the

foot of the mountain, north of the Rincon store. From there it spread to Bougher point, then followed the west grade to the edge of the property of Tuckers Country club. The eastern boundary of the fire, he said, was along the mail carrier's trail. Nobody was injured, although several men had narrow escapes when the fire jumped behind them, forcing them to run for their lives. The few trees that were destroyed, Bailey said, were in the section of the mountain seldom visited by tourists.

Tuckers Country Club was previously named the Hotel Palomar and was located at Silvercrest. The mail carrier's trail was the Trujillo Road, a steep road built in 1891 coming up Palomar on the south from Cuca; it was replaced by County Highway S6.

1925 Fire



1925 Palomar fire on the WIFIRE map [3]

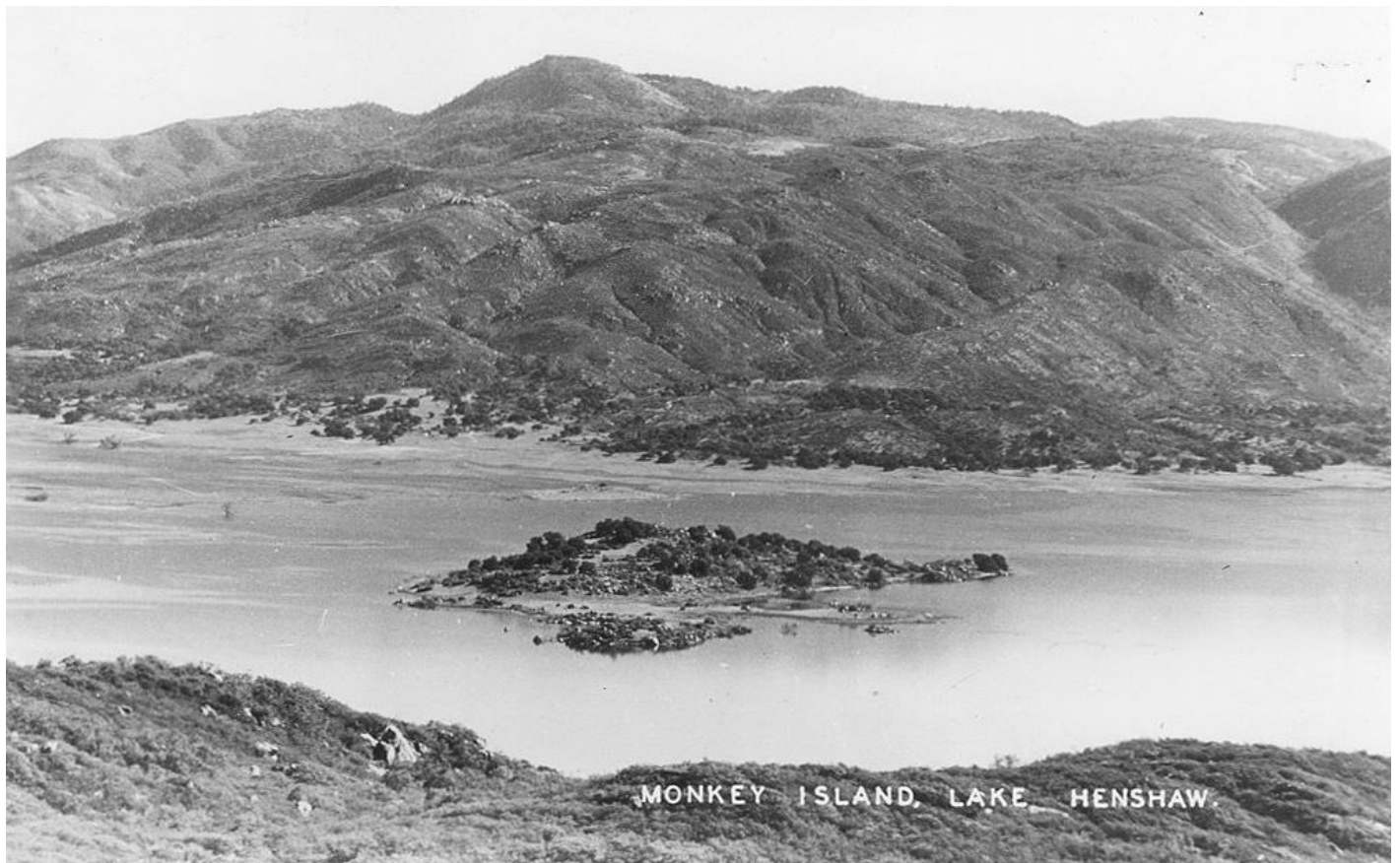
On August 24, 1925 the San Diego Union reported [43]:

300 MEN FIGHT PALOMAR FIRE

FIERCE BLAZE BELIEVED CONQUERED AS IT LICKS AT CLEVELAND RESERVE

Raging Flames, From 150 to 200 Feet in Height, Sweep Across Southeastern Side of Back Country Mountain; Conflagration, Started Thursday, Gains New Headway; Power Lines to Valley Damaged; Many Deer Burned

Eating into the tall timber of the Cleveland reserve with a fierceness which for a time defeated the efforts of 300 men, and which gave, during the afternoon, the terrific spectacle of a solid sheet of lurid flame 150 or 200 feet high and a full mile in length, the most destructive forest fire of the season, fanned by a strong west wind, yesterday swept across the southeastern end of Palomar mountain and was burning steadily last night south of the San Luis Rey river and on the north side of Mesa Grande mountain. Saturday night the fire, which started Thursday, was believed to be under control. One hundred and fifty men had fought it throughout the day, and it seemed that an effective check had been placed upon it. There was, however, the fear that the high winds which have been blowing across the country in the neighborhood of the Henshaw reservoir would give the blaze a new start, and this fear was materialized early Sunday morning.



Undated postcard showing the east slope of Palomar Mountain that burned in the 1925 fire

Carried by a steady and strong sweep of air, the blaze was borne across the San Luis Rey river at two distinct points, and then began an apparently uncontrollable march up the slopes of Palomar mountain. It wiped out the

brush and timber on the southeastern edge of the mountain, and then cut its way straight toward the spillway of the dam. With the exception of the power lines of the Sierra Power & Telephone company, running between Del Mar and Brawley, no damage to property was reported, with the exception of the destruction of timber. No lives were endangered nor were injuries reported.



Aftermath of the August 1925 fire on the east end of Palomar Mountain.
February 1926 photo looking towards Lake Henshaw from Monkey Hill Road (east grade) on Palomar
Woodbridge Metcalf photo, UCB Bancroft Library

According to reports last night, the flames swept completely around houses, leaving them untouched, while it destroyed everything else in the vicinity. The case was different with the wild life in the brush and timber. Many bodies of deer were found by the fire fighters yesterday, and from the front of the blaze numberless deer, foxes, rabbits and other denizens of the forest fled in panic, their singed coats in many instances testifying to the rapidity of the march of the blaze. When the blaze broke out with a new fierceness yesterday morning, a hurried call for reinforcements to the crews of fire fighters was sent broadcast and more than 100 men were rushed to the blaze, the greater number coming from Oceanside. With other reinforcements, the total number of fighters contending with the flames yesterday was in the neighborhood of 300, and all these were on the job last night.

The last report from the scene of the fire, received by The Union at midnight, indicated that the blaze was apparently under control, the victory

having been gained by four miles of successful back-firing. The situation, however, was still a serious one, and the possibility of another wind sending the flames off on a wilder attack on the timber was a matter of real concern to the tired fighters. ... The area burned over by the fire was estimated last night at about 6000 acres...

On August 25, 1925 the San Diego Union reported ^[44]:

RANGERS CONQUER FLAMES AT PALOMAR MOUNTAIN

Blaze Practically Extinguished After 6000 Acres of Back Country Is Burned Over in Most Serious Conflagration In Years; Pump Rushed to Scene to Battle Fire

The forest fire which has raged in the Palomar mountain and Henshaw dam district for three days, endangering the lives of scores of men, threatening resort cottages, and doing thousands of dollars damage to grazing lands and watersheds, is practically extinguished, according to word from the fire line late last night. By backfiring, squads of men under direction of forest rangers succeeded in circling the flaming area and it now is just a matter of letting the fire burn itself out. It was expected that the last embers would be extinguished before noon today. The blaze was the most serious forest fire to break out in San Diego county in several years, forest officials said, and has burned over more than 6000 acres of land. ... Three hundred men were put to fighting the Palomar blaze, which was sweeping the east slope of the mountain and down along the San Luis Rey river Sunday night. Fearing that they would not be able to control the fire, forest officials sent to Santa Barbara for a big pressure pump used to fight forest fires. This pump was put into operation yesterday afternoon, drawing its water from the San Luis Rey river. It was especially valuable in extinguishing flaming patches within its radius, fire-fighters said. The men fighting the flames were being released by the score last night. Forest Supervisor J.E. Elliott ... was enthusiastic in his praise of the men who helped him combat the flames, many of them fighting without sleep or rest for more than 24 hours at a time. Most of the recruits were ranchers and Indians from the Pala reservation. "Why don't you make some of those tourists fight," the rancher stationed at Palomar lodge was asked by a woman autoist Sunday. "Why, they're not much good after the first couple of house," he replied. "They just wear themselves out, get trapped by the fire and it takes half a dozen good men, ones we need badly to fight the fire, to save them from being burned up." Tourists returning from Palomar yesterday were ordered to use the west grade, as the one on the east side was directly in the line of fire. ... The blaze crossed the San Luis Rey river at two points yesterday, and it was only by the hardest kind of work on

the part of the fire-fighting forces that the wall of flames was kept from mounting the steep slopes of Palomar and laying waste to valuable timber. So far, property damage, with the exception of a few acres of small timber and the power lines of the Sierra Power and Telephone company, has not been great. No human lives were lost, although rangers reported finding the burned bodies of many wild animals, including deer, foxes and coyotes.



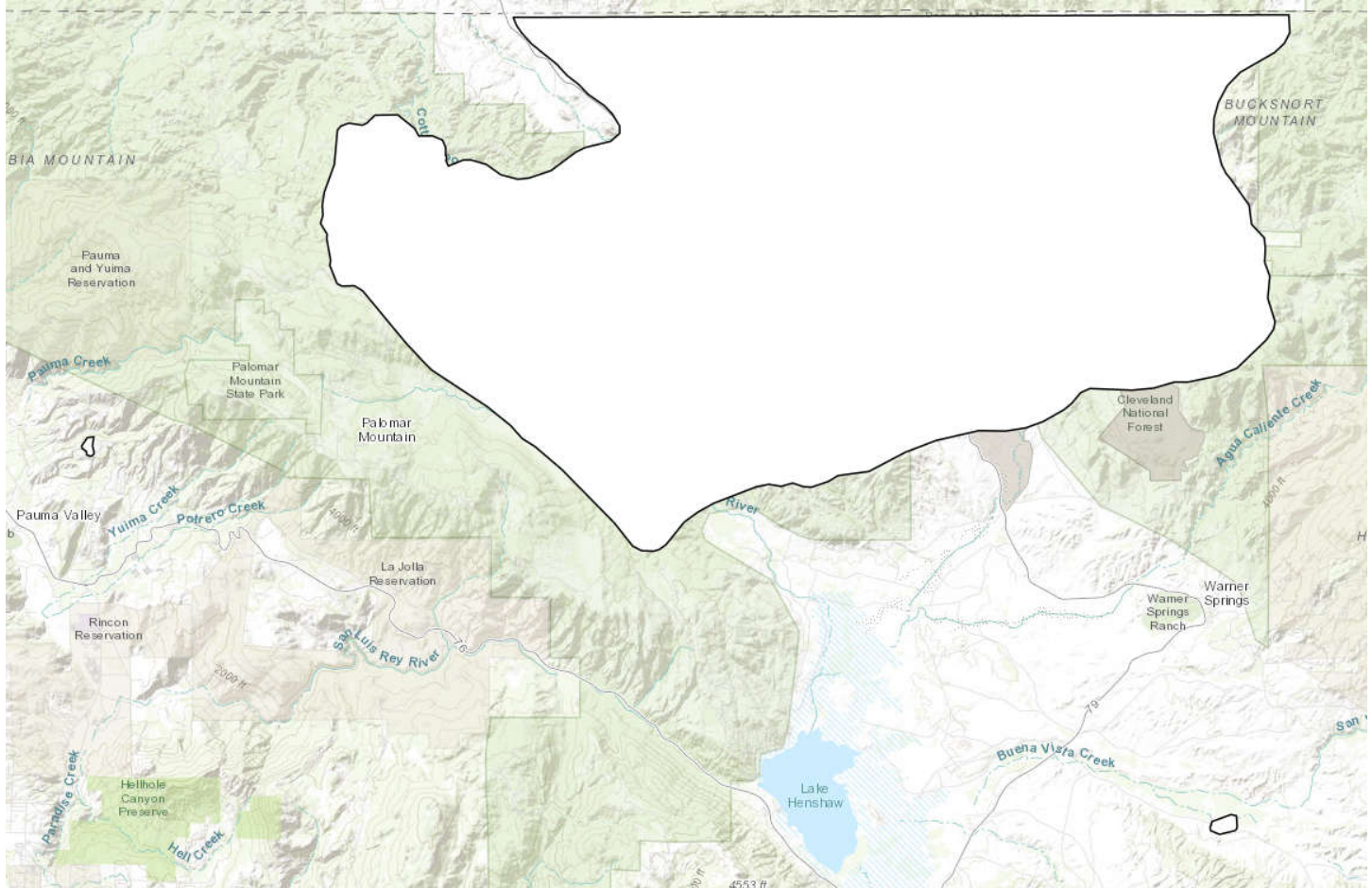
Aftermath of the August 1925 fire on the east end of Palomar Mountain.
February 1926 view of Palomar above Lake Henshaw along Monkey Hill road (east grade)
background unburned, foreground burned by fire
Woodbridge Metcalf photo, UCB Bancroft Library

On August 26, 1925 the San Diego Evening Tribune reported [45]:

PALOMAR FIRE NOW UNDER CONTROL

... the season's largest fire, that in the Palomar mountain and Henshaw dam region, is completely under control... A force of 50 men continued to patrol the area of the 6000-acre blaze near Henshaw dam today, the fire being reported as smoldering in logs and trees on the southeastern slope of Palomar mountain and in the vicinity of the dam. A brief thunder shower, which passed over a portion of the area late yesterday, aided in the work of putting the fire under control. It was expected that the fires would be out entirely today.

1928 Beauty Peak Fire



1928 Beauty Peak Fire on the WIFIRE map ^[3]

extent of fire north of the Riverside County line towards the fire's origin
at Beauty Peak (northeast of Oak Grove) is not mapped

In 2005, Robert W. Cermak wrote in *Fire in the Forest: A History of Forest Fire Control on the National Forests in California, 1898-1956* ^[25]:

One of the largest fires on record in California began on September 18, 1928, in Riverside County as two fires, one in Lewis Valley, the other near Tule Peak. They burned together on the 29th and crossed into San Diego County near Beauty Peak. At this time the fires were miles outside the forest, and a west wind was driving the fires toward the desert. Forest officers watched but were not especially worried. The morning of September 20th the fire poured over the south slopes of Beauty Peak headed for Chihuahua Valley, and Supervisor J.E. Elliott of the Cleveland became alarmed. He ordered men from the Palomar District of the Cleveland to attack the fire. About 5:00 p.m. that day a Santa Ana wind, blowing from the north, struck the fire and carried it on a fifteen-mile-wide front toward Palomar Mountain and the Cleveland Forest. By 10:00 a.m. the next morning, the fire had traveled ten miles and was entering Warner Valley. Meanwhile the same fire had entered the San Bernardino Forest, where it

consumed brush and timber on 19,000 acres within the forest. This fire, called the Beauty Peak Fire in the Cleveland and the Wilson Creek Fire in the San Bernardino, burned an enormous total of 166,000 acres. Fifty thousand acres burned within the two national forests.



1928 Beauty Peak fire on Palomar

Los Angeles Herald Examiner photo, 29 September 1928

On September 21, 1928, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported [30]:

BLAZE SWEEPS ON WARNER'S HOT SPRINGS

MAY DESERT RESORT IF FIRE NOT CHECKED

With Warner's Hot Springs and Palomar mountain directly in the path of the serious fire sweeping northern San Diego county, a crew of nearly 400 men today battled desperately to check the onrushing flames, which were fanned by high winds. At noon, the flames raged on a 15-mile front and were within

three miles of Warner Hot Springs, threatening Palomar mountain at a point near Aguanga, word here states. Residents and visitors at Warner's Hot Springs were preparing to desert the resort, it is reported.

Starting early Tuesday morning at Beauty peak, located northeast of the Oak Grove ranger station and a mile north of the San Diego-Riverside county line, the fire burned for two days, with little effort being made to check the blaze. Government rangers kept watch on the fire and preparations were made to combat it in event it crossed the county line. Hopes were held that the fire would burn itself out in desert country, since it was being forced towards the desert by a strong west wind. A wind shift to the east and north yesterday sent the flames into San Diego county, and Elliot and Luther Gordon, chief county fire warden at La Mesa, left at noon to direct the efforts of a small crew which had been assembled to attempt to check the blaze. Clouds of smoke from the fire rolled over San Diego yesterday afternoon, and fear was felt for a time by residents in the vicinity of Lakeside and Ramona that the fire was threatening the country in those districts, word here states. ... With two houses destroyed and more than 30,000 acres of valuable timber and brush lands laid bare, the serious fire which swept across the San Diego-Riverside county line yesterday was burning early today within two miles of Palomar mountain and threatening to spread to the forested slopes on the north and east sides, reports here state.

No lives have been lost so far, it is reported, although information here states that a woman and four men were surrounded for a time last night by the fire. Rescue parties directed by J.E. Elliott, supervisor, Cleveland national forest, succeeded in rescuing the quintet, it is reported. Emergency crews were being rushed to the fire zone today. Indians and road crew members were being enlisted from the El Cajon district by Frank Jennings, constable, and busses were carrying large numbers of men from San Diego.

A stiff northeast wind last night swept the fire across the east end of Chihuahua valley towards Palomar mountain. At one time, the flames advanced nearly three miles within an hour and a half, according to Robert Sager, government lookout on Hot Springs mountain. Sager said that at dawn today a wind of about 12 miles prevailed, coming from the east and north. Palomar mountain lies directly in the path of the fire, which at 9 a.m. was burning within two miles of the foot of the peak, Sager said. Between the fire and the mountain lies fairly level land. Hot Springs mountain will be in danger should a wind shift to the west occur, Sager said. At 9 a.m., Warner's Hot Springs and the Oak Grove ranger station were not threatened. The houses destroyed last night were on a ranch in the east end of Chihuahua valley. Sager said that it was feared that other ranch houses also had been burned, but that definite information concerning their condition

had not been learned today. Elliott flew over the burning area today in a plane ordered sent to him from Los Angeles, Sager said. Reports from Elliott's office here today state that the fire raged over a 15-mile front last night. ...

On September 22, 1928, the San Diego Union reported [31]:

FLAMES RAGING TOWARD PALOMAR; 13 ARE BURNED IN BRUSH BLAZES

WARNER'S SAVED BY WIND SHIFT

Four Separate Fires in This County Fought by Many on Curving Line of
Battle Under Reddened Skies

Palomar, sentinel of northern San Diego county, was besieged by fire that stretched in a hundred scattered infernos from the mountain eastward 12 miles to Ward valley, while due south flames raged around Witch creek and still farther south two uncontrolled blazes swept the countryside in the vicinity of Potrero and the Tecate mountain. Vastest of the four raging cauldrons of flame was the Palomar blaze, which under the fanning of an east wind was sweeping the north flank of the mountain and marching in red fury on the Oak Grove settlement, 65 miles northeast of San Diego.

Battered back by the scorching breach of the advancing flames which advanced under towering plumes of smoke fire-fighters prayed for the wind to die down so backfiring could be used. With the wind as it is, backfiring on a scale large enough to halt the onrushing wall of flame was considered too dangerous. Warner Springs, noted mountain resort, was in the path of the flames for a time, but, on reaching the grass line about three miles from the resort, the fire demon turned on its heels and swept to the northwest. Covering Aguanga mountain, a finger-line spur running eastward from Palomar, the flames raged to the junction of Aguanga and Palomar and then along the north flank of the noted county peak. Abandonment of all cottages in the path of the flames was advised by the fire-fighters. There are few settlements in front of the flames except along the Oak Grove road.

All day yesterday reinforcements for the fire-fighters, poured from San Diego and county points to concentrate at Warner Springs and Oak Grove. Last night concentration of fire-fighters on the top of Palomar was ordered to save the heavily timbered shoulders of the grand old mountain from the fire. At the time the fire had not yet reached the heavily wooded part of the Palomar slope, but a continuation of the east wind would spell ruin for the

trees, it was asserted. Forest Supervisor J.E. Elliott and County Fire Warden Luther Gordon were in command of the rear guard action that was being fought against the flames. Additional men and equipment were ordered throughout the day and far into the night trucks rolled into the hills carrying supplies for the fighters. Deputy sheriffs and county traffic men, aided by the American Legion, sought to fill the requisitions for men and more than 400 were dispatched to the Palomar fire during the day.

The fire, which started Tuesday in Riverside county, first appeared to be swinging toward the desert, but a change of wind swept it southward over Beauty Peak, across the San Diego county line and into the Chihuahua valley. Sweeping southward along a front that at times seemed to be almost 20 miles across, the flames stretched toward Warner Hot Springs and invaded a corner of the famous Warner ranch. The resort was not endangered, however, as the fire swung westward, north of Lake Henshaw, devastated Aguanga mountain and reached Palomar. In its course the fire described a gigantic J fifteen miles long and is now on the upcurve, burning from the smoking path left by the downward sweep to the lower tip of the J.

Up to last night no heavy timber had been burned, the land consisting mostly of heavy brush covered terrain. At last reports the flames were burning in territory where there have been no fires for years and the progress of the fire has been augmented.

Caretaker Kitchin of Lake Henshaw gave a graphic description of the fire last night following an inspection of the flames. "There are 90 to 100 fires stretching from the head of Ward canyon to Palomar," he said. "It looks like an inferno and everything seems to be a fire. At the lake it is calm but the lookout told me there is an east wind of from 12 to 15 miles an hour at the fire. The nearest fire is four miles from Henshaw. The humidity is very low and has been running from 7 to 13 during the day."

W.D. McFadden at Warner's Hot Springs, east of Henshaw declared that the sight was a terribly beautiful one. "It's worth coming miles to see," he said. "The fire appears to be on a front of about 12 miles, with one wing resting on Palomar mountain. The Warner resort had not been endangered as the fire stopped at the grass line several miles distant. The nearest fire is now about four and a half miles from Warner's. It is working over toward Oak Grove. I understand there are some families on the Oak Grove road but they probably have been warned of their danger."

Estimates of the acreage burned by the Palomar fire vary and range from 20,000 to 40,000 acres, including thousands of acres in Lake Henshaw's watershed. ...

On September 23, 1928, the San Diego Union reported [32]:

100 MEN FIGHT BLAZES IN SAN DIEGO; DEATH TOLL FOUR IN NORTHERN FIRES

FLAMES RAGE ON SIX FRONTS IN COUNTY AS REINFORCEMENTS ARE RUSHED TO BATTLE LINES

Desperate Offensive Mustered to Combat Fires in Palomar, Witch Creek, Potrero-Dulzura, Santa Ysabel, Valley Center and Mesa Grande Sectors; 200 Marines Join in Effort to Stem Red Tide; 145,000 Acres Burned

... Six forest fires, three of major importance, snarled like ravening demons across the back country yesterday, blackened tens of thousands of acres with their fiery breath, burned one ranch house and outbuildings at other ranches and at midnight was stubbornly resisting the efforts of more than 1000 fire fighters. Encouraged by a lull in the wind fire fighters mobilized during the night for a desperate offensive against the flames in an effort to subdue them before the morning winds again send the red monster galloping. Trucks rumbled out from San Diego all day yesterday and last night, while ashes from the burning mountains floated down over the city and on decks of ships far at sea. Conservative estimates indicated that more than 100,000 acres had been burned over by the Palomar fire, at least 25,000 in the Witch Creek fire, 10,000 to 20,000 in the Potrero-Dulzura flames and smaller acreages in blazes near Santa Ysabel, Valley Center and Mesa Grande. A fire at Rainbow was extinguished after burning over 20 acres. ...

Raging through heavy brush at speeds faster than a man can run the Palomar fire swung along the north slope surrounding the Oak Grove ranger station and last night had separated into three separate fires, one menacing the fine timber stand near Agua Tibia, or Morgan Hill, and the other two apparently over in Riverside county near where the fire first started. By backfiring the flame fighters at Oak Grove succeeded in saving the ranger station and settlement, although all non-combatants were sent out of the area as the fire rushed on. ... When the Palomar fire raced along the north slope of the famous area it tore through brush that has not been burned over for 40 years at least, Jim Kitchin of Lake Henshaw reported. He said the progress of the flames was almost unbelievably rapid, due to the east wind which was almost blowing a gale. At Lake Henshaw the water was washing against the concrete dam facing for 15 feet above the lake level, he said. The brush through which the fire burned was so thick that it was almost impossible for anything but fire to pass through. Kitchin said he thought that little of the valuable timber of the Palomar region had been burned as the fire was mainly on the north slope. ...

On September 24, 1928, the San Diego Union reported [33]:

BATTLE FLAMES IN THREE COUNTY AREAS

1450 MEN FIGHT TO HALT FIRES

Hope Seen in Favorable Winds to Control Blazes in Palomar, Cuyamaca and Potrero Areas by Tonight.

Aided considerably by favorable winds which materially retarded the rapid advance of flames in the Palomar, Cuyamaca and Potrero fire areas in San Diego county, fire fighters yesterday were able to check in a degree the steady march of destruction that had characterized its progress during the last three days. About 1450 men are on the fire lines. The men battling the fires are better organized this morning and the programs of attack are well defined, according to J.E. Elliott, supervisor of the Cleveland national forest, who was optimistic last night about the situation generally. "If the wind continues to be with us today," Elliott said, "we hope to have all of the fires under control by tonight. Barring strong west winds I think it will be all over but the shouting."

Two fires last night were giving fire officials the most worry. The Palomar blaze started again on the southwest side of Aguanga mountain yesterday morning, burning toward the northwest throughout the day. At 3 o'clock yesterday a fire of immense proportions was reported burning on the north end of the Palomar mountain proper. With a northeast wind blowing yesterday the Palomar blaze was kept from going over the mountain into the heavily wooded districts and into territory containing valuable resort property. Elliott said last night that the present plan of the fighters is to close a three-mile gap between the fires on Palomar and Aguanga mountains, thereby bringing together two flanks which will burn themselves out. This can be accomplished, Elliott thought, barring a dreaded west wind which would whip the flames into thousands of acres of unburned territory to the east. ... The Palomar fire alone has laid barren more than 100,000 acres ... About 650 men were on the Palomar fire line last night ...

On September 24, 1928, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported on several San Diego County fires, and said this about the Palomar fire [60]:

... Fred and David Mendenhall returned Sunday evening from Palomar mountain, where they went Saturday with their father, Charles Mendenhall, who remained on the mountain to help look after the Mendenhall interests. These boys report that the fire was still burning Sunday afternoon on the

north slope of Palomar, but that the fire on top of the mountain was completely extinguished Sunday afternoon. The fire on top had burned over High Point on Palomar but had not damaged big trees to any extent, they reported. There really has been slight damage to big trees on Palomar, according to these two boys. The fire was burning Sunday afternoon into Barker valley, on the north side of Palomar, between three and four miles from Mendenhall valley.

On September 25, 1928, the San Diego Union reported [34]:

2000 MEN CONQUERING FIRES

TWO BLAZES REMAIN ON LONG FRONT

Red Demon Lays Waste 200,000 Acres of S.D. Back Country; Marines, Sailors and Scouts on Line

With 200,000 acres in smoking ruin behind it the fire demon began to unclasp its red fingers from the mountain region yesterday and almost 2000 men last night were busy in an effort to pry completely loose the flaming monster's grip on the two remaining blazes in San Diego county. ... Forest Supervisor J.E. Elliott expressed belief that the Palomar and Boulder creek flames would be under control this morning. "Just arrived at Oak Grove from plane reconnaissance of Boulder Creek and Palomar fires," Elliott messaged The Union last night. "... The Palomar fire looks good with the exception of two gaps, one south of High Point, where the fire is backing into Colb valley. Another hot blaze is northwest of French valley near top of ridge where the fire is in old timber burn. I believe both places will be made safe by morning." ... One hundred additional marines left San Diego yesterday afternoon for Palomar, swelling the number of service men on fire duty to more than 500. ... During the day the fire fighters camp in the Palomar area was moved from Mendenhall to French valley to facilitate operations against the blaze. One hundred men, recruited in Oceanside and Vista, were sent to the French valley camp for assignment. ... Fire authorities were unanimous last night in expressing the belief that neither the Palomar cabin area nor the settlements in the Cuyamacas were in danger. ...

On September 26, 1928, the San Diego Union reported [35]:

PALOMAR FIRE GETS NEW START

Threatens Resort, Burns Fine Timber and Rages Out of Bounds on 10-Mile Front; Recruit 325 More Men

Overwhelming its human opponents with towering walls of flame the Palomar fire ran wild yesterday afternoon, burned more valuable timber than had been destroyed in the entire conflagration to date, menaced all cottages and resorts on Palomar and last night was raging completely out of control on a front of more than 10 miles. The lurid scimitar of flame stretched from High Point southeastward through Barker valley, Mendenhall valley, Dyche valley and Will Valley, thence northward toward the little Rincon or Warner valley. More than 300 additional men, some from the Boulder creek fire, were thrown against the Palomar conflagration and plans for backfiring during the night were being made by Forest Supervisor J.E. Elliott.

When day broke yesterday there was no indication of the variable winds that were to whip the seemingly dying Palomar fire to Gargantuan proportions. Until noon good progress was made against the flames when suddenly they whipped toward the Palomar settlements. Fighting a desperate rear guard action, the little army of workers retreated through Barker valley, back to Mendenhall valley and then to the very doorsteps of the settlements. By exerting every artifice known to experienced forest fire fighters the rangers directed the efforts of their crews toward saving the cottages and the Palomar lodge and at last report they had been successful in preventing damage to such property. But fine timber changed to charcoal under the breath of the destroying flames when the east wind blew strongly and whipped the fire into the big trees in the Mendenhall valley. Mendenhall valley, famed as a resort center, has been four times invaded by the flames in this fire but yesterday's onslaught was the fiercest of them all. With the Boulder creek fire apparently dying down numerous men, including a group of 50 sailors, were sent to Palomar. In all 325 additional men went to the Palomar fire yesterday and last night Supervisor Elliott reported that there were more men there than at any time during the blaze. ... Sailors from the naval training station last night were operating against both the Boulder creek and the Palomar fires. Marines from the marine base are present in strong detachments at the Palomar fire. ...

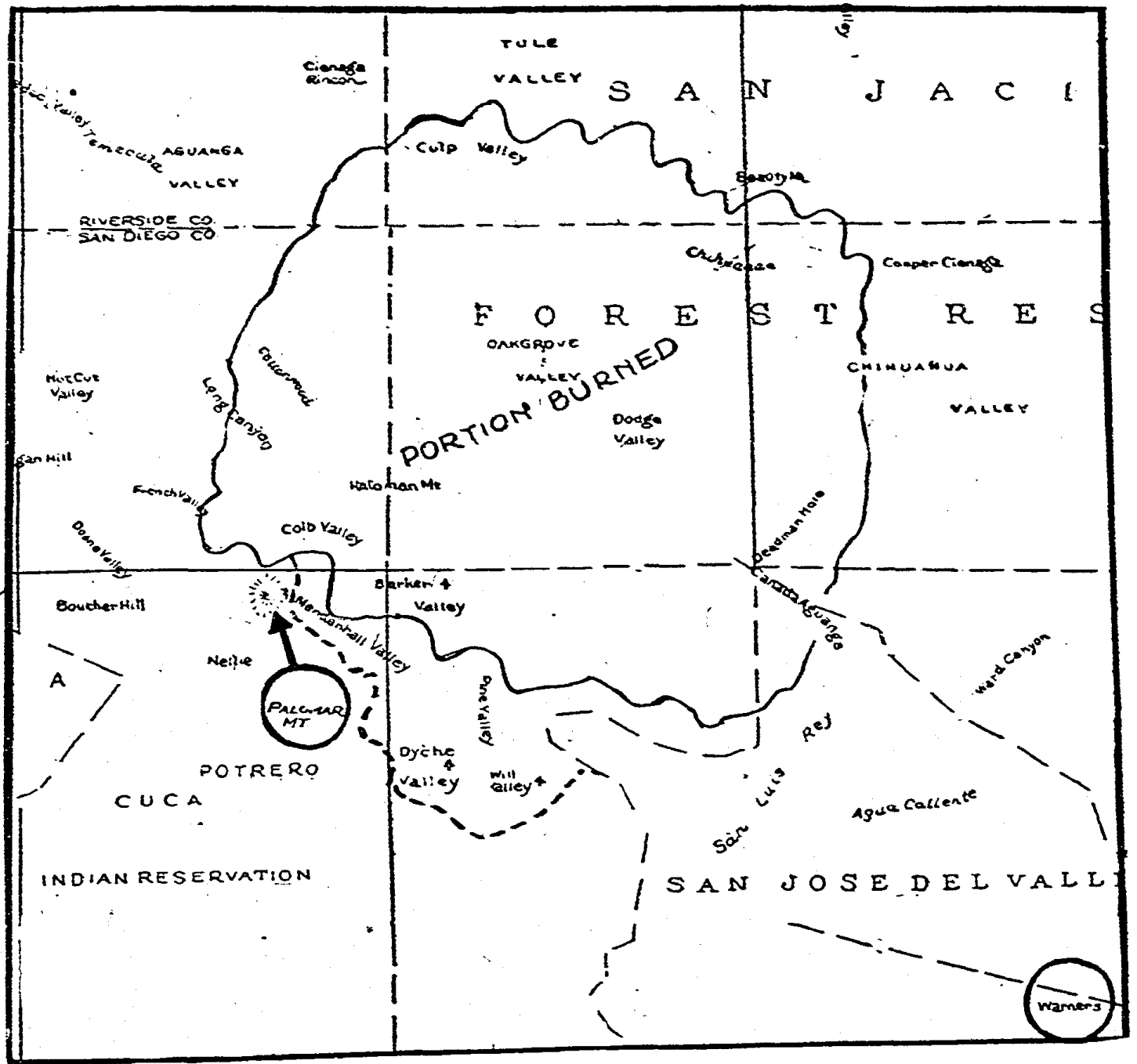
On September 27, 1928, the San Diego Union reported [36]:

FIERCE FIRE ON PALOMAR CONTROLLED

Vigilance Maintained Along 10-Mile Front by 400 Men To Protect Timber, Homes; Wind Gives Fighters Aid.

Palomar mountain with its heavy stand of mature timber and many cottages and summer homes was reported last night out of danger from the persistent flames which threatened it yesterday afternoon. J.E. Elliott, supervisor of Cleveland national forest, telephoned from Warner Hot Springs last night that the huge blaze was under control but that vigilance along the 10-mile fire line in the Mendenhall, Dyche and Will valleys would be maintained unremittingly against a fresh outbreak. He said the danger zone will be patrolled today by about 100 men. Nearly 400 fighters were on active duty in this region last night when victory over the fire demon was announced. The army of weary fighters was helped yesterday by a strong west wind and high humidity, according to Robert Sager at the Hot Springs mountain lookout. He said the percentage of humidity last night was 81, and the temperature was 47.

The flames swept southeast from Mendenhall valley yesterday forenoon and gained some headway on the east lower slope of Palomar mountain before they were forced, partly by the wind and partly by the fighters, to turn south. The northern slope of Little Rincon mountain was swept by the wall of flames yesterday afternoon, but here, too, Elliott said, its progress was checked by persistent backfiring. The supervisor's plan of backfiring along the west slopes of the three valleys Tuesday night is thought to have checkmated the fire's play yesterday with the resulting victory. With the Palomar fire under control, San Diego county was free from active blazes last night. ...



[Figure legend] San Diego county's biggest forest fire in years was brought under control last night. More than 120,000 acres of fire-scarred brush and timber land devastated in the Palomar district during the last week are represented within the solid circular line on the accompanying map. The area enclosed by dotted lines shows the progress made by the flames when they took a fresh spurt in the Mendenhall, Dyche and Will valleys yesterday morning. A strong west wind greatly aided the army of fighters yesterday in saving Palomar mountain with its fine timber and scores of cottages from destruction. Nearly 1000 men have fought this blaze since it started near Beauty peak a week ago.

On September 27, 1928, the Escondido Times-Advocate reported [38]:

PALOMAR FIRE REPORTS TOO BIG

RESEMBLE THE ACCOUNT OF MARK TWAIN'S DEATH, AS MARK HIMSELF DECLARED, SAYS SAM DICKSON

"If Escondido people will take a trip up Palomar mountain they will be unable to see where the big fire, of which so much has been said, destroyed any trees, houses or other property," said Frank H. Reynolds to the Times-Advocate Thursday afternoon. "Yes," chimed in Sam Dickson, "we have just returned from an inspection of our cabins and land and the property of other Escondido people on Palomar, and as Mark Twain said about the story of his own death, the report has been greatly exaggerated."

The two Escondido men explained that a trip over the route ordinarily taked to Camp-site and other places on the wood portion of Palomar mountain would not take a person to the burned area, or even in sight of much of it. They relate that the fire was all on the "other" or north and east side of the mountain. It was at one time a mile and a half from Camp-site and two and a half miles from Bailey's camp, but that was the nearest it came to the cabin properties of most of the Escondido owners. The fire burned the heavy brush over a part of High Point on Palomar, but that is the only place where it reached the upper portion of the mountain. It did no damage there except as burning of brush is a damage.

Mr. Reynolds carried a message from Dr. Milton Bailey, to be telephoned to Mrs. Bailey in San Diego. It gives the situation in a nutshell, as follows:

"We are pretty sure the fire is safe. Tuesday night we back-fired from French valley through Mendenhall valley and down old road from Mendenhall valley to Fink's, then down Fink stream to Warner's ranch, and back over to High Point ridge, which completely circled the fire area. In the Palomar district, proper, about 30,000 acres of brush land was burned and only 300 acres of timber. No timber land burned was in sight of our part of the mountain. The back-fire Tuesday was done at the order of the Mendenhalls. No houses were burned and no deer killed."

This news will be happily received by everybody in Escondido, for much apprehension has been felt about the destruction of the beautiful trees on Palomar. The fire that has now burned off the brush will leave a bare spot which will be a protection for the mountain itself for several years. The returning Escondidans appreciate very much the work of the Mendenhalls in working out the back-fire protection and thus finally stopping the fire. They

worked under orders from the Forest Service officials, who gave them the right to do whatever they thought best. About 400 men were at work at one time. Under the new law back-fire cannot be utilized except with a permit and under extreme necessity.

Camp-site is the Crestline cabin area.

On September 28, 1928, the San Diego Union reported [37]:

ESTIMATE \$1,000,000 FIRE DAMAGE

250,000 ACRES LIE CHARRED

Prepare to Withdraw Crews in Back Country as Blazes Burn Out; Cost of Fighting Flames to Run High

Tamed after eight days of struggle the greatest fires in the history of the county were burning themselves out last night after blackening 250,000 acres and causing damage estimated upwards of \$1,000,000. Ringed within a broad belt cleared by backfires, the Palomar blaze was making its last stand by eating into "islands" of unburned brush which by some vagary of the flames had hitherto escaped destruction. "Mopping-up" crews with water laden pack trains were penetrating the burned area, putting out fires lingering in logs and chopping down burning trees that the wind might not blow sparks into unburned sections. Plans of Forest Supervisor J.E. Elliott last night called for withdrawal of the main crews from the Palomar fire this morning, although the "moppers-up" and patrol gangs will remain until the last spark is extinguished.

The Ramona-Witch creek-Boulder creek fire area is still being watched while the last patrols were withdrawn from the Potrero-Cottonwood area yesterday morning when the last spark was put out. To date the suppression cost of the fires has been somewhere between \$75,000 and \$100,000. This is the smallest item of the loss, however. One of the heavy losses came when more than 300 acres of land forested with great fir and cedar trees burned last Tuesday in the Palomar section. This land is valued at about \$1000 an acre, making this one item of about \$300,000. While it is almost impossible to estimate the intangible loss caused by destruction of protecting brush on watersheds, the fire undoubtedly did about \$700,000 worth of damage in the 250,000 acres of watershed and grazing area blackened, it was estimated yesterday. Stock owners yesterday were endeavoring to make plans for grazing their cattle, as the lands on which they had been operating have been burned over. ... "All our lines held today," Elliott telephoned The Union

from Warner's Springs last night. "We will maintain heavy patrols for several days in the timbered regions, however. Water is being brought into the burned area on pack trains and used to put out fires in logs and trees. We were worried a while today, but the wind was with us and the lines held. The smoke flareup today was well within the lines and came from one of the 'islands' that had been left unburned by the fire. These 'islands' may burn for several days. Some of these so-called 'islands' are 1000 acres in extent and were spared through some vagary of the wind. These are likely to flare up later but cannot spread. We plan to leave about 65 men along the 10-mile fire line this morning and gradually reduce the number. ..."

Discussing the damage done by the fires Elliot said ... "Then in the timbered sections the loss is great. Some people will pay from \$1000 to \$1500 for a cabin site if it has a big tree on it." The Boulder creek and Palomar fires have cost the government about \$80,000 in cash, Elliott estimated. Payrolls of fire fighters and cost of keeping the camps ran well into the thousands daily. In addition it was necessary to purchase much equipment which would not have been necessary had only one fire been burning, the supervisor declared. ...

Milton Bailey, proprietor of a resort on Palomar yesterday telephoned to Mrs. Bailey and gave a report on the method by which that fire was controlled. The blaze was circled by a backfire extending down French valley to Mendenhall, to Fink's stream, down Fink's stream to Warner's ranch, then to High Point, he said. This line was almost 15 miles long, and the work was done under directions of the Mendenhalls of Mendenhall valley, he reported. Bailey estimated that 30,000 acres on Palomar had been burned. Tens of thousands of acres were burned over before the fire reached Palomar, however. Of the land burned on Palomar, about 300 acres was in fine fir and cedar trees. No houses were burned on Palomar and no deer were reported trapped, Bailey reported. He added that the fire damage could not be seen from the resort. The Beach, Weber and McClard ranches were circled by flames on the west end of the mountain near French valley, but the houses were not injured, he declared.

Names are: William and Kenneth Beach, Gus and Marian Weber, and Ray McClard, brother Olin McClard and their parents and sister.



1928 Beauty Peak fire on Palomar U.S. Forest Service

David Charles Mendenhall wrote about the 1928 Beauty Peak fire in his memoir [6]:

In the fall of 1928 there was a great fire that destroyed all the timber on the north part of the Palomar mountain range. It was started by a man who had a place about two miles to the north, and he wanted to burn out some foxes that had holed up in a brushy area. The fire got away from him, the dry East wind caught it and away it went up the mountain slopes and burned for two or three weeks. The fire spread over a large area and grew on itself. The trees, brush, and grass were tinder dry, the heat of the fire intensified the blast of the wind, producing "fire storms" in the pocket canyons, there were no bulldozers then, and no roads in the rough area to get trucks in, so the work was done by men on foot. Teams of firefighters came from far and wide and there must have been 600 or so before it was over. Of course all

the Mendenhalls wherever located dropped whatever they were doing and came to help, also people we might have had petty differences with. When there is a fire, all grudges are forgotten. The winds were capricious, and it was said the fire traveled every direction of the compass. Papa and I went to check on a mountain man named Gus Weber, who had a place a mile or so north of what is known as French Valley. He was a ranger and lived there with his artist wife, had a few cattle and raised the most delicious strawberries. The mountain people would come and gorge on them. To protect his stuff from the fire he had dug a great big hole where he intended to bury his furniture, and let the approaching fire take his house. But he lucked out — the roaring fire came within twenty feet of his property line, suddenly changed direction and his house and belongings were saved!

At one point the crew thought they had the fire licked. They had control all around except a quarter mile strip and the wind was taking the fire another direction, the cold night reduced the intensity, so the tired men bedded down. During the night the wind shifted and next morning the fire whipped through there and went wild again, roaring up the next slope. Up to that time most of the burn had been on government owned land, but now it was headed for the ranches and homes. A ranger had been in charge of the men. By orders of the headquarters he was not allowed to set any backfires, which was the policy then. It was obvious that there was no way to stop the fire except with a backfire, so he went home to Riverside and turned over the command to George Mendenhall and Ralph Tillinghast, another mountain man. They set a backfire extending from the French Valley to Warner's Ranch -- a length of about ten miles, which finally stopped the fire, which had no place to go.

We all somehow crammed into the upper ranch house at night, and the women did their best to cook food for us as we straggled in, tired and dirty, I was too young (13) to grub brush on the fire line so I was water boy. With canteens hung on my saddle I took water to tired men camped all along the Mendenhall Valley. Some hadn't slept for two nights. The nights were freezing cold and they built fires to keep warm and that was a worry because the fire might spread in the dry grass while the men slept.

It was during the back firing that Papa almost got in trouble. When you are working a back fire against the wind you start from an open area or even just a trail and burn a narrow strip that burns back to the trail, then you go upwind for more width until you have a wide strip the wild fire can't jump across. Using the Mendenhall Valley as a start, Papa, Happy, Judge, and some others set a line to stop the flames roaring up from the Barker Canyon, which is to the north. They had to set the brush on fire, then escape up a steep and rocky trail. They got it going pretty well and all arrived back up

the trail except Papa. The smoke and heat were getting more intense and soon the cry went out, "Has anyone seen Charlie?", and soon it was panicky, "Where's Charlie?" At the last minute he emerged at full speed on his terrified horse. He later said he didn't get scorched, but the horse's tail might have been singed some.

Robert Asher wrote about the 1928 Beauty Peak fire in his *My Palomar* memoir [2]:

Barker Valley figured in one of the most spectacular fires of Palomar's recent history. It had started on Beauty Mountain in Riverside County, wandered around like an old cow for several days, then made a break for the Hot Springs Mountain east of Palomar. About this time the smoke was coming over my way and I was getting uneasy. Up to that time, I judged that the high stratum of smoke overhead was coming a long distance, but now it was getting thicker, so I went up to Baileys to get my mail and to get pointers about the fire. The latest news at Bailey's was that the fire was threatening the Hot Springs Mountain lookout station and was working southeast but was not threatening Palomar Mountain.

I was up early the next morning as was usual. The smoke was coming over thickly from the direction of Weber's and French Valley. I had pressing work on hand, but the moment breakfast was over, I hit the trail for Weber's. Gus was on duty as lookout man on Bougher Hill. Mrs. Weber was on hand, however, and assured me that the fire was nowhere on Palomar Mountain. I went down to Observation Point. The clouds of smoke lifted for a moment and I could see the Bergman Place and county roads near Aguanga. No signs of fire thereabouts, but much smoke from the hillsides beyond.

Reassured and ready to return home, I went up by the Weber tent. Mrs. Weber wanted to know why the hurry. "Work," I said. "Nonsense!" she said. "You just sit down on this log while I tell you all about it."

Before she had finished her story, the 'phone bell rang. She was back in a minute or two. "Fire has jumped road at Dead Man's Hole and is coming this way. Gus says for you to stay right here. You can go to work helping to dig a big hole to put our tent and furniture in."

And there I was, and for several days the fire raced up from Dead Man's Hole toward Hi-Point. Then down toward Aguanga, then back up hill toward Webers. Shifted toward Beach Ranch, burned through Beach Ranch to Barker Valley, Forest Service fighting with hundreds of men. Ol' Man Fire going just where he pleased. Firefighters made a stand along creek in Barker Valley. The officer in charge put men to work clearing a fire guard through

the brush some distance north of the broad brush freewash of the creek. Comes George Mendenhall, and George wanted to know "How come?" Men say orders from higher up. George snorts, "Such doings! Why not make fire break at creek?" "Orders different." George then handed out an ultimatum. "Put all your men under my direction or get out!" He got the men.

They cleared a path clear to Warner's Ranch. A line fifteen miles long, and they then started the back fires. The fire wall went roaring up toward Hi-Point. From my point of observation on the Weber Ranch, the view was simply magnificent. I could see nothing of the blaze -- it was over the hill beyond the Beach Ranch, but there was a great wall of smoke from southwest of Beach's clear to Hi-Point. A sheer perpendicular wall thousands of feet high -- clear cut and sharply defined as a thundercloud. Then the smoke boiled up at the top and billowed away to the southwest like a one-sided mushroom. As I stood watching and admiring the mighty show, with its iridescent coloring around the sun and along the north side of the smoke wall, a solitary airplane came into view from the northeast, flying close to the smoke wall and about half way up. It skirted around the wall almost touching the smoke, then disappeared over the hills to the south. Later came two more planes, but they flew wide of the smoke cliffs and in which the pilots showed their wisdom. One touch of the tip of a wing against that solid wall -- goodbye, poor little airplane!

Asher wrote about the Beauty Mountain fire in another chapter of his memoir [2]:

The Webers were still living in the big tent, before beginning work on the new house, when a fire broke out on Beauty Mountain in Riverside County northeast of the Weber Ranch. For some days and nights it pursued a very erratic course, with many fire fighters endeavoring to control it, but not threatening Palomar Mountain. My place below Doane Valley is a sort of a hole in the ground, but one morning the smoke clouds were boiling up in a most alarming fashion toward the east. I went up to the post office, but was told that the fire was not on the mountain. At daylight next morning, however, there were great bellows of smoke going up toward French Valley and the Weber Ranch, so up to French Valley I went. Solid pall of smoke, so I went on down to the Weber's. Mrs. Weber reported "no fire on the mountain yet." But I was not satisfied, so I went on down to "The Lookout Point." Arrived there, I found that I could see out under the shifting smoke cloud to the road between Oak Grove and Aguanga. There was no evidence of fire on the Palomar side of the road, but the hills beyond were still sending up spirals of smoke here and there. The fire fighters had evidently backfired from the road. Satisfied that all was well for the time being, I started for home but Mrs. Weber stopped me just below the tent and we sat down on a log while she started to tell me all about it. But soon the phone

bell rang up in the tent. Mrs. Weber returned in a minute or two. "It was Gus," she explained. "He says for me to keep you here until he phones again."

It was not long until he did phone again, this time with the news that the fire had jumped the road at Dead Man's Hole east end and was now on Palomar and driving toward the northwest where it would soon be threatening the Weber Ranch. Further, that the Missus and Bob were to begin immediately digging a pit ready to bury the tent, etc., if the fire should come our way. So we went to work. Some time later, Judge W. P. Cary showed up, then Don Gordon. Don reported a fire-fighters' camp in French Valley; that he had offered his services, but that the boss hadn't been at all nice to him. So here he was -- and ready to help Bob with the digging. At supper time, the fire which had been burning down the mountainside below the Weber Ranch about a mile to the northwest suddenly changed its course and began burning toward the Beach Ranch. So we ate our suppers quite leisurely. I finished first and was busily digging when Mrs. Cary came down from the tent, and picking up Don's shovel, went to work. Then Don showed up, but Mrs. Cary refused to give up the shovel. Don called for Mrs. Weber to come help him get his shovel, but Mrs. Cary wasn't quitting. Mrs. Weber finally convinced the lady that she was really delaying the work; also that the immediate danger from the fire had passed. It was going the other way -- which it was, toward the Beach Ranch. Don got his shovel and we went on with our digging.

Some time later I heard a strange roar which seemed to be easing from the east. Straightening up, an amazing sight greeted my eyes. A tall, dead, big cone spruce tree just below the Beach Ranch was ablaze from bottom to top, with the flames reaching upward for a hundred or two feet. Above that went a column of smoke. The smoke went up and up for about two miles when it spread out and raced toward the southwest. That the up-draft must have been something tremendous may be judged from the fact that it carried along many fragments of charred bark for as much as eight or ten miles. I found numerous pieces in Lower Doane Valley and on my own place. Most of the fragments were only an inch or two long, but some of them were three or four inches long and three-quarters of an inch thick. The fire crossed the ridge east of the Beach Ranch and did not again come near the Weber's.

In the morning some fears were expressed as to the fate of the Beach buildings, but I did not need to go all the way to assure myself that the buildings were standing. However, beyond the Beach Ranch, great masses of thunderhead-like clouds were building up. But they were smoke clouds, not thunderheads. I had come quite a way back toward the Weber Ranch when I suddenly became aware that something new and strange was creeping over

the landscape. Everything was turning to an ash grey -- a pearly grey I had never before seen except in some dream. There were no more greens or browns and the sun was a strange sun, surrounded by wide zones of faint rainbow colors. And beyond Barker Valley, the clouds had risen and mushroomed out with a sheer circular wall below, maybe five or six thousand feet in height and a half mile across. As I watched, a little plane came around from the south about halfway up the wall and so near to it that I began to shiver for fear a wing tip might touch the wall and so send the plane to earth. A few minutes later the same plane appeared, but flying higher and much further from the wall.

I learned later that the fire fighters, under Mendenhall directions, had backfired from a fire guard along the north side of Barker Valley creek clear to Warner's Ranch at the foot of the mountain. The strange appearance of the sun and the other weird effects may have been due to polarized light. Anyhow, it was something wonderful and, perhaps, indescribable, although I have made an honest attempt to give my readers some idea of the splendor of it all.

On October 1, 1928, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate published a poem about the Palomar fire ^[61]:

AN ODE TO PALOMAR

When the clouds had rifted
And the fog had cleared away,
We turn our face toward Palomar
With anxiety today.
For our thoughts are on the mountain
Where the boys are fighting fire;
Our hopes are, they have conquered
The demon in his lair.

Our hearts stood still with terror,
For the smoke ascending high
Spoke plainer than could voices
Of the danger that was nigh,
Nigh to the great destruction
Of those beautiful green trees,
The joy of all our dreamland,
The home of doves and bees.

The birds for many ages
Have nested in the spring,
And all the little birdlings
First there their praises sing.
But now they flee in terror,
For the mountains are on fire,
And men are fighting demons
Pressed on by one desire.

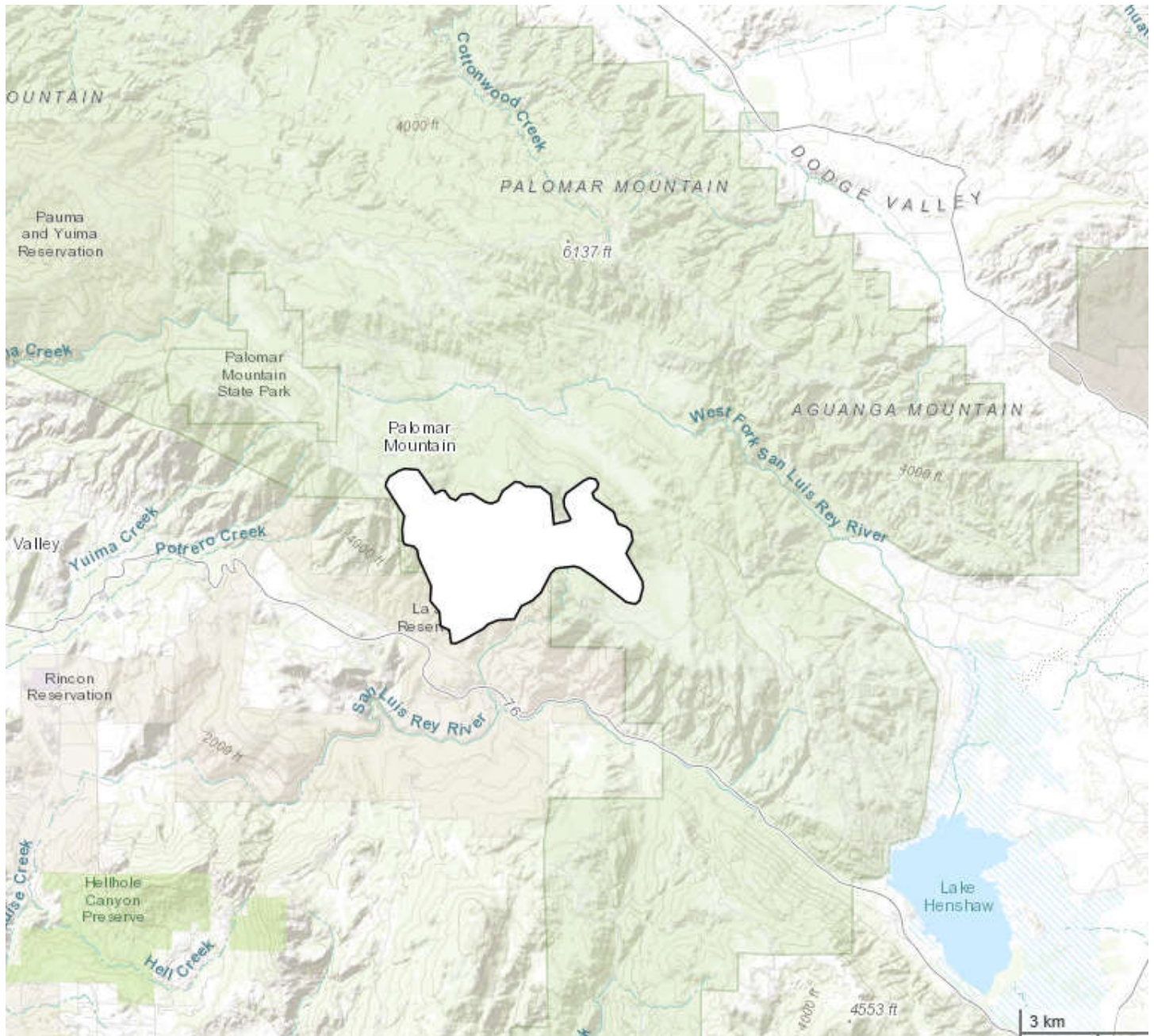
To save the pines and cedars
Who for ages have stood there
To clothe the heights in beauty
That once was bleak and bare;
And as the day advances
And the sea breeze fans the flame,
The smoke clouds roll above them –
We ask, who are to blame?

The man who carried matches?
Or the man who fire the gun?
Or the man who went a-camping
And light a fire for fun?
Or the young and thoughtless youngster
Who smoked a cigarette
And threw away the little squib
While a fire was smoldering yet?

The very breezes whisper
The Nimrods are in the field;
The wounded deer lies bleeding,
In pain his life he yields.
Oh! Men who handle firearms,
Look o'er your path today,
And swear by all the powers that be
Game hunting does not pay.

JOHN CALVIN STEWART
Sept. 26, 1928.

1934 fire



1934 Palomar fire on the WIFIRE map [3]

On July 10, 1934, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported [64]:

BRUSH FIRE BREAKS OUT IN LOW SLOPES OF PALOMAR

Dry warm weather brought a quick response in the way of brush fire in the mountain country northeast of Escondido. Such fire broke out at noon Tuesday in the lower slopes of Palomar mountain, near Rincon valley and the fire warden's camp east of the Kuebler store at Lake Wohlford was summoned to extinguish the flames.

On July 11, 1934, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate reported [65]:

FIRE STARTS UP NEAR PALOMAR

FLAMES SUBDUED DURING EVENING, BUT ARE REPORTED TO HAVE JUMPED ROAD

State Fire Warden Herbert Phelps reported to the Times-Advocate Wednesday afternoon that there are three serious fires raging in the county. The first and nearest to Escondido is southeast of Palomar Mountain. The flames were thought to have been placed under control Tuesday night, but they broke out afresh, as a result of strong winds, Wednesday. According to Phelps the flames have jumped a road and are headed towards Oak Grove, in the Warner's Hot Springs country. There were 200 fire fighters engaged on the Palomar blaze Tuesday. Up to 2 o'clock Wednesday morning it is estimated that about 150 acres had been blackened by the fire. ...



Man holding hose near a fire on Palomar Mountain, July 1934 Edward H. Davis photo

On July 12, 1934, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported [7]:

AID RUSHED AS FLAMES DESTROY 6 CABINS

Raging uncontrolled on the west side of Palomar, a fiercely-burning forest fire today had blackened about 1460 acres despite the efforts of more than 300 men to check it, according to reports. Another 100 men were ordered into the battle today, 75 of these coming from a San Bernardino CCC camp, and another fire camp was being established on the Salmons ranch in Dyche valley. Six Palomar mountain cabins were reported destroyed in the blaze, which started on the west slope Tuesday. It was being brought under control, but a large flaming snag tumbled down the mountainside yesterday afternoon, scattering the flames, and they spread rapidly. ... Property reported destroyed in the Palomar blaze included the Darlington, Morton, Bowen, Filbrook, Purkey and Pressler cabins. Cedar Crest was reported menaced last night. San Diego county fire fighters were assisted by crews from Riverside, Orange and San Bernardino counties. High temperatures and low humidity readings handicapped the crews battling on the fire lines.

Names are: Herbert Seymour Darlington of La Jolla; Morton; Max J. and Edith I. Bowen; Filbrook spelled Fillbrook in the Escondido newspaper; Spencer Scott and Etta May Purkey; Pressler



Man holding hose near a fire on Palomar Mountain, July 1934 Edward H. Davis photo

On July 12, 1934, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate's reported [55]:

PALOMAR FIRE DESTRUCTIVE; CABINS, TIMBER, BRUSH BURNED

Hundreds of acres on Palomar Mountain are now reported to be charred ruins as a result of what is declared to be the most destructive fire on the mountain in years. Although hundreds of fire fighters and fire fighting trucks were employed in battling flames, the blaze was reported to be still making good headway Thursday. Efforts were made Thursday to communicate with fire fighting authorities, but little authentic news relative to the fire could be obtained.

Ernest Settles, road foreman for Supervisor Tom Hurley, went to the mountain Wednesday and called a Times-Advocate reporter at about midnight when he returned home. He said the fire is one of the worst in the history of the mountain and, unless placed under control, could result in most serious damage. Six cabins were destroyed by the flames Wednesday, Mr. Settles reported. They are owned by Messrs. Darlington, Morton, Bowen, Fillbrook, Purkey and Pressler, he asserted. At the Purkey home a car in the garage was destroyed. Mr. Settles described the fire as burning on both sides of the road which runs on top of the mountain for a distance of about two miles, on the east end of the range. He said that the fire had gone to the Palomar tavern, which was saved, and was headed towards Cedar Crest. It had gone as far as Louis Salmons' apple orchard, he declared. "Nothing less than a miracle will prevent widespread damage," Mr. Settles asserted.

The fire is sweeping back, towards the west end of the mountain. This means that the cabins owned by Karl E. Petersen, Mrs. John C. Dickson, Mrs. M.L. Howell, Wallace Stewart and several other Escondidans are in the path of the flames. Should the fire sweep through the location of these cabins it would be headed towards the highly improved Bailey camp. At about 5:15 Wednesday evening a truckload of CCC boys, believed to be from San Diego, went through Escondido, siren on the truck open, and apparently headed towards Palomar. Orders came from fire fighting officials on the mountain to enlist 35 men in Escondido to fight fire. Local Fire Chief K.E. Petersen drafted 35 men and they went to Palomar in a truck at about 6 o'clock. Up to noon Thursday the fighters had not returned.

It is reported that there is a general exodus of campers and residents of Palomar for the lower lands. Some cabin owners are reported to have deserted their mountain homes in great haste, not even bothering to remove any furnishings. The fire started Tuesday afternoon on the southeast side of

the mountain, near the La Jolla Indian reservation. It was thought to be under control Tuesday evening, but broke out with renewed energy Wednesday.

PETERSEN TELLS OF PALOMAR FIRE

LOCAL FIRE CHIEF BROUGHT FIRE FIGHTING CREW TO MOUNTAIN – SEES DESTRUCTION

A reporter of the Times-Advocate interviewed K.E. Petersen, city councilman and local fire chief, who returned from Palomar Thursday afternoon with his family. Mr. Petersen had driven to Palomar Mountain with 35 men who were drafted here for service. "It is hard to tell how many acres have been burned off. It is safe to say that it is the worst fire in recent history. Last night the flames were stopped within about 100 feet of the clubhouse. The Jeff Cook Valley was burned over and the fire was stopped on the Tillinghast 40 acres last night. So far the damage has not been real severe to the big trees."

At about this time C.G. Burwell, who had driven down from Palomar with his family, arrived at the Petersen home to report that he was unable to drive down the east grade, the fire having again jumped the road in the vicinity of "Uncle Tom's" service station. There, it was reported, fire fighters had prepared to backfire, but the flames swept up a draw and leaped the road before the backfire had been started.

Mr. Petersen continued to report that the main fire is now coming up the old mail trail. "If this fire continues, Bailey's cabins will be threatened," Mr. Petersen said. "Up to this morning about 1200 acres had been burned over. There were about 350 men on the fire lines. People at Palomar were having a great time up to the time the fire broke out. There was the biggest crowd on Palomar in many years."

A peculiar incident was reported by Mr. Petersen. He said that the cabin of Mrs. W.S. Spencer of Oceanside had survived despite the fact that all the trees all around the cabin had been burned over. "The smoke was so thick that all the people left on Palomar huddled together near "Uncle Tom's" service station, where they slept in trucks and on the ground. "Cedar Crest," on the east grade, has been entirely burned over. That is where the old saw mill is.

"It is our understanding that prisoners from the county camp have been placed at work fighting the flames on the old mail trail. Warren Gates was placed in charge of the Escondido crew of fighters. My son, Bobby, was

given charge of a crew. He was up on the mountain and was drafted into service, although he was supposed to be here to report for a job.”

The Palomar tavern is the Edgewood Tavern located on Crestline, and now known as Palomar Mountain Lodge. The old mail trail is the 1891 south road up Palomar from Cuca. Uncle Tom’s Service Station was at the Ocean View Resort on Crestline managed by Thomas A. Boland, located where the fire station is now.



Ruins of a house with stone fireplace, possibly the Darlington house, July 1934 Edward H. Davis photo

On July 13, 1934, the San Diego Union reported [40]:

1500 ACRES TOLL OF PALOMAR FIRE AS FIGHTERS SEE HOPE OF CONTROL

Steady Westerly Breeze Is Aid in Checking Path Of Flames; Danger to Private Property Wanes

Aided by a steady westerly breeze, backfiring was resorted to last night in an effort to combat the forest fire raging on the south slopes of Palomar mountain since Tuesday. Although state and federal forest service chiefs could not say the blaze was under control, they were confident it would be by morning. More than 1500 acres had been blackened by the flames by last

evening, and six mountain cabins destroyed. Although other property was threatened yesterday, none was damaged, but heavy underbrush carried the flames rapidly through many acres of fine timber. No additional private property was in danger last night.

The fire was blazing all day yesterday along a front extending about six miles. This front encloses a burned area describing a rough triangle, two miles on each side, and cut in two by the road from Lake Henshaw through Dyche valley, Palomar and [Nate Harrison] canyon. The blaze started on La Jolla Indian reservation and spread north to Mendenhall valley and east to Dyche Valley. More than 400 men were at the scene of the blaze yesterday afternoon and they were reinforced by 200 fresh workers last night. A radio appeal enlisted 50 men here. City Manager Lockwood provided 25 city laborers, and the county sent 20 more. A CCC camp at San Bernardino supplied 75 youths. The forest fighters were concentrated in three main camps – on the Salmons ranch in Dyche valley and the Crestline camp near Palomar, maintained by the forest service, and a camp near the Indian reservation maintained by the state forest rangers. ... Most of the fire was within Cleveland national forest but part of it was on Indian and state lands to the southwest. The private property destroyed included the Darlington, Morton, Bowen, Filbrook, Purkey and Pressler cabins. CCC workers made the bulk of the fire fighting force... E.W.S. Delacour, radio amateur, went to the scene of the fire last night prepared to install radio equipment to permit communication between the two federal fire camps. Delacour volunteered his services.

On July 13, 1934, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate's reported [66]:

THINK PALOMAR FIRE CONTROLLED

NO FURTHER DAMAGE TO CABINS THURSDAY, IS REPORT FROM MOUNTAIN

The fire at Palomar Mountain is apparently under control. That is the word received by the Times-Advocate late Friday afternoon from Mrs. Milton Bailey, wife of Dr. Bailey, owner of one of the leading resorts on the mountain. The Times-Advocate was able to communicate with Mrs. Bailey. Mrs. Bailey asserted that although there has been considerable damage to the east end of the south slope there is every reason to believe that the fire is now under control and that cabins and timber are safe from further destruction. She reported that only the six cabins previously reported destroyed by flames have been lost. No other cabins were burned Thursday, nor Friday. Mrs. Bailey said that the general area of the fire on the top of

Palomar is from Louis Salmons' place to Uncle Tom's service station. Backfiring from the road Thursday afternoon proved successful, it is reported and the fire was halted about two and a half miles from the Bailey resort.

On July 14, 1934, the San Diego Union reported [41]:

FIGHTERS CHECK FIRE ON WESTERN SIDE OF PALOMAR

With the western side of the Palomar mountain forest fire checked by backfire, the eastern side was giving fire fighters a stiff battle last night, it was reported at the Fallbrook fire camp. The fire, which has burned 2400 acres since Tuesday, is rapidly giving way before the efforts of more than 500 men working under direction of state and federal foresters. Improved weather conditions are expected within 24 hours, bringing a rise in humidity which will be of great aid to the fire fighters. The west wind which had been fanning the flames died down early yesterday. No property damage besides the six cabins reported burned Thursday occurred yesterday, and no more property is reported in immediate danger. No one has been injured seriously by the fire, although some workers have dropped from exhaustion after days of unceasing effort, and many have suffered from sore feet and minor burns on hands and feet.

On July 14, 1934, the Escondido Daily Times-Advocate's reported [67]:

CREW PATROLS PALOMAR AREA

BIG BLAZE UNDER CONTROL – WARREN GATES PRAISES ESCONDIDO FIGHTERS

The Palomar fire of the past few days is now under control, but a crew of men, including about 35 fire fighters from Escondido, is now patrolling the smouldering ruins, according to Warren Gates of Escondido, who was in charge of a large crew of men in the fire area. Mr. Gates said that the Escondido boys would probably be kept at Palomar for about two more days. Mr. Gates gave praise for the Escondido boys who were under his supervision. He said that they were a gang of hustlers and did much to conquer the flames. The local men arrived at the scene of the fire at about 7 o'clock Wednesday evening and were kept on the job for about 35 hours without stopping, getting time off for their first rest Friday morning at about 5 o'clock. George Mendenhall was a big help to fire fighters in backfiring. Mr. Gates said. Mr. Mendenhall knew the country well and led the fighters

over trails from which successful backfiring was accomplished. However, Mr. Mendenhall was the big loser in the fire, some of his cattle being lost and his grazing land burned over. Too, timber on his property was badly burned. ...

In the aftermath of this July 1934 fire, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported [39]:

3 AGENCIES URGED TO BALK DANGER OF NEW FIRE ON PALOMAR

Now that Palomar mountain has been laid waste by forest fire to the extent of some 2500 acres, federal, state and county forest firefighting resources should be pooled to prevent recurrence of any such devastating conflagration, a large delegation of interested citizens toold the board of supervisors, and other officials, in conference in the board's chamber at the courthouse today. ... Many of the citizens in the delegation told of the burning of cabins and fine areas of timber, one speaker likening the scene after the fire to a battlefield upon which the dead lay unburied. The damage might have been less had the fire fighters been under one authorized command, it was agreed. Louis Salmons, pioneer rancher, who was credited by women speakers with having "saved the top of the mountain" by backfiring at the proper times and places, rose to say there as "no use criticizing the crews of fire fighters, because the winds changed every hour" during the fire. Ralph Tillinghast pleased for the construction of adequate firebreaks. Referring to the origin of the Palomar blaze, he declared that "the Indians on the reservations built a beautiful fire trail about three weeks ago, and they'll build another if we don't have some protection."

The California Ranger: Region Five published a report on Palomar's 1934 fire [4]:

PALOMAR MOUNTAIN FIRE THREAT TO VALUABLE TIMBER AREA

Starting at noon on Tuesday, July 10, on the La Jolla Indian Reservation along the San Luis Rey River on the west slope of Palomar mountain, the Cleveland National Forest's first extra period fire in three years was well under way within a few moments. While the fire started outside of the Forest, steep topography, low humidity (19% at Oak Grove at 3 P.M.) and a fifteen mile west wind combined to spread the fire rapidly to the higher elevations. It soon covered 120 acres with exceedingly difficult line to construct on the west side. Spruce timber on steep slopes made work hazardous and constituted a constant threat of breaking over the line.

This actually happened Wednesday shortly after noon when, with a humidity of 11%, temperature of 107 and northwest wind of 20 miles at Oak Grove, the fire broke across this line. A flaming spruce snag from a considerable distance up the hill crashed down into the canyon and within a few moments the fire had swept up to the Palomar road, jumped across and pursued a course east toward Cedar Creek and Jeff Cook Valley. Six mountain homes were destroyed during this run all in the vicinity of Edgewood Tavern.

A prompt reorganization and order for men, equipment and supplies, enabled considerable progress during the night but continued difficulty on this west line from burning timber snags resulted in a further break the following day in spite of intensive backfire and coldtrail operations. Additional forces were mustered and the fire finally controlled 2:00 P.M., Friday, the 13th after some three miles of intensive backfire (Principally in timber) and some 25 miles of intensive line construction. The fire was handled by both Federal and State forces. Federal operations involved a maximum of 510 men Friday of which most were made up of C.C.C. forces from San Juan, Alta Loma, Fallbrook, Palomar, Pine Valley, and Green Valley Falls C.C.C. Camps.

Overhead and equipment was secured from the Angeles and San Bernardino Forests. Water played an important part in the saving of improvements, handling of snags and hot spots, backfire operations, and direct stack tank trucks from the State Division of Forestry ably demonstrated the value of this type of equipment. Last but not least! The C.C.C's can and did take it 100%. In spite of the fact that all camps were reduced in strength by about 50%, the cooperation given by Army authorities was excellent.

Final acreage – (estimated) 2400 acres.

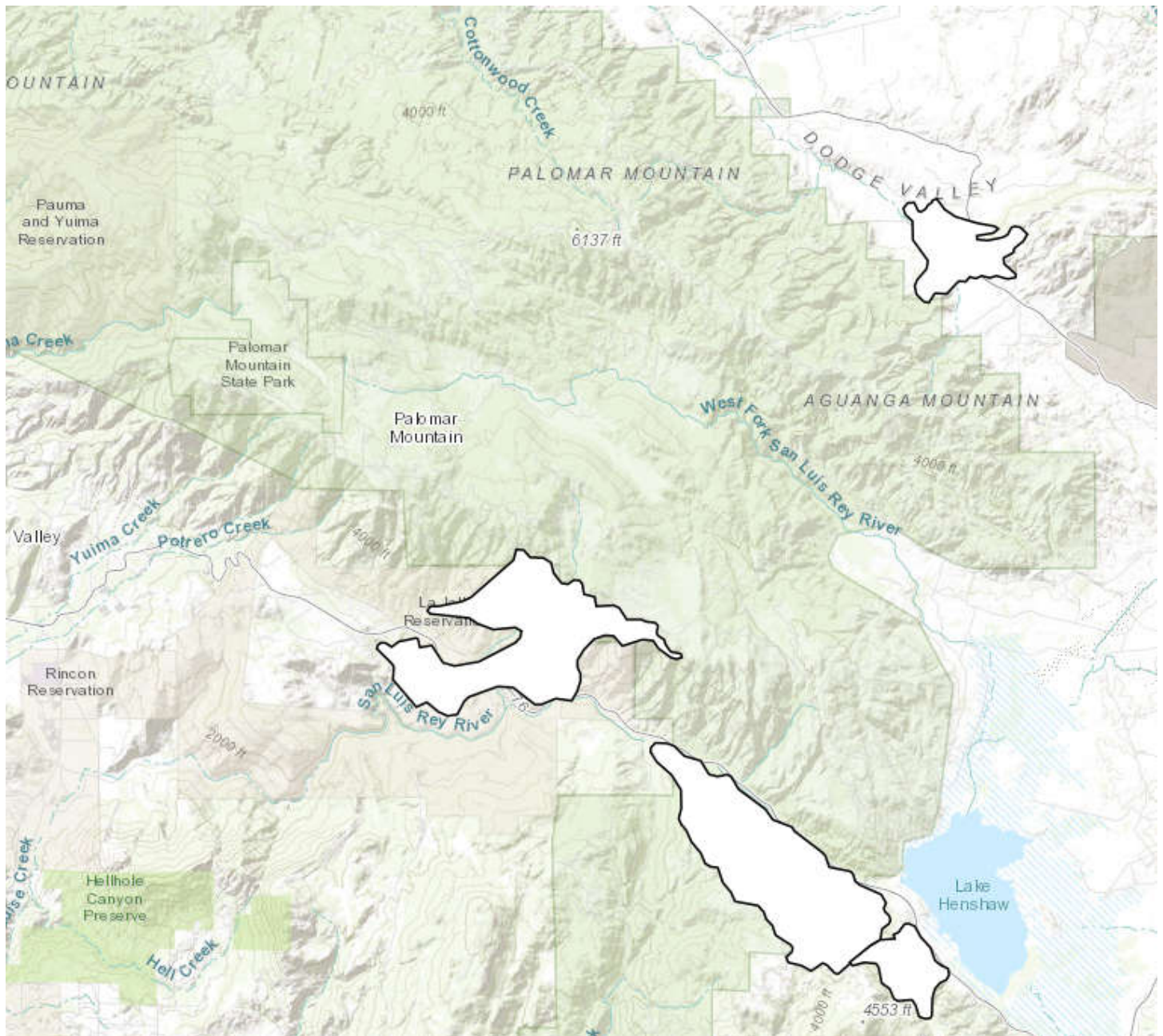
Inside forest -- 1920 acres

Outside forest -- 480 acres

Jay Price and Wm. Jones of the Regional Forester's office and Walt Coupe and Luther Gordon of the State Forester's office were on the fire.

Edgewood Tavern is an earlier name of Crestline's Palomar Mountain Lodge.

1947 fires



1947 Palomar fires on the WIFIRE map [3]

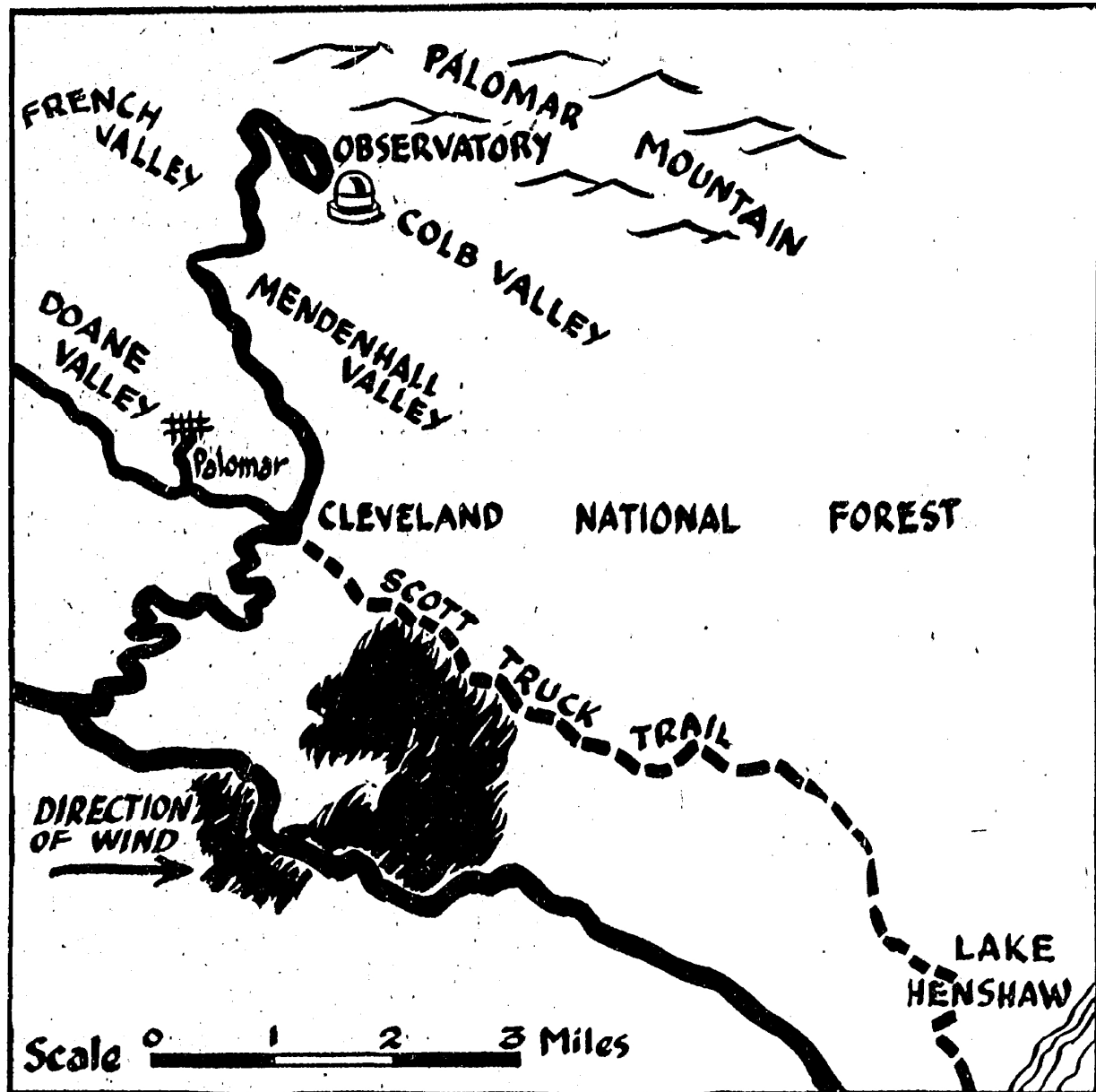
On July 28, 1947, the San Diego Union reported [42]:

Incendiary Fires Sweep Over 1800 Acres in Palomar Area

700 Men Battle Flames Along Six-Mile Front

A series of incendiary fires last night was sweeping through nearly 1800 acres of brush and scrub timber in the Palomar Mountain area and a small section of Cleveland National Forest. More than 700 Federal, State and military firefighters battled to establish a six-mile defense line along the

Scott truck trail paralleling the flames. Neither the Palomar observatory nor the Palomar State Park resort grounds are presently imperiled by the fires, which were being pushed east and partly south by a 20-mile-an-hour wind, U.S. Forest Ranger R.H. Blood said. "These fires are undoubtedly of incendiary origin," Blood declared, "because they began isolated, dry grassy areas and within a short period of time. The terrain also is about the most difficult for firefighters to approach in that district. Also, we found our phone lines were cut maliciously at three places, miles apart, while Federal and State foresters were working to bring the blazes under control. Without radio communications, we would have been messed up."



Federal and State Forestry firefighters are relying on the Scott truck trail to halt progress of incendiary fires burning out of control across 1800 acres of brush and timber in Palomar Mountain area. The trail is a natural barrier against the flames, which are being pushed steadily eastward by 20-mile-an-hour winds. Forestry officials said the Palomar observatory and resort area are protected from fires by Doane, Mendenhall and Colb Valleys. More than 700 men are battling the fires.

Two of the major fires were started Saturday at widely-separated points in the vicinity of Cuca, six miles south of the State Park. Before they were brought under control, another large incendiary blaze began yesterday on the fringe of the San Luis Rey Highway, two miles southeast of Cuca. Unless the wind shifts, the flames are expected to continue in the direction of Lake Henshaw, bypassing the observatory and resort area five miles to the south, Blood said. [PB: north, not south] Handicapped by the rugged, ravine-pitted terrain – ranging in elevation from 2600 to 4000 feet – the fire-fighters were withdrawn to the Scott truck trail at noon yesterday after it was decided to make a defense stand there. Blood said the trail, which is being widened by firebreaks, is ideal for halting the fires' progress. "It is unlikely that flames will leap the trail, particularly if bulldozer operators succeed in broadening it before the fire approaches too closely," Blood pointed out. He said more than 700 men were assisting nine tanker crews in the firebreak construction.

Dispelling fears for the safety of the observatory and State Park area, Blood explained that both are protected by the natural barriers created by the broad-basined Doane, Mendenhall and Kolb Valleys. "The Valleys, with only young pine and spruce growth, are natural firebreaks and I can't visualize the blaze spanning them," he said. So far, no structural damage has been reported. Most of the Summer cottages and ranch house are north and east of the selected defense line. When firefighters were ordered to withdraw to the trail, approximately 100 acres of scrub timber along Cedar Creek, east of Cuca, were sacrificed, Blood said. "The timber has little commercial value and it wasn't worth the gamble to attempt to save it at the risk of losing full-grown spruce and pine farther in the Cleveland National Forest," he reasoned.

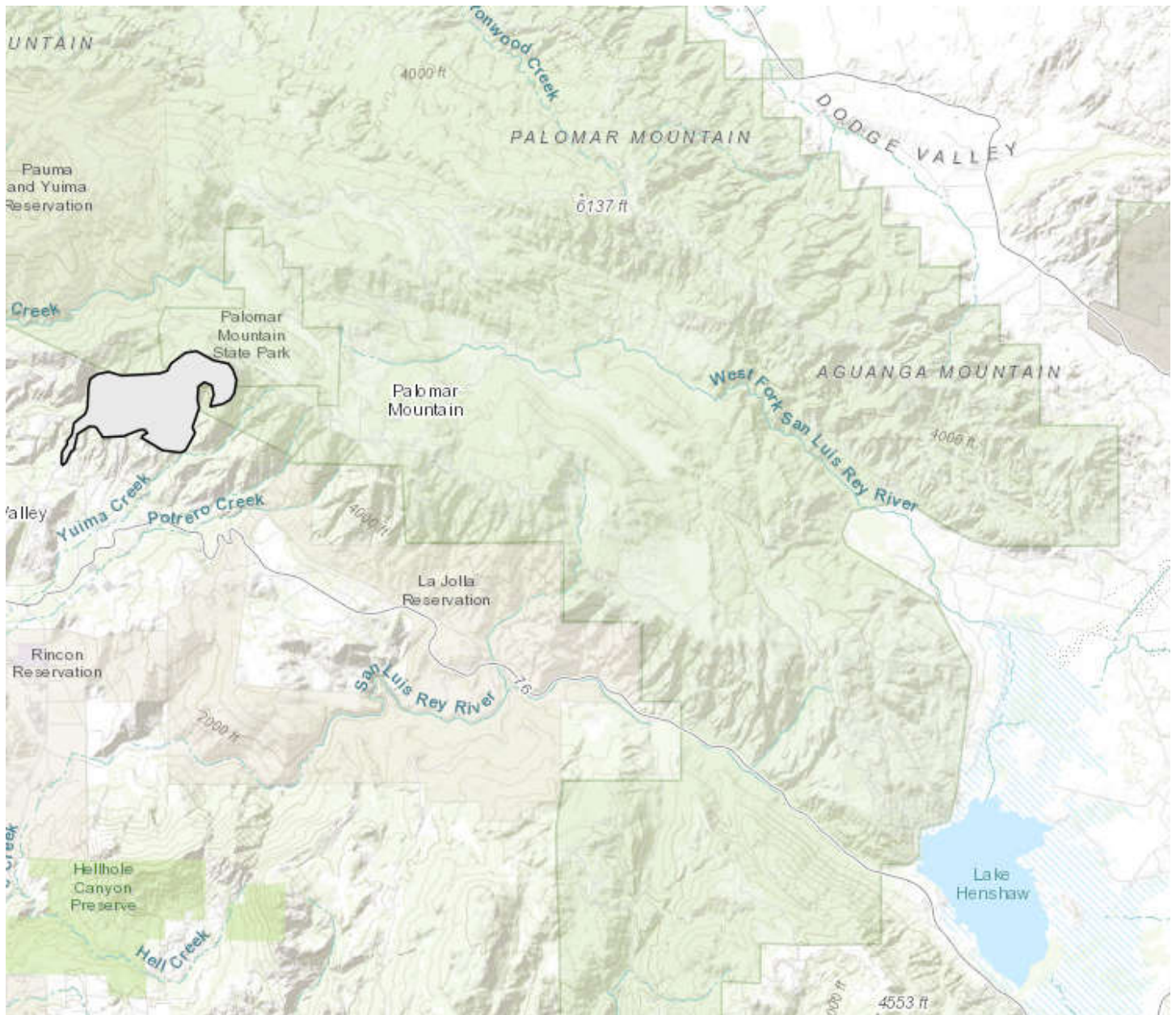
H.L. "Dyke" Landweer, U.S. Forestry Service Road Foreman, who flew over the burning area in a Coast Guard plane late in the afternoon, reported that it appeared firefighters would succeed in controlling the blaze soon. "Visibility for a 10-mile area was very poor," Landweer said, "but the men seemed to be establishing an adequate defense line. There were few observed gaps in the lines and they probably are closed by now. I am confident the fire will be under control by tomorrow," he said. ... Working alongside Federal and State Forestry crews were 160-man detachments from the Marine Base and Naval Training Center. Federal Forestry Service experts on backfiring were brought to the area as a precautionary measure yesterday from Santa Barbara, Los Angeles and San Bernardino.

On July 29, 1947, the San Diego Union reported ^[46]:

INCENDIARY FIRES UNDER CONTROL ON PALOMAR; 2000 ACRES BURNED

Incendiary fires which burned 2000 acres on Palomar Mountain were under control last night but 400 U.S. Forest Service firefighters stayed to put out small blazes. San Diego forest service headquarters said firefighters would lay 10,000 feet of hoses into the area during the night to soak smoldering brush. Water will be brought from Lake Henshaw by tank trucks. Raised humidity and a light shower were of doubtful value to the firefighters yesterday. Although the weather made extinguishing the main fire easier, it made backfiring more difficult. A forecast of more showers for today minimized the possibility that the fire might get out of control again. Only 400 burned acres are in Cleveland National Forest, and only 75 acres were in timber. Only flareup yesterday was on the eastern border of the fire. Buildings at the Salmons ranch were threatened about 11 a.m., but the flames were brought under control quickly. Forest service headquarters reported no leads on the identity of the person who started "at least five" fires in the area. They said there was no doubt the fires were of incendiary origin. ...

1957 fire



1957 Palomar fire on the WIFIRE map [3]

On August 14, 1957, the San Diego Union reported [47]:

Fire Races Uncontrolled on Palomar

Blaze Is 6 Miles from Observatory; 150 Acres Burn

A brush and timber fire was burning out of control early today on the west side of Palomar Mountain, about six miles southwest of the observatory and 2 ½ miles north of Rincon Springs. California Division of Forestry officials said the fire had burned 150 acres of brush land and was potentially the most dangerous fire of the year in the county. Two tanker planes were carrying

water from Gillespie Field in El Cajon to dump on burning areas inaccessible to forestry crews and on hot spots. The U.S. Forest Service has contracted for two Stearman planes to begin work today. Each can carry 150 gallons of water. The Division of Forestry had 17 fire trucks and three tanker trucks and their crews fighting the fire. The U.S. Forest Service had five tanker trucks in use. Six crews of firefighters from the county honor camps were on the fire lines and four bulldozers were being operated in building firebreaks. ...



Fire races up Boucher Hill on Palomar Mountain toward state Division of Forestry lookout (circle). Firefighters from county honor camps, Division of

Forestry, U.S. Forest Service and tanker planes are battling the blaze. Palomar observatory is six miles northeast of the burning brush and trees.

—Curt Whitely Photo

State Forestry Division dispatchers in La Mesa said more than 400 men were working on the fire line last night. James Fenlon, state ranger for the San Diego County area, directed fire fighting from a light plane flying overhead yesterday afternoon. A fire camp had been set up near a nursery in Rincon and food and supplies were being trucked to that location. Joe Anthony and Rod Crouch, pilots of a PBY tanker flying water from El Cajon to the fire

under contract with the forestry division, said they were making a round trip every 50 minutes. The PBY was carrying 1,500 gallons of water each trip and a smaller plane owned by the U.S. Forest Service was carrying 600 gallons each trip.

Charles de Lacy, manager of the Rincon Springs Restaurant, said a straight line of flames that appeared to be about two miles long could be seen last night from Rincon Springs. "It looks like the fire isn't abating much," he said. "There have been an awful lot of men and heavy equipment set up." Residents on Palomar Mountain below the observatory said flames could not be seen there last night.

On August 14, 1957, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported ^[48]:

Water Bombs Fight Palomar Fire

Flames Sweep 3 Miles From Observatory

Forestry Officials Evacuate Park; Foreman Injured

Four tanker planes dropping water and chemicals on the pine-clad west slope of Palomar Mountain today helped 500 fire fighters gain 90 per cent control of a brush and timber fire. The flames burned nearly 1,000 acres of scenic watershed from the 1,800-foot level to the 5,000-foot level within three miles of the Mt. Palomar observatory and its giant telescope. The blaze started at 12:30 p.m. yesterday on a lower slope ranch west of the observatory. Fire fighters, using tanker trucks and bulldozers, stopped the fire just inside Palomar State Park, which was evacuated yesterday by state and federal forest officials. Other public camp areas had been alerted to the fire and a camp trip scheduled to begin today in the city-county family camp in Doane Valley, north of the observatory, was postponed. James G. Fenlon, California Division of Forestry ranger, credited the tanker planes with halting the fire in an area of inaccessible, craggy bluffs and steep canyons which ground crews could not reach. One ground crew was withdrawn from a steep, rocky slope last night after the fire loosened a shower of rocks that injured Phillip Moe, of Valley Center, a state forestry foreman. Moe was treated at Palomar Hospital, Escondido, for head injuries. Robert McBride, Cleveland National Forest fire control officer, said control of the fire can be gained by tomorrow morning if late afternoon winds do not carry it to new areas.

The fire area is 2 ½ miles northeast of Rincon Springs. It started near a pump house on a ranch in Canalape Flats. Investigators were questioning farm

workers to determine how the fire began. There has been no structural damage from the fire and Fenlon said there were no buildings in danger in the fire area. He said fire fighters were hampered by the steep slopes and deep ravines that prevented access by foot and barred the use of bulldozers. One bulldozer taken into a steep area last night broke loose and tumbled into a ravine. No one was injured. The fire was kept from ranch structures on the lower level last night by backfiring, Fenlon said. Most of the lower slopes are covered by brush watershed. The tanker planes, including a Convair PBY Catalina of World War II vintage, were put on the fire yesterday, flying from Gillespie Field, El Cajon. They moved their landing base today to a Camp Pendleton air strip. They are dropping a borate solution to quench the fire.

On August 15, 1957, the San Diego Union reported [49]:

Flames Leap Firebreak At Palomar

Fighters Hacking Out A Second Line; 3 New Blazes Flare

Flames leaped a firebreak along the northeastern edge of the Palomar Mountain fire yesterday afternoon and raced up a steep canyon toward the Boucher Hill lookout station. The breakover forced firefighters to fall back and start hacking out a bulldozer fire line along the ridge of Boucher Hill while the flames swept unmolested up the slope of the rocky canyon. The lookout station was in no immediate danger, however. ... Forestry officers in charge of fighting the Palomar fire said they hoped to have it under control by 10 a.m. tomorrow if their tractor firebreak can hold the breakover. Robert McBride, fire control officer for the Cleveland National Forest who is in charge of the fire fight, said he was confident night crews would complete the firebreak in time. He said down-canyon winds and higher humidity had slowed the fire's advance. ... By midnight the Palomar fire had burned 500 acres, said Dave Waite, U.S. Forest Service information officer. He said no homes or improvements on the thickly populated mountain were in danger. The fire was burning along the western slopes of the mountain, 2 ½ miles north of Rincon Springs. ... At higher elevations the fire was destroying spruce and cedar trees. Farther down the mountain brush was the only fuel.

One fire fighter was hurt yesterday. James Younghusband, a state Forestry Division foreman, suffered a bruise on his right arm when a rock slide fell on him while working beneath a cliff. ... In addition to the bulldozers and tanker trucks, four planes were being used in fighting the fire. They dropped a mixture of water and borate on hot spots, cooling down the flames so crews could work. The borate coat the foliage and acts as a flame deterrent.

Waite said about 95 per cent of the fire's perimeter was contained by firebreaks late last night. Two fire camps were in operation. Three hundred state firefighters were using a camp near the Rincon Indian Reservation, below the fire. Two hundred federal men were using a camp in Palomar State Park, on top of the fire. One hundred fifty children, 9 to 12 years old, who had been evacuated from the Palomar Baptist Camp on the mountain east of the fire, were returned to the camp late yesterday afternoon. Seventy of the girls and younger boys had spent Tuesday night sleeping on pews in the First Baptist Church here. The older boys had been taken to another part of the mountain farther from the fire. The start of a family camping session at the City-County Camp Commission's Camp Palomar in Doane Valley, five miles from the fire, was delayed until Friday for 26 families. They had been scheduled to go to camp yesterday and remain until Sunday afternoon. ...

On August 15, 1957, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported ^[50]:

500 Fighters Halt Blaze on Palomar

More than 500 state and federal fire fighters held a brush and timber fire in check on Palomar Mountain today. The men patrolled fire lines at the head of a burned off area that covers 500 to 800 acres on the west slope of Palomar Mountain, 2 ½ miles northeast of Rincon Springs. Officials yesterday estimated the burned area was more than 900 acres. They revised the figure after air reconnaissance today. ... Four fire fighters were injured, none seriously. Harold Allen and Harry Wilson, of the U.S. Forest Service station on Mt. Laguna, were taken to San Diego's Naval Hospital last night. Allen was struck on his right hand by a rolling rock. ...

On August 16, 1957, the San Diego Union reported ^[51]:

Flames Break Out Again On Palomar

State and federal firefighters worked last night to stem a second outbreak of the 600-acre fire on the western slopes of Palomar Mountain. Officials said they hoped to control the blaze – which started Tuesday – by 10 a.m. today. ... The latest outbreak in the Palomar Mountain fire came as the blaze was reported 95 per cent controlled yesterday morning. The Escondido Forest Service dispatcher's office said the flare-out was traveling up the mountain slope toward a two-lane paved road which runs to Palomar Mountain State Park. "It's getting into country where we can get at it," the dispatcher, Ken

Seebold, said. Approximately 350 men, nine bulldozers, 20 tanker trucks and four airplanes are being used to fight the fire. ...

On August 16, 1957, the San Diego Evening Tribune reported ^[52]:

Fire Crews Hold Line Flareup on Mt. Palomar Brought Under Control

Fighters held the line last night against a serious break in the 600-acre brush and timber fire that threatened for a time to carry the fire over the top of the mountain. State and federal officials said they had anticipated the break and were ready with a wide firebreak. Last night's flareup began in a steep canyon and moved up to the top of a ridge near the Boucher Hill fire lookout. James G. Fenlon, state ranger, and Robert McBride, federal fire control officer, said the flareup put the fire where it can be controlled. They predicted 100 per cent control today. The force of state and federal fighters was reduced last night from 500 to 350 men. Water drops by four tanker planes were discontinued, but the planes were being held on standby at Camp Pendleton. ...

On August 17, 1957, the San Diego Union reported ^[53]:

Palomar Blaze Under Control After 4 Days

State and federal fighters yesterday controlled the 550-acre Palomar Mountain fire four days after it broke out near the Boucher Hill lookout station. ... The Palomar fire was controlled during the afternoon after spilling over check lines on Wednesday near an access road to Palomar Mountain State Park. Patrol work will continue several days, the Forest Service said. Some 350 men and one bulldozer remained on the job late yesterday. ...

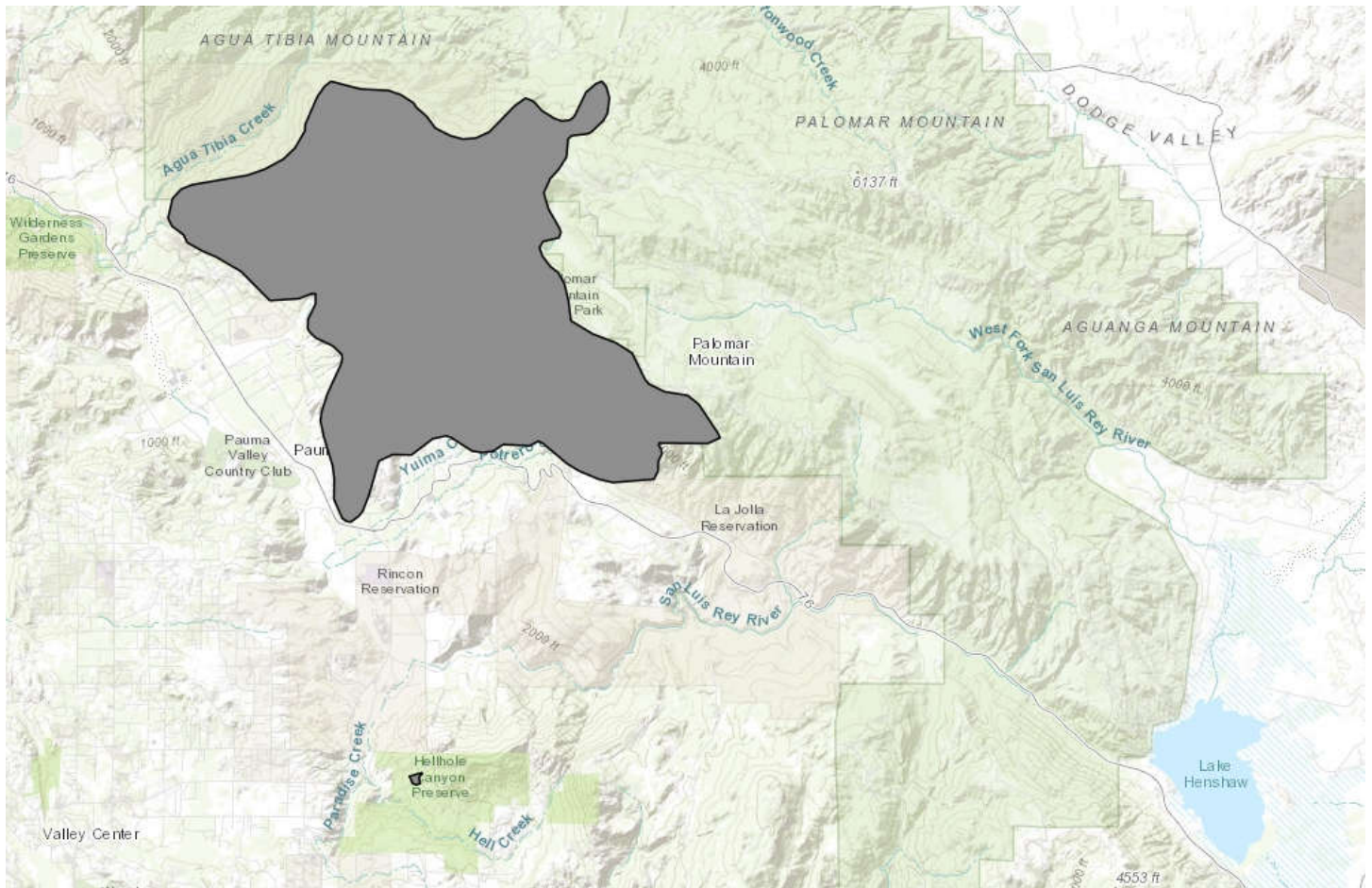
On August 18, 1957, the San Diego Union reported ^[54]:

631-Acre Palomar Fire Is Mopped Up

A combined force of 175 state and federal firefighters yesterday mopped up remnants of the Palomar Mountain fire which burned 631 acres before it was controlled. One U.S. Forest Service ranger, Floyd P. Hargon, 24, of Sierra Madre, was injured during the clean-up operations yesterday when he was struck by a boulder. Hargon was treated at Palomar Memorial Hospital,

Escondido, for bruises and a fractured right index finger. The boulder hit him on his left side and chest after it was loosened by a rock slide. The official acreage figure of the California Division of Forestry included 354 acres of state land burned and 277 acres of land in the Cleveland National Forest. No structures were damaged. ... The cause of the Palomar fire is still undetermined.

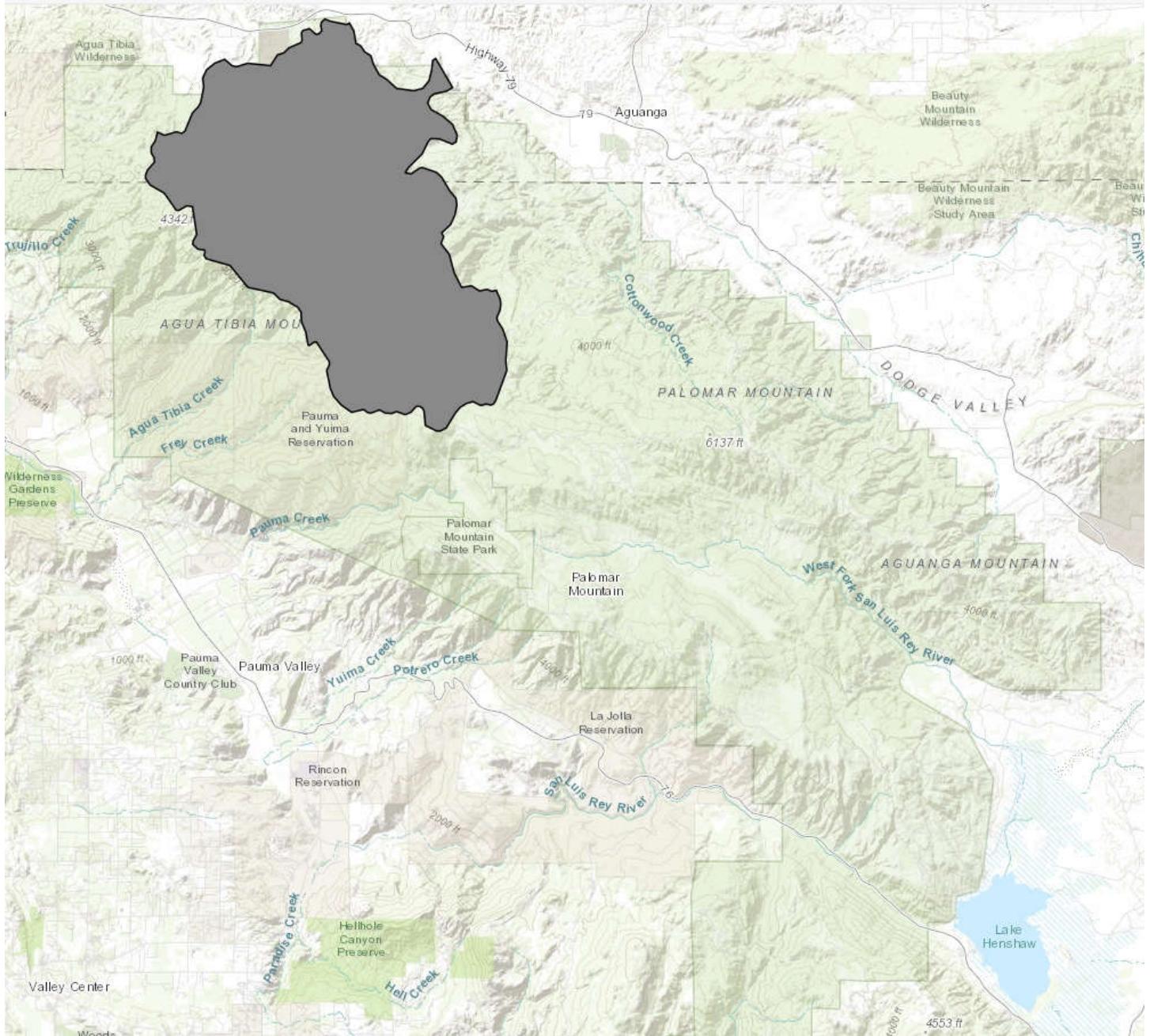
1987 Palomar fire



1987 Palomar fire on the WIFIRE map [3]

The 1987 Palomar fire started October 3rd, escaping from a controlled burn in Rincon, and ultimately burning 16,100 acres; 1.5 inches of rain that fell on October 11th helped contain it [68].

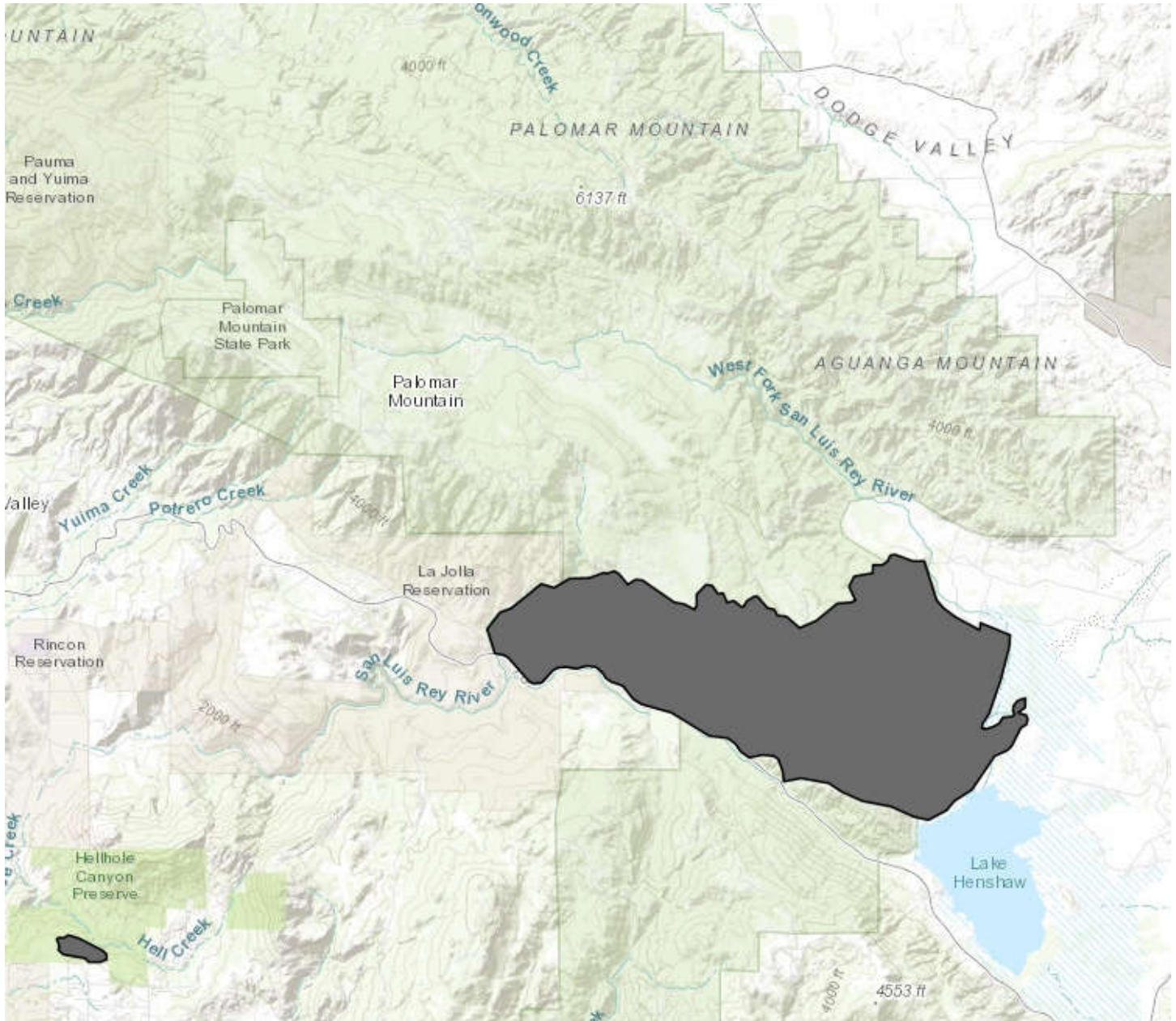
1989 Vail fire



1989 Vail fire on the WIFIRE map [3]

The 1989 Vail fire started July 29th by an arsonist at the Dripping Springs Campground on Highway 79, and was contained August 7th, ultimately burning 15,643 acres [69,72].

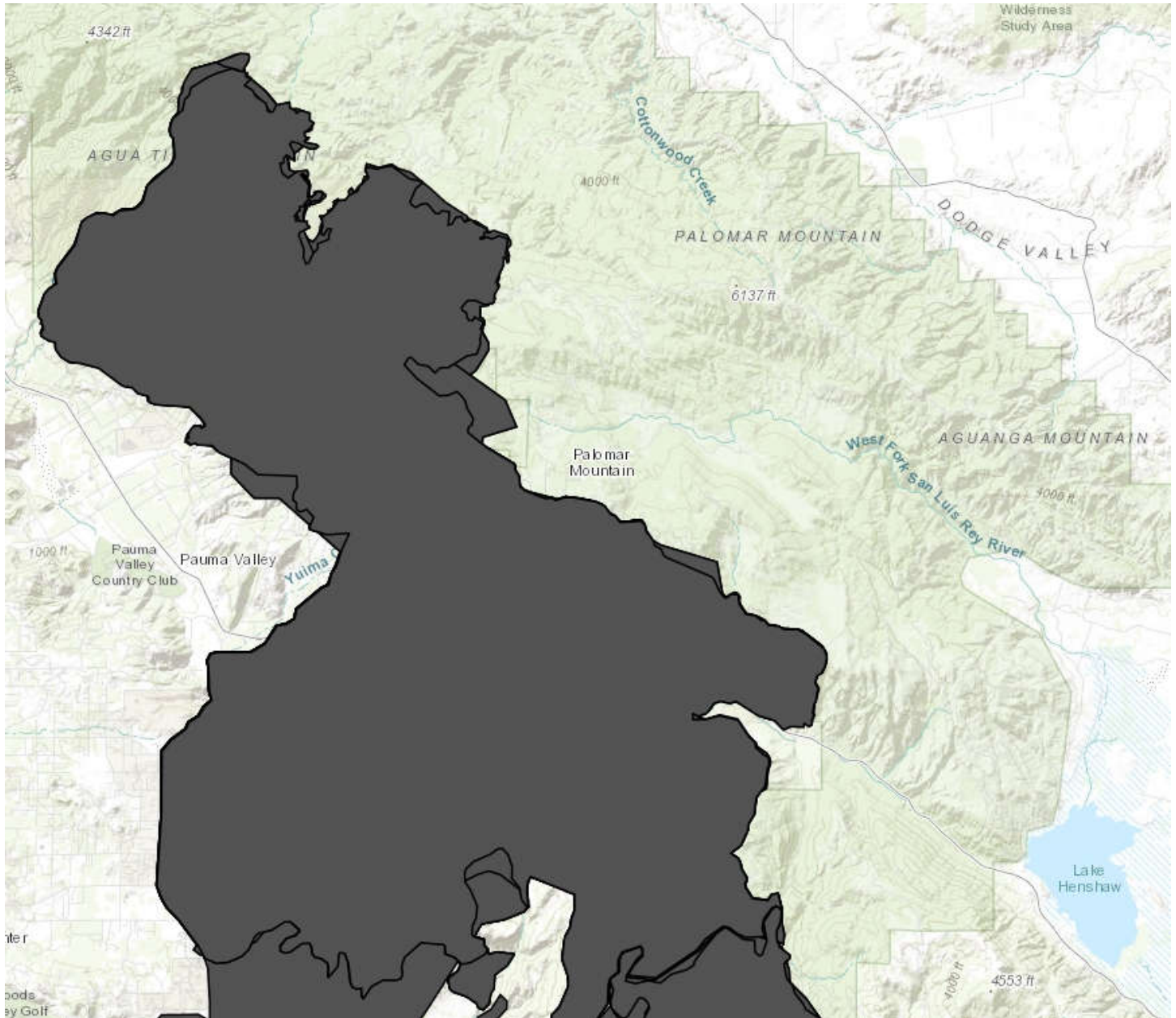
1999 La Jolla fire



1999 La Jolla fire on the WIFIRE map [3]

The 1999 La Jolla fire started September 30th by trash burning on the La Jolla Indian Reservation, and was contained by October 7th, ultimately burning 7,800 acres [70,73,74,75].

2007 Poomacha fire



2007 Poomacha fire on the WIFIRE map [3]
Poomacha fire joined up with the Witch Fire farther south.

The Poomacha fire started on the La Jolla Indian Reservation and burned up onto Palomar Mountain; its destruction included about 20 houses on Palomar Mountain along South Grade Road S6 [71]. About the Poomacha fire, the California Department of Parks and Recreation said [62]:

The Poomacha fire started on October 23, 2007, and was fully contained by November 9, 2007. It burned 49,410 acres and destroyed 138 homes. Fifteen firefighters were injured. ... About 65% (1,230 acres) of Palomar State Park burned.

Thomas Courtney wrote about the Poomacha fire in “Poomacha: The True Story of the Palomar Mountain Volunteers” on Firehouse.com [63]:

It was hard to be a volunteer firefighter and a fifth-grade teacher, but for five years I did both. When I made spaghetti on nearly each and every hoselay, Chief George Lucia liked to ask me whether I was smarter than a fifth-grader. My friend, Travis, liked to answer for me in the negative. On Oct. 21, 2007, my assigned pager went off while my students were in music class, and, suddenly, I no longer was a teacher.

On that day, a large fire called “Poomacha” erupted on the southside of Palomar Mountain in northern San Diego County, and there was a chance that it could threaten the entire mountain community if the winds sprang up. Because resources were at a premium in Southern California as a result of what was then unprecedented fire activity, I was being called up to active duty along with about 25 other members of the Palomar Mountain Volunteer Fire Department (PMVFD). I said goodbye to my class, told them to behave for the substitute and left for the station, which was an hour away.

On the drive, much of the Interstate 15 freeway looked like a hellscape. The Witch Creek fire had just swept through, leaving ash and flame in its wake. I arrived at the station, and seeing the fixed faces of my fellow volunteers, I knew then that I was going to be involved in my career fire. I still remember standing in my wildland gear with my friends, Scott Kardell, Justin Wisnewski and Travis Johnson, watching the red glow from below get closer and closer to Highway 76. (Someone that evening took a picture of the moment, and it still hangs in Station 97 to this day.) We knew that if the fire crossed the highway, we were in massive trouble. There was no mutual aid available for days, and the only thing that was between us and Poomacha would be an immense and dry canopy of fir, pine and cedar trees.

We were teachers, astronomers, custodians, marines and office workers, but we were trained to be firefighters, too. (I was Firefighter 14, or, as my friends had written on the back of my helmet, Hollywood.) As we watched the red glow of the fire meet the snaking road below us in the dying light, we knew that it was going to be a while before we could be any of those other things again. While the chief directed us, the men and women of the PMVFD, that night, we fought what at times was a wall of flame that was more than 100 feet high. Winds blew so hard that night that tightened helmets still flew off of our heads. Embers swirled like fireflies, landing on any exposed skin. It became difficult to tell one person from another, because everyone was covered in gray soot and ash.

Palomar hadn't had a massive fire like this in generations. The trees had suffered greatly from the bark beetle infestation, and we were deep into a decades-long drought. Our friends, Bruce Graves and Mark "Doc" Sowards, refreshed our water stores from Water Tender 97 as fast as they could, but we knew that there was no keeping up with the fiery storm. To top it all off, a red flag warning still was in effect. The Santa Anas were going to blow but not in the direction that we needed. Furthermore, there hadn't been a cloud in the sky for days.

The entire forest below State Park Road went up like a tinderbox that night. I watched it race up like flames in a chimney below Tom Burton's house. We stood our ground there, while the other three engines planted themselves along the ridge miles apart from one another. There would be no second line of defense: three trucks that carried roughly 750 gallons each, a water tender that held 4,000 gallons (but that needed time to refill and repump to each one), a rescue that carried 200 gallons and the chief's truck, which held about 100 gallons. Each vehicle had fire extinguishers for something small. All of us carried fire shelters as a last resort. Miles of raging flame raced toward us. We were it, and we knew it.

At around 10:00 pm, the fire jumped State Park Road and ran through the park, destroying the beautiful trees and many buildings there that we loved. I heard Travis call on the radio for an extra truck, and my partner, Justin, went to help with the brush rig while I took Rescue 97, which was a much smaller vehicle, to the aid of our chief. Driving down the winding road, we came to a lone white truck, the chief's rig. The chief was holding back all of Palomar Mountain from the blaze singlehandedly, but his Ford, like Rescue 97, only had a minute of water-fighting power.

"We've got to hold this line!" he yelled over the wind.

That was all that we needed to hear. While my friends ran hoselays, I turned on the pressure, and, with nozzles open, we fought back the flames like a boy throwing up his hands to a bully's punches. The heat off of that fire was like a cathedral-size furnace. I had thought my fire-proof wildland gear was tested before then, but as the flames tried to reach over and around me, I knew that it really hadn't. The only thing that was between us and being roasted alive was the open nozzle and the fanlike spray of our hose, but it wasn't going to last long. The winds blew the embers all around us. Flames swept over our heads.

"Fall back!" shouted the chief over the roar of the fire. He pointed through the trees. "It's jumped South Grade! Fall back, and we'll help Engine 97 on top! It's our only chance, or else it's going over Crestline Road!"

Crestline Road was where nearly half of the cabins that were on the mountain were located, mine and most of the volunteers among them.

We dropped our hoses behind us and dashed back to the rescue. I disconnected the couplings from the back, and while flames erupted in the trees on the wrong side of the road now, we spun around and stormed up the mountain. In my rearview mirror, I saw the chief's red lights flashing through the haze. He had waited for us. On the way up, the radio crackled. It was Travis. The fire now had broken all containment in the State Park. Travis was the ranger for the park, and he had fought the fire out of his park ranger truck. (Later, we would learn that he used fire extinguishers and a shovel in nothing but his officer's uniform the whole time. There just wasn't enough equipment, firefighters or water to stop it.) Worse, our friends, Dan and Laura Zeiber, were trapped there by a fallen tree. Somehow, they cut, fought, chainsawed and sprayed their way out of the state park, bringing every last one of them to the station. Along the way, they knocked on every door that they could, ushering residents to the safety zone, where community emergency response team members waited.

We hoped that the fire would lie low through the night and that we might have help before the winds sprung up again in the morning. None of us spoke as we listened to the radio. We were mountain people. We moved there to be close to nature. We joined the department so we could protect it. I wept inside for every tree that we lost, but I cried for joy knowing that my friends were safe. When the rescue got to Engine 97, we saw why they called for assistance. It feels near to impossible for me to describe that scene, but when I look back now, I see a normal country road. To the left is a lovely hill of sage scrub and oak topped by A-frame cabins that peeked above the tree line, the moon rising above it. To the right is hell on Earth, opening wide to swallow it whole. (A picture was taken by someone at that moment, and this one wound up in the local papers. A firefighter is shown running from a wave of flame that curls over him like a tsunami. I still don't know who that person is.)

By the time that the chief and the rescue made it to the engine, the fire was crawling its way up the scrub brush toward the dozens of homes that were above us. We only had one chance left to save Crestline. We prepared the fastest hoselay that we ever prepared, and Justin filled the hose with the last of the water. My friend, Steve Brown, and I crawled up the side of the hill as best that we could.

"Water 1!" I shouted.

“Water 2!” Steve cried.

The flow came, and as I watched the stream storm out of the nozzle up into the smoky air, I knew instantly that it wouldn’t reach the edges of the fire.

“It’s coming over the ridge!” someone below us called out.

“Come on,” screamed Justin as loudly as he could over the roar of the fire. “Just a little higher. We have to stop it here!” Justin was a Marine, and someone had apparently once told that Marines don’t quit.

However, the hill was nearly a vertical climb. There was no perch, no place to hold onto. I watched helplessly as the fire crept up the hill, bush by bush, advancing relentlessly toward the homes—Justin’s, the chief’s, my home, too. That’s when the chief called for a pull back. “Cut those damn hoses and fall back to the station. Now, Dammit! Now, Hollywood! Now, Brown!”

While the Poomacha fire engulfed the air and the hill around us like some savage rampaging monster, Justin took out his knife and cut the hose free from the engine. I remember just closing the rescue’s door when a tendril of flame reached out and over the hill, lapping the sides like a dog would water.

We pulled back to the station, but the Poomacha had found a partner in its destruction: the wind. Before we knew it, gusts whipped back around, and flames now threatened to engulf the station itself. We had no choice. The chief ordered all personnel to the evacuation and safety zone, which was an abandoned parking lot that was about one-quarter of a mile away. Minutes later, Justin and I sat in the rig and watched the Poomacha fire race up and over Crestline Road. Tears streamed down our ash-coated faces. We said nothing, and although the radio sometimes crackled as though someone was hitting the transmit button, no one talked. There wasn’t anything to say. I remember the uncontrolled gasp from Justin and me when we saw and then heard the first explosion.

“Propane tank,” Justin said.

That was one of the longest nights of my life. My cellphone had long since died, but around 1:00 a.m. my wife called Justin’s phone.

“Are you okay?! she asked frantically. “I’ve been trying to get hold of you all day! What’s going on?”

“I’m fine,” I told her.

I remember looking up then at the hungry red line in the darkness. There was just enough moon to make out the tops of trees. I was watching the fire race up the tallest tree on that ridge. I knew then it was the cedar tree where a great horned owl lived. It was on the edge of our property.

“I heard the fire took some structures,” she whispered. “How’s the...”

“It’s gone,” I said. “It’s gone, honey.”

Around 2:00 a.m., the chief came over the radio and told us to get some sleep. In the morning, he said, we would hope to hear from Heartland dispatch. He told us that a few of our volunteer neighbors were working on another portion of the mountain and help was on the way in the morning. We knew it was going to be too late to save any homes on Crestline, but it gave us some small comfort. I awoke to the sound of hysterical laughter.

“Wake up, Hollywood! Wake up, you jerk!” It was Justin. “Put your freaking seatbelt on, damn it,” he was barking at me.

Before I could get my head out from between a mounted fire extinguisher and a bolted first aid kit, Brush 97’s engine roared to life. Then to the right of me, Engine 97, Water Tender 97 and Rescue 97, too. I looked out of the window in the pale light and saw that the chief’s white rig had its red lights flashing. Justin flipped the switch on the dash, and our lights came to life above us.

“What the hell is going on, Justin?” I asked.

Just then, the radio clicked, and then clicked again. People were trying to talk over one another. Then I heard their voices.

“Can you believe it? Over.”

“Copy. Boooo, yeah!”

“It’s a miracle!”

“What is going on, Justin?” I asked again. “Are we evacuating again? Talk to me, man!”

His eyes were lit up inside of their soot-stained sockets. “Chief just scouted Crestline, Tom,” he said, and the pink lines of a smile cracked into life through the ash and raced upward toward both ears. “There isn’t a single house lost on Crestline. Not one!”

He slapped me on the back. Tears of joy ran down our faces.

“You hear that, you freaking volunteer?! We didn’t lose a one of them!”

Within minutes, the chief gave us coordinates for structure protection. When I heard ours, I thought I was imagining things. Coming around the bend on Crestline, there it was, my house, like all of the others, in a sea of ash. I couldn’t believe my eyes. In less than 30 seconds, we laid out a hoselay in front of my very own home. Engine 97 was working on a flare-up by the home of a local architect, and the rescue had refilled and, backed up by the water tender, tackled a spot that was north of our position.

Somehow, someway, during the night, the fire raced up the hillside through the fuels around the cabins but didn’t catch any of them in the process. Now, with the morning winds picking up, the fire grew hungry again, but there wasn’t as much fuel for it to burn. Miraculously, we finally had a fighting chance. My house was the first in a canyon that made a natural path for an advancing fire, and I knew instantly why the chief put us here: If my cabin was lost, we’d lose all of those that were behind it. By 8:00 am, we had help in the form of mutual aid from the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians Reservation and the Pala Band of Mission Indians Reservation. Many of their firefighters were volunteers, too. Their air horns blasted at us as they came over the ridge to let us know the cavalry was coming. I can’t write the words that Justin and I spoke when we heard those horns, but many of them started with the letter “f”.

The news channel must have caught word that other agencies were coming to Palomar’s aid, because while Justin and I were Water 1 and Water 2 that morning, someone who had a microphone, a yellow jacket and a very professional voice asked from behind us what was happening.

“Oh, nothing,” Justin said. “Just putting out this here fire in front of my friend Hollywood’s house.”

I stood feet apart in front of my own bedroom window, fanning down the flames that were in front of me. Behind me, Justin called for more pressure from Doc. I felt the surge come and tightened my grip. A voice from behind me asked, “Sir, you are live on Channel 8 Action News. What’s it like being a firefighter and saving your own house?”

“Oh,” I laughed. “I’m not a firefighter. I teach fifth grade.”

“We just do this for fun,” one of my crewmates said.



Fire retardant lines placed in front of the advancing Poomacha fire burning on Palomar Mountain. C-130s launched from Channel Islands Air National Guard Station, on October 26, 2007 participated in the Southern California firefighting effort.

U.S. Northern Command <https://www.northcom.mil/photos/igphoto/2000023474/>

REFERENCES

- 1= California Wildfire History Map. Capital Public Radio, Sacramento. projects.capradio.org/california-fire-history/#11/33.2906/-116.9224 ; California Fire History Map. Data Basin databasin.org/maps/new/#datasets=bf8db57ee6e0420c8ecce3c6395aceeb ; WIFIRE Fire Map. San Diego Supercomputer Center firemap.sdsc.edu/ (the WIFIRE Fire Map is the easiest fire map to use to look at specific years)
- 2= Robert Asher. My Palomar. Peter Brueggeman, editor. archive.org/details/asher-my-palomar_202402
- 3= Wildfire Fire Map. Historical Fires, California, 1878-2023. WIFIRE, San Diego Supercomputer Center, wifire.ucsd.edu <https://firemap.sdsc.edu/>
- 4= California Ranger Region Five, Volume 5, Number 35, July 27, 1934, page 3
- 5= San Diego Union, September 10, 1881, page 3, column 1
- 6= David Mendenhall's Life Story. David Charles Mendenhall. January 1992. Published in: Mendenhall Family History, Pamela Ruth Mendenhall Homan, 2015
- 7= San Diego Evening Tribune, July 12, 1934, page 1, column 6
- 8= San Diego Union, September 28, 1899, page 5, column 2
- 9= Riverside Morning Enterprise, September 24, 1899, page 8, column 2
- 10= San Diego Union, June 12, 1877, page 1, column 5
- 11= San Diego Sun, September 9, 1882, page 4, column 1
- 12= Riverside Morning Enterprise, September 29, 1899, page 1, column 5
- 13= San Diego Union, October 5, 1899, page 5, column 2
- 14= San Diego Union, September 15, 1882, page 3, column 2
- 15= San Diego Union, September 13, 1878, page 1, column 4
- 16= San Diego Weekly Union, November 22, 1894, page 8, column 3
- 17= San Diego Union, September 9, 1898, page 5, column 2
- 18= San Diego Union, October 2, 1899, page 5, column 2
- 19= San Diego Evening Tribune, September 13, 1910, page 3, column 1; San Diego Union, September 3, 1910, page 16, column 1
- 20= San Diego Evening Tribune, August 1, 1908, page 8, column 1
- 21= San Diego Union, August 2, 1908, page 7, column 1
- 22= San Diego Union, July 28, 1909, page 13, column 3
- 23= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, October 6, 1924, page 2, column 3
- 24= San Diego Union, October 4, 1924, page 5, column 5
- 25= Fire in the Forest: A History of Forest Fire Control on the National Forests in California, 1898-1956. Robert W. Cermak. USDA Forest Service, 2005

26= San Diego Union, October 4, 1924, page 5, column 5
 27= San Diego Union, September 17, 1917, page 1, column 8, and page 3, column 6
 28= San Diego Evening Tribune, September 18, 1917, page 12, column 4
 29= San Diego Evening Tribune, September 19, 1917, page 12, column 2
 30= San Diego Evening Tribune, September 21, 1928, page 1, column 1
 31= San Diego Union, September 22, 1928, page 1, column 1
 32= San Diego Union, September 23, 1928, page 1, column 1
 33= San Diego Union, September 24, 1928, page 1, column 1
 34= San Diego Union, September 25, 1928, page 1, column 1
 35= San Diego Union, September 26, 1928, page 1, column 7
 36= San Diego Union, September 27, 1928, page 1, column 5
 37= San Diego Union, September 28, 1928, page 1, column 1
 38= Escondido Times-Advocate, September 27, 1928, page 1, column 3
 39= San Diego Evening Tribune, July 30, 1934, page 2, column 8
 40= San Diego Union, July 13, 1934, page 1, column 5, page 3, column 8
 41= San Diego Union, July 14, 1934, page 2, column 8
 42= San Diego Union, July 28, 1947, page 1, column 4
 43= San Diego Union, August 24, 1925, page 1, column 1
 44= San Diego Union, August 25, page 7, column 3
 45= San Diego Evening Tribune, August 26, 1925, page 16, column 2
 46= San Diego Union, July 29, 1947, page 1, column 3
 47= San Diego Union, August 14, 1957, page 1, column 4
 48= San Diego Evening Tribune, August 14, 1957, page 1, column 7
 49= San Diego Union, August 15, 1957, page 1, column 3
 50= San Diego Evening Tribune, August 15, 1957, page 6, column 4
 51= San Diego Union, August 16, 1957, page 1, column 7
 52= San Diego Evening Tribune, August 16, 1957, page 11, column 1
 53= San Diego Union, August 17, 1957, page 13, column 5
 54= San Diego Union, August 18, 1957, page 20, column 2
 55= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, July 12, 1934, page 1, column 6
 56= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, September 17, 1917, page 1, column 1
 57= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, September 19, 1917, page 2, column 3
 58= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, October 2, 1924, page 1, column 7
 59= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, October 3, 1924, page 1, column 4
 60= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, September 24, 1928, page 1, column 1
 61= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, October 1, 1928, page 4, column 3
 62= The Cedar and Poomacha Fires. California Department of Parks and Recreation www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=25413
 63= Poomacha: The True Story of the Palomar Mountain Volunteers. Thomas Courtney. Firehouse.com, 2020. www.firehouse.com/operations-training/wildland/article/21203898/poomacha-the-true-story-of-the-palomar-mountain-volunteers
 64= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, July 10, 1934, page 1, column 3
 65= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, July 11, 1934, page 1, column 3
 66= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, July 13, 1934, page 1, column 6
 67= Escondido Daily Times-Advocate, July 14, 1934, page 1, column 1
 68= San Diego Union-Tribune, October 12, 1987, page B-1
 69= San Diego Union-Tribune, July 30, 1989, page B-3
 70= Major fires in San Diego County history. Forest Fire Lookout Association, San Diego-Riverside Chapter ffla-sandiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Major-fires-in-San-Diego-County.pdf
 71= San Diego Union-Tribune, October 25, 2007, page A-10
 72= San Diego Union-Tribune, August 17, 1989, page B-1
 73= San Diego Union-Tribune, October 1, 1999, page B-1
 74= San Diego Union-Tribune, October 4, 1999, page B-3
 75= San Diego Union-Tribune, October 7, 1999, page B-1
 76= San Diego Sun, May 13, 1885, page 3, column 2
 77= San Diego Sun, January 4, 1902, page 4, column 1