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The Famous Matilija Fire

All the major fires on the Los Padres National Forest pale into insignificance when compared to the great Matilija Fire of 1932, probably the fastest burning and one of the largest wildland fires recorded in Forest Service history. The fire broke out at 10:00 AM on September 9, 1932, started by some unknown deer hunter. Before it was controlled fourteen days later, it had burned over a total of 219,255 acres in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties.

The fire literally exploded over the landscape and covered 20,000 acres within a few hours of its start. During the first eleven days of its progress it burned over 10,000 to 30,000 acres daily...

Stories are still extant locally of cool-headed leaders saving the lives of firefighters. Supervisor Nash-Boulden and a crew of twelve men in reconnoitering the fire one day drove up a truck trail and parked their cars in the most open spot near a trickle of water. A sudden shift in the wind brought the flames on all sides of them. The crew became panicky and wanted to retreat down the road in the cars. Nash-Boulden insisted that they stay where they were. Amid the choking smoke and intense heat the crew backfired the cover from their fairly open space, shielding their faces and necks with wetted handkerchief and the heavy Stetson hats. Their cars caught fire time and again but they managed to save the tires by throwing dirt on the flames. The tops and cushions of the machines were covered with spotted burns, but were driven back down the hill under their own power.

Forest Guard Bill Bowhay started to drive up the same road about the same time. As the fire reached the roadway the forest officer jumped from his car and ran down the road for his life. He had hardly left the machine when dirt and shale rock, loosened by fire action, descended in an avalanche burying the car several feet deep and putting out the flames creeping over it. The car was later dug out, two new tires installed and driven away under its own power.

A forest officer with a crew of 80 men was cutting fireline between Matilija Creek and the end of Highway 399 [now SR-33]. Supervisor Nash-Boulden, viewing that section of the fire from some distance off, figured out what its behavior would probably be and sent word to

this division leader to bring out his entire crew. The two sections of his line being almost joined and sensing no immediate danger from where he was located, he sent back word that he would stay for a little while longer and finish his line construction. Nash-Boulden sent a speedy messenger telling the forest officer in no uncertain terms to get his crew out of there immediately. The time the division leader obeyed. The last group of men had hardly scrambled down the hill to a place of safety when the flames swept over the area where the entire 80 men had been working. Had there been a moment's further delay every man in that sector would have been trapped and burned to death.

Several women, used to outdoor work in the mountains, rendered signal service in aiding the effort of the firefighters. Mrs. H. M. Hunt, comely, slenderly-built horse rancher of Ojai, was one of these. She won the admiration of Forest Service leaders for her coolness and efficiency in handling a string of pack mules transporting supplies to isolated camps. Mrs. Hunt was credited with saving a bunch of bewildered firefighters from being killed or badly burned when she assumed charge of the group and kept them huddled under wet blankets during one of the runs of the fire across a creek bottom.