Palomar Mountain Photographs: Observatory Site 1934-1935, and 1928 Fire

Peter Brueggeman

Photo dated 2 October 1934
Photo dated 17 December 1935

North area of Observatory site shown. At left is the tank used to store spring water. At right near the tall trees is the Hospitality House for visiting scientists.
Photo dated 29 September 1928. A newspaper headline on the back of this photo says one thousand men were fighting this fire, which burned hundreds of acres.

Robert Asher, in two sections in his memoir, My Palomar, writes the following about an undated Palomar Mountain fire, which could well be the fire shown above due to geography:

“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. Fire fighters 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 onesided mushroom. As I stood watching and admiring the mighty show, with its irridescent 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!"

And

"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 Rauch. 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.”