

FAIRVIEW HOLLOW FIRE
MARCH 16, 1965
KENTUCKY
THREE FATALITIES

This fire occurred in the southeast corner of Kentucky, on the outskirts of the town of Harlan. It started as a result of debris burning at about 1430 on March 16, 1965. The accident occurred when a backfire made a run at a ridge where a squad was constructing handline and burning out, and overran their location.

Background Information

Fire danger for the fire area was rated as "moderately low". The area had not been burned for several years, allowing ground fuel to accumulate to a considerable depth. Forest debris burning is a common practice by inhabitants of the area. In many cases, debris burning is accomplished independent of any fire organization.

Topography

The terrain was relatively rugged, rising from an elevation of 1,480 feet where the fire started, up a steep incline to about 2,300 feet at the ridgetop on the southeast portion of the fire. The Fairview Hollow drainage defined the west flank of the fire. Several minor subdrainages dissected the fire area, running west into Fairview Hollow. The fire was halted on the east side at a ridgeline that runs north-south. The slope rising to the east from Fairview Hollow (where the fire made it's fatal run) is about 100%. The aspect on which the fire burned was west-facing.

Vegetation and Fuels

The area leading into the hollow, where the fire burned, was covered with grass and hardwood timber of the ten inch diameter class.

Weather and Fire Behavior

The afternoon of March 16 around Harlan was clear, with good visibility and a southwesterly wind blowing at about 4 mph. When the accident occurred, the winds had increased. Observers at the fire indicated that the winds were "strong updrafts from the southwest". Temperature at the time of the accident was about 64 degrees. Rain was forecast for that evening. A moving weather front coming through the area was causing an unsettled condition. The gusty, southwest winds, described by observers on the fire were unusual for this area. These winds were likely caused by a combination of frontal activity and fire activity.

Strategy and Tactics

A state forest ranger, supervising eight firefighters, made the initial attack on this fire. When he arrived at the origin (Point A), he observed a backfire just starting on the northwest flank (Point B) and another being started farther south on the west flank (Point C). He advised the individuals (private landowners) to be careful with their firing, as he and his crew would be building a fireline along the ridge above the hollow. The firing continued despite the ranger's cautions and with no coordination with any of the suppression forces. The ranger did not leave any personnel to monitor the progress of the backfires.

The ranger took his crew to the midpoint along the east flank, on the ridgetop to begin handline construction. He divided the crew, working half of them back down the ridge to the north to tie into the origin. At this time fire was still moving slowly in the bottom of the hollow (unseen from their ridgetop location. The winds were light (4 mph or less). The ranger felt secure with the indirect fireline strategy because of the light winds and relatively quiet fire behavior. Consequently, the ranger did not discuss escape routes nor safety zones. No formal lookout was posted.

The ranger and the other four firefighters began constructing handline down a spur ridge, west, toward Fairview Hollow. This route was not the route that they had used when climbing up the ridge, nor had it been scouted prior to initiation of line construction. The intention was to take advantage of the ridgeline to stop the fire. Both squads were firing the line as they worked down the ridges.

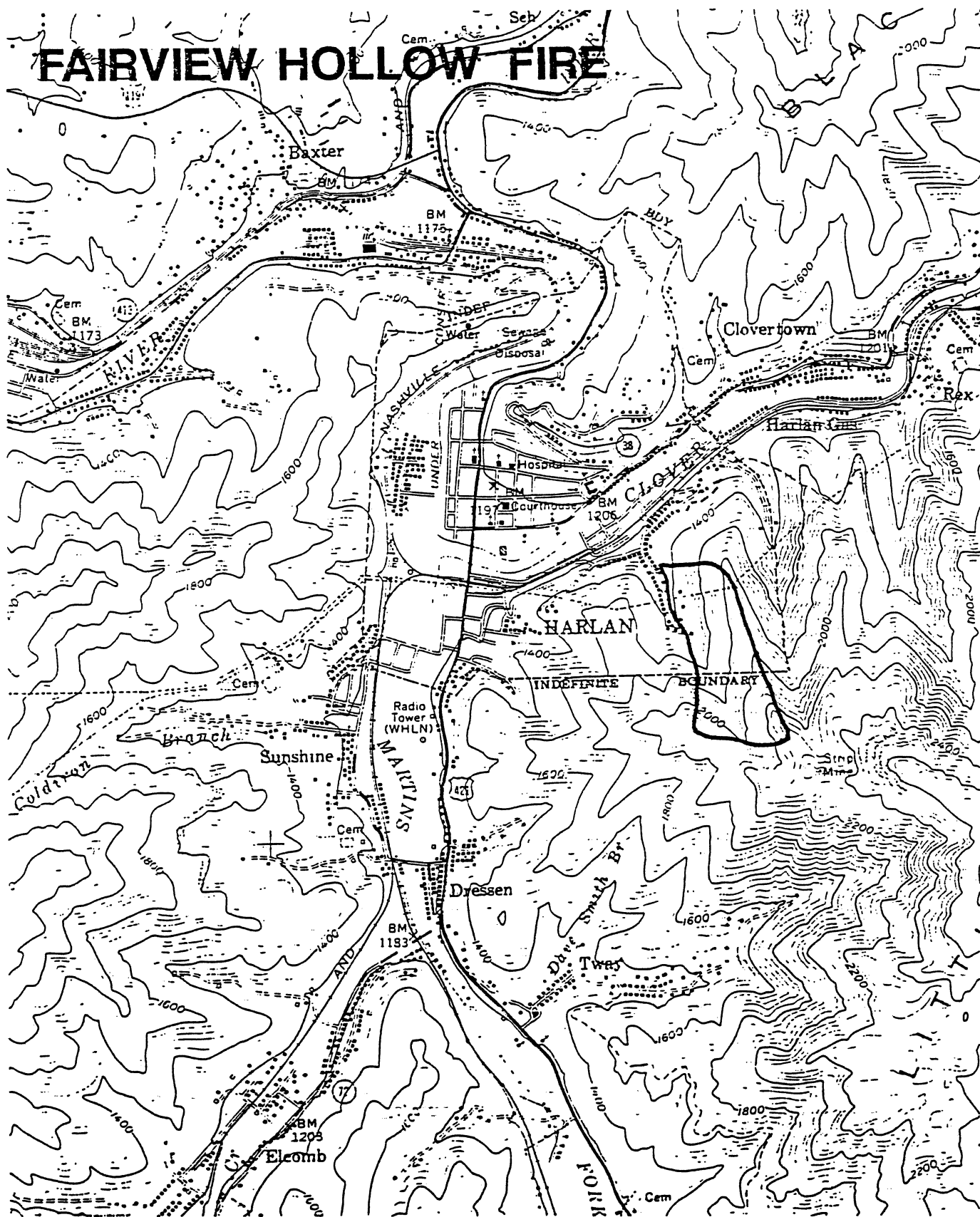
Communications on the fire was by voice only; none of the firefighters had portable radios.

None of the firefighters with the ranger had experienced a rapid fire run, although all had been trained in the proper response to rapid fire runs.

Sequence of Events

The ranger and four crewmembers had completed about 200 yards of handline (Point F to L) when they heard a loud roar from below. None of them could see the source of the noise due to a "shoulder" on the ridge (the ridge was convex; the bottom of the hollow could not be seen from the upper portion of the ridge). However, the ranger correctly assumed that the noise was from the fire making a run at them from below. The ranger, who was firing the handline behind the squad, yelled for the firefighters to run to safety. The ranger ran south, across the head of the adjacent hollow, stopping at Point J. Three crewmembers ran down into the hollow, where the fire overran them. All three died at Point G. The fourth crewmember ran back uphill into the backfired area, suffering only minor burns.

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