

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260364259>

6-Romero Fire 1971

Chapter · February 2014

CITATIONS

0

1 author:



[Ray Ford](#)

Santa Barbara Independent

11 PUBLICATIONS **0** CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Chapter 5

THE ROMERO FIRE

October 6-16, 1971

“Before primitive man learned to make fire, Freud noted, he had to conserve it. But even cavemen had the habit of putting out fires with streams of urine. In doing this, Freud speculated, they engaged in a highly pleasurable, symbolic battle between penis and phallic flames....”

“I think the Freudian view is sheer nonsense,’ says Kenneth Fineman, a psychologist at the University of California, Irvine....’ Most modern psychologists, including those who follow Freud, now agree that firesetting is not a urethral-erotic problem. It’s a problem with expressing aggression. If you have delinquent tendencies and you’re really assertive and someone bugs you, you confront them. You either talk to them or punch them out. But it’s direct. Firesetting is usually very indirect. It’s a symbolic way of getting back at someone you believe has hurt you.”

Diane Swanbrow

LA Times Magazine

PAT RUSS IS AN ARSONIST. He is a drifter now, living mostly in his camper truck, which is outfitted with a color TV to entertain him while he is on the road. There is no place he really calls home. For him there never really has been a home. His early life is spent in Rochester, New York, sharing a house with his mother, 18 brothers and sisters, and his grandfather—who, tragically, is also his father. Like many others who have a history of pathological crime, Russ is both the result and a victim of sexual abuse.

The fires set by Russ may have been a passionate cry for help or a means to gain some sense of control over his life, or possibly revenge. “He grew to like the way fire looked and smelled and sounded,” says Diane Swanbrow in an article which appears in Los Angeles Times Magazine on August 16, 1987. “He liked the comfort and the warmth he got from the flames. But mainly, setting fires gave him a sense of power.”

“See, I could build a fire and burn up anybody I wanted,” Russ says of his motivation, “If I was mad at my mother, I could destroy her without touching her physically. I’d pick out a box and say, ‘This is you,’ and watch the fire destroy it. And after the fire went out, the problem was solved.”

After high school Pat Russ figures, why not make this compulsion his living? For more than a decade he travels around the United States, hiring out as an arsonist. It is not a risk-free life, however. By age 40 he has spent nearly one-half of his life in institutions. He spends seven years in Attica State Prison in New York for fires he sets in his home town of Rochester, one of them causing \$6 million in destruction.

In the 1960s, after leaving Attica, Russ travels to California to try another line of work--there have been too many close calls. By this time he is married, has two daughters, and feels it is time to settle down and have “the perfect middle-class life” everyone in Southern California is supposed to have. Obtaining a job at Knott’s Berry Farm, he begins to put down roots.

Perhaps if all had gone well, Pat Russ might have had a chance. But he and his wife have serious disagreements. Eventually his wife leaves him for another man—not any man, but his brother.

“I felt I’d been dealt a losing hand,” he tells Swanbrow, “and somebody was gonna pay.”

The urge to use the torch began to build inside him once more.

A GROUP OF CAMPERS spot a fire burning along Happy Canyon Road on July 7, 1977 near Figueroa Mountain Road. Before it is contained 1,825 acres are burned. It is kept out of the San Rafael Wilderness only by the efforts of firefighters, who make a strong stand along Figueroa Mountain Road. It costs more than \$1 million in damage, and two lives. Helicopter newscaster Francis Gary Powers—whose U-2 spy plane crash in Russia in 1956 causes a major political crisis for President Dwight Eisenhower—is covering the fire for KNBC-TV. He and his cameraman are killed when it crashes on the return trip home. It is one of more than 100 arson-caused fires started during the year.

From 1973-77, there is an average of 28 incendiary fires each year in the Los Padres National Forest. What is especially alarming is that fact that those responsible are rarely caught—at least not until they have set quite a few more. The psychological profile of the arsonist is such that he will rarely stop after one fire. Pat Russ figures he has set more than 2,000.

In 1977 the total number of arson-caused fires in the Los Padres National Forest skyrockets when two young Santa Barbara men go on a fire-setting rampage during a period from May 31 to September 29, including the Cachuma Fire noted above.

IT HAS BEEN CLEAR SINCE the third or fourth fire set by these men that an arson pattern exists. Though none of these first few fires burns more than seven acres, Forest Service officers realize that if the arsonists are not caught soon, they may threaten to destroy a good deal of the Santa Barbara back country.

Dennis Ensign is the arson specialist for the Los Padres headquarters. During the daytime, a “deterrent” approach is taken, flooding the areas where most of the fires have been set with marked Forest Service vehicles in the hope that whoever is guilty will realize that they are being watched, and stop.

At night he begins a low-key surveillance operation. Dozens of forest service employees, eventually some from other parts of the state, are placed in unmarked cars and hidden at night at strategic intersections near known fire start locations. It is their job to record the license number of every vehicle which travels past each observation point. Heaviest focus is along San Marcos Pass from Painted Cave Road to the top of the pass, along East Camino Cielo, and down Gibraltar Road.

The forest personnel are at their locations from 8-12 pm, the established time frame of previous fires. For three days, nothing happens. On the fourth night, just 30 minutes after the midnight, the surveillance crew has gone home, a fire ignites on East Camino Cielo. The arsonists just miss being caught.

The following day, while a mop-up crew is finishing up fire containment, several young men stop by to watch. One of the crew explains that it has been arson-set and that they have barely missed catching the responsible party. Later, once the case has been solved, Ensign discovers that the fire crew has been talking to the two men who started the fire.

At this point Ensign feels the need to step up the operation. A computer is obtained to sort out the data being fed in from the field. City and County Fire, the Sheriff's Department, and other Southern California forest personnel are brought in and the surveillance area is enlarged to cover all areas in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties where incendiary fires have occurred.

But even with this intense focus by the Forest Service, and local fire and law enforcement agencies, the fires continue.

AFTER THE CACHUMA FIRE on July 31, pursuit of the arsonist becomes top priority. California Department of Forestry (CDF) arson specialists are brought in. They provide more computer equipment and a "motionized" camera which can be placed on a telephone pole. The camera is capable of taking several pictures of each vehicle which goes by, as well as the time at which it passes. Headquarters is set up at the Holiday Inn, occupying an entire wing.

The task force is broken into two teams. One becomes the undercover group and is responsible for surveillance, data input, and data crunching. The second team becomes the investigative group, and takes responsibility for each fire scene, as well as locating witnesses and conducting interviews.

On August 24, at the request of District Attorney Stan Roden, the Santa Barbara News-Press is involved. An anonymous donor has provided enough money to offer a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the arsonists. Through the paper an "arson line" is set up. "This arrangement is sought," Roden says, "in the belief that some members of the public with information might be reluctant to go to the authorities but would be willing to relay the information through the newspaper, with the guarantee that their identities would be protected." This later becomes standardized policy in dealing with arsonists.

The calls begin to come in. Most are crank calls; some are sincere, but none of them are helpful.

On September 6, three more fires break out along Stagecoach Road, East Camino Cielo, and San Marcos Pass Road between 10:55 and 11:45 pm. At this point nerves begin to fray. County Fire Chief William Patterson, in an address to the County Board of Supervisors, suggests that it might be wise to provide temporary road closure in some areas during extreme fire weather.

On November 14, an additional three fires are ignited at about 1 am in the same areas as the previous three fires. Just as they are losing hope that they will be able to apprehend the suspects, a magic call is received on the Hot Line.

The 18-year-old who makes the call is a friend of the arsonists and has been with them on at least one occasion when a fire is set. He has also been shown the incendiary devices used and watched while one of the devices is thrown out of their vehicle at Santa Barbara Research Park. Additional investigation reveals that the Forest Service surveillance teams have seen the defendants' vehicle in the vicinity of some of the fires.

Arrest warrants are obtained and the two men accused of the crimes, whose first names I will call Jimmy and Robby to protect their identities. They are taken into custody on November 17. Jimmy protests that he is innocent, stating "that he did in fact make some [of the] devices but used them only to 'experiment with' and not to set fires, and that the witnesses against him are after cash rewards or other satisfactions."

While he is in jail a conversation is monitored between the defendant and his brother in which the two decide that the brother will arrange to have the "friend" who turned them in beaten up or

otherwise “persuaded not to testify” against the defendant at the trial. Sheriff’s Sargeant John Wells poses as an ex-jail inmate and calls the brother, explaining that he has been asked by the defendant “to do a job on the witness. Wells and the brother meet in a local restaurant. The police officer is given the address of the witness along with instructions “to do what was necessary to keep the witness from testifying.” Both the defendant and his brother are arrested on conspiracy charges.

Given the situation in which the defendant finds himself, on February 16, 1978 Jimmy agrees to plead guilty to four felony counts of arson. He is sentenced to six years in state prison, the maximum term he can be given by Judge John Rickard who calls Jimmy “a rebellious person who threatened a witness against him and showed no remorse for what he and [Robin] had done until after he was jailed.”

THE HEARING TO DETERMINE Robby’s sentence doesn’t occur until April. At one point during the hearing Judge Arden Jensen asks Sneddon what he would do if he were the judge. Sneddon responds that he would send Robby to state prison for the maximum term “and I wouldn’t lose a night’s sleep about it.”

His voice rising at times, Sneddon tries to convince the judge to impose this term. “I mean only five days after the Sycamore Fire we have the Cachuma Fire set by those two individuals. There is no way they could have been unaware of the potential for loss of lives and property damage.

“Any time a person sets a fire in the Santa Barbara area you’re playing Russian roulette.”

John Wells, the Sheriff officer who poses as the undercover agent, also testifies that Robby should get the maximum term. “The fires were set so indiscriminantly,” he says, “it makes me sick to my stomach that someone would drive around our county and set fires anywhere they damned well pleased.”

Despite these pleas, Robby is given a sentence of four years in the California Youth Authority. “That’s meaningless,” says Sneddon, “they can adjust it up or down, but my guess is that he’ll only do about a year.”

In some ways Robby’s personality is typical of those who exhibit an “arson personality.” He has moved to Santa Barbara in 3rd grade and attends Hollister School, La Colina Junior High, and San Marcos High School. “My brother is 8 years older than I and my sister is ten years older,” he explains in a report to his probation officer. “At times even with friends I feel lonely and I feel that to overthrow this lonely feeling I have to prove myself....In the 5th grade I tried smoking cigarettes to be ‘cool’ with some of my friends, and not to be called chicken.”

Things are pretty much okay after this until Robby enters high school in the 10th grade when he begins to smoke pot. While his friends tells him that he doesn’t have to use drugs to “hang” with them, he continues to smoke pot because “all my friends that I hung around with didn’t care for people who didn’t like to get high.”

He also experiments with coke in 10th grade and in 11th grade, and tries LSD with a friend who wants to “drop a tab,” but doesn’t want to do it alone. In all, he uses LSD 70 or 80 times that year, though he stops he says, “because my grades were suffering very bad and they improved after I stopped.”

On August 16, the summer after he graduates from high school, Robby joins the Air Force along with his friend Jimmy, but receives a discharge in December, 1976. Basic Training is an extremely difficult time for him. He fails several inspections. "After the 2nd setback," Robby says, "I became very, very depressed and didn't tell my parents because I felt I had failed in the eyes of my parents." While he is in Tech training he begins to drink heavily.

Because he does not feel he can make it in the Air Force he decides to leave the service, and officials agree to give him an honorable discharge. After this, Robby returns to Santa Barbara where he begins to hang out with Jimmy again, who also has been released from the Air Force.

Not too long after this he gets back into the drug scene. On January 2, Robby is stopped by a traffic officer who arrests him for possession of marijuana, but later the charge is dropped. From May through September, the period during which he and Jimmy are responsible for setting what might have been as many as 105 fires, he starts using acid heavily again.

Sadly, arson has become Robby's way to make up for the self-respect he no longer possesses.

"LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST has a reputation for consistently producing large fires," Fire Control Officer Ben Lyon of the Forest Service states in a summary report on the Romero Fire. The reputation is not entirely undeserved in view of the 1,428,649 acres burned within the protection boundary during the 60 years between 1911 and 1970....the above figures might indicate to the reader a lack of progress in Forest protection."

But while fire control technology has improved dramatically during the past 15 years since the Refugio Fire, risk and hazard have increased at a correspondingly greater rate. Fire occurrence has doubled in the Front Country portion of the Los Padres National Forest since 1960 and arson has become the fastest growing crime" on the South Coast. During 1970-71, 25 of the 41 fires started in the Santa Barbara Ranger District are incendiary.

As a result of the increasing number of man-caused fires and concern expressed by local citizens, a Fire Danger Alert Plan has been developed by the South Coast fire agencies which is to be put into effect during periods of critical fire weather.

Under Phase One of the plan, a "General Alert" is called. Fire patrol of hazardous areas is intensified under this alert, and the newspapers, TV, and radio stations are asked to step-up fire prevention messages. Phase Two, an alert called under extreme fire conditions, involves actual closure of the fire-prone areas.

On October 5, one day before the Romero Fire, a Phase Two alert is put into effect, the third time that summer one had been called. Checkpoints are established that afternoon at the intersections of Highway 154 and East Camino Cielo and Gibraltar and El Cielito Roads. While eight forest personnel man these checkpoints, there are nine other fire prevention officers out in the field, as well as 10-12 vehicles on patrol, saturating the high fire areas.

As part of the fire plan, manpower each day is based upon the day's weather forecast. Under Plan 8, a total of 58 initial attack and prevention personnel are on duty. In addition an eight-man "pick-up" crew composed of UCSB students is hired on the 5th, and a 20-person crew on the 6th. Santa Ynez Mountain Lookouts are staffed. District ranger stations have full crews, pumpers, and water trucks available. Dozer are ready at the Refugio and San Marcos Pass Stations. And the 21-man Los Prietos Hot Shot team is on call at the Santa Barbara Ranger District. It appears the firefighting forces are ready.

Prior to the start of the Romero Fire there has been no rain for 131 straight days. Rainfall has amounted to 13.69 inches during the previous season, 24 per cent below the 100 year average of 18 inches. Rainfall, however, during the past four years has been plentiful—21.56 inches per season—enough to cause the chaparral to grow quite rapidly. The brush has accumulated in thick patches and now, during the current period of drought, it is becoming extremely desiccated. On October 6, a sundowner brings the fuel to a near-dry condition. Forty-five minutes before the fire begins, at the nearest weather station the temperature is 100 degrees, the humidity 9 per cent.

ON OCTOBER 6, PAT RUSS is driving to San Jose to visit his estranged wife when the urge to start another fire overwhelms him. Near Goleta he turns off Highway 101 and begins driving along Cathedral Oaks, Foothill, and other back roads looking for just the right spot—one that is isolated enough, with thick brush and a steep enough slope for the flames to take off.

He finds the spot at about 3:30 pm that afternoon near Bella Vista Drive between Romero Canyon and Ladera Lane. Patrols have driven by this spot at 9 and 10:30 am that morning and at 2:00 pm that afternoon, just an hour-and-a-half earlier. But there is no one there to see Russ at that moment.

Turning around, carefully looking around to make sure that no one is watching, he lights the fuse on the small homemade firebomb, tosses it out the window, and drives off slowly so that he won't attract any attention.

He then continues on his long drive north, unaware of what he has left behind.

THE FIRE IS DISCOVERED 3:57 pm by Howard Fenton, who reports it immediately to the Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Department. Because of its origin along Bella Vista Drive and deep in Picay Canyon, directly behind Summerland, the column of smoke arising from the rapidly spreading fire isn't visible from the La Cumbre Lookout until 4:03 pm. Later, the Forest Service estimates that 7 valuable minutes might have been saved if temporary "mobile lookouts" equipped with field radios had been put in the field.

The dispatcher immediately broadcasts the report on a frequency monitored by all the local fire agencies. Without wasting a second, they all spring into action. At 4:01 pm every Forest Service unit from the Santa Barbara Ranger District is on the way to the fire, including the Hot Shot crew. At 4:02 pm, two aerial tankers are being fed loads of retardant and minutes later the TBM and F7F are in the air. Soon after, four more tankers are on their way from out of town.

Within five minutes after Fenton's report of the fire, the smoke column is 1,500 feet. Photos taken about this time indicate that the Romero Fire has already blackened 30-40 acres. During the initial attack period, lasting from 4:08-5pm, firefighting forces pour in from all over the South Coast.

At 4:08 pm Squad #1 from the Montecito Fire Department arrives with three men, and at 6:09 pm their Engine #1 crew with an additional three men. At 6:10 pm a Forest Service unit arrives from Mountain Drive with five more crew members. During the next hour engine companies from the City of Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, Montecito and Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Departments, and all local Forest Service units respond to the fire scene.

Most come in from the coast side. The crews from the San Marcos Station and Los Prietos Ranger District cut across East Camino Cielo and down Romero Road and begin to work the west flank of the fire. “Well, it’s going to be a long day,” a fireman radios back to headquarters, his voice already tired-sounding. Even at the beginning it is obvious to the men who are first on the fire—because of its location, the weather, and time of day—that it is going to be a major one.

At this point the winds are pushing the flames to the northeast and up into dense brush. Because of the intensity of the blaze, it is almost impossible to make any headway. When Forest Service Fire Control Officer Ben Lyon and Assistant Officer Jerry Berry arrive, the initial attack has failed.

“In order to have been successful,” Lyon estimates, “initial attack forces would have had to arrive between five and fifteen minutes sooner than they did. Immediate detection of the fire....could have made a difference, but even this is highly questionable. On October 6, burning conditions were so critical that any established fire had the potential of escaping initial action, no matter how effective.”

Lyon becomes Fire Boss for the Romero Fire, with Berry acting as Line Boss. “Because it was immediately apparent that the fire would not be readily contained,” Lyon concludes, “I decided to attempt control of it along the East Camino Cielo fuelbreak.”

Meanwhile, City and County Fire Departments are directed to protect homes along Bella Vista and Ladera Lanes, and in Toro Canyon, where the flames are already eating away at the canyon walls and towards several structures.

There, residents are beginning to gather possessions together. One young woman on Toro Canyon Road is seen placing a few belongings in a small suitcase. “Each fire I pack a little less,” she says as she leaves. At 6 pm a house trailer and flat bed truck near where she has been staying are destroyed.

Another resident, C.L. Stegall, spends the hour between 5-6 pm in hectic fashion, removing riding equipment, saddles, and other tack from a shed. But because of the flames and lack of transportation, he is unable to trailer his four horses or the one tame ram he owns from the area. Spotting a large field that is mostly clear of brush, he spreads oats throughout it, and is able to coax them into the open area. The animals spend the evening contentedly munching on the oats, despite the flames burning on the canyon walls to either side.

By 6 pm the fire has already spread to the crest of East Camino Cielo, and burns rapidly through the grass-covered fuelbreak. But because the break is wide, and the grass burns at a low intensity, the pumpers are able to douse the flames there.

Shortly after dark, a sundowner begins, and like in the Coyote Fire, the fire line turns and begins to make a downhill run, burning on a hot wide front which sweeps across Bella Vista and Ladera Lanes, destroying four homes. At the home of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Fenton, things went from being relatively calm to critical within a few minutes as the flames swooped down on them. They have decided to stay at their newly-built luxurious home.

“We debated where it would be safest when the fire passed us and decided on the pool,” she tells a reporter. With the flames swirling right over their heads, Mrs. Fenton chops off pieces of hose to use to breathe through, they climb into the swimming pool and duck underwater, staying their for 20 minutes while the fire crowned through the trees overhead. They are lucky. Not only are their lives spared, but somehow the house does not burn either.

By daylight Thursday, the fire has burnt through all of Toro Canyon, from its base at East Valley Road to the top of the Santa Ynez Mountains, an eastward spread of about 2 miles during the night. At 6 am, 3,600 acres have burned.

The plan for Thursday is to hold the fire at the fuelbreak on the top and construct a line along the bottom flank to keep the fire from spreading down into Summerland and the Carpinteria foothills. As for the east flank, the direction in which the hottest parts of the fire are heading, fire personnel search desperately for a ridgeline accessible enough to be used as a holding line. But the mountain wall behind Carpinteria is extremely steep and it will be almost impossible to build such a line.

Bombers attack this flank despite this, hammering at the flames, trying to slow the fire's progress enough for the ground troops to gain the needed foothold.

"They come early, the men, women and youngsters who arrive by car, motorcycle, bicycle, or afoot to watch the air attack pilots and bombers at work," Katherine McCloskey writes about the attack which is being waged from the Municipal Airport. The airtankers are now not only indispensable to fighting fires, but famous as well.

"How'd I get into this?" the pilots are asked. "Oh," they say—a look towards the Romero Fire beating a relentless way up and down, depending on which way the wind blows at the moment, 'I'm a retread. I liked flying, came back to it, when the war ended....'

"It is that roar people first hear here. They know, by the relentless steady plod of that sound that the bombers have made their runs to the fire and are returning.

"Once heard, there's no chance—ever—of mistaking that sound for the breathtaking, relentless skyward thrust of a jet.

"But that's why the attack bombers are what the pilots want. They are the proven planes. The ones with the reputations for steady persistence, valor, and endurance—no prima donna moods or whims for these planes.

"People know. And watch. Admire, and respect."

Though the pilots bomb the fire hard, and often, their efforts cannot be followed up on soon enough and for the first few days their efforts prove ineffective.

Considerable progress is, however, made by mid-afternoon on the other sides of the fire when an unexpected marine layer causes the fire to lay down a bit. Throughout the morning the fire has consumed only an additional 550 acres, most of it in Oil Canyon and Arroyo Paradon, east of Toro Canyon.

There is also some success on the lower eastern side of the fireline, now the responsibility of CDF. This southeastern line is considered critical because of its proximity to the city of Carpinteria. On the upper, northeastern half things do not look as encouraging because the Forest Service is unable to contain the flames because there is simply no place to bring a tractor line down the mountain.

However, fire officials are heartened by the weather forecast for that evening. Issued at 2:30 pm, northerly downslope winds are predicted for the evening, mostly light, with only occasional gusts to 15 miles per hour down the main canyons. A revised update is even more optimistic, with winds not to exceed 8 miles per hour, humidity in the range of 80-90 per cent, and the possibility of fog below the fire camp by the next morning.

“The fire view from the top of Santa Monica Canyon seemed dogged down to a ragged half-mile of smouldering perimeter,” News-Press reporter Bill Downey writes. “It was making more smoke than damage at that time.

“Occasional fingers of flaring orange flame gushed out of the smoke. The brush was too heavy for a man to enter from the front. The fire moved at its own speed, at a rate of steady consumption that ate up stands of brush that hadn’t been burned off in years.

“If we can bulldoze from the lower end of the canyon on a line diagonal to the fire and make it to the top of the hills over there,” says Ed Hud Banks of the State Division of Forestry, “we might have a chance to pinch it off.”

If, meaning if the winds stay favorable, and if they are are no setbacks, and if there are no unexpected surges elsewhere.

A team of four bulldozers, each with two-man crews, is assigned construction of the pincher line along the eastern edge of the fire from the base of the mountain up along the edge of Santa Monica Canyon. By early evening things look good.

“Dusk was setting in,” Downey adds, describing the mood, “The air bombers hung above the roiling masses of smoke that climbed a mile above the canyon. The wind was southwest and gentle. It seemed fairly favorable, weather wise, Banks agreed.

“Above, the bombers were trying to dump as much retardant on the head of the fire as possible before it got dark. It looked then like Hud Banks’ prayers would be answered.

“At the time no one dreamed that in four hours four men would die in smouldering Santa Monica Canyon. That others would be severely burned and that another would come within a hairsbreadth of losing his life.”

At about 9 pm, running short on fuel and ready for a new shift to replace them, the tractor crew turns back towards the valley. On their way down the men continue to improve and widen the track they have made earlier, at one point dropping down a spur ridge into Santa Monica Canyon, the tractors four abreast, to improve access to that area.

Just as they begin to work their way up the ridge and back to the main line, severe downcanyon winds commence, and with a great deal more force than predicted. The winds are turbulent and extremely dry, causing the entire eastern flank of the fire to come alive, particularly along the lower half of the line where the eight men are working. Suddenly, they find themselves in a desperate situation.

“When it comes,” one reporter writes, “there is literally a tremendous ‘blowup’ of flames and fire, with a vacuum. The air, already at a high temperature from the fire, is instantly sucked out of large areas.”

JERRY HOTCHKISS IS a graduate of Carpinteria High School and his dream has always been to go into business for himself. After spending two years in the Navy, and having learned how to operate heavy equipment, he starts an earth-moving business with a pick-up truck, then adds a forklift, and later a backhoe attachment. Finally, after saving enough money, Hotchkiss is able to buy his own bulldozer.

When the Romero Fire starts he is assigned the job of building the dozer line near Santa Monica Canyon with the other men. Technically, he is not an employee of the Forest Service. Instead, Jerry Hotchkiss signs up as an independent contractor, which means that the Forest Service is not responsible for him should anything happen.

Jimmy Ames is a veteran catskiner who is experienced in working on fires, including the Coyote Fire in 1964. His instincts honed by these experiences, he senses the wind's change and what it bodes.

"We've got to get out of the canyon, and back up on the ridge," he warns Hotchkiss. "It's becoming too dangerous down here." But as Ames begins to inch his dozer back uphill, Hotchkiss makes the decision to stay where he is. Just at that point the fire turns into an inferno. From above, having escaped the searing heat, Ames watches, seeing the headlights of the tractors surrounded by flames, the men unable to get out.

"Hotchkiss probably could have escaped injury if he would have made his way to a shallow pool of stagnant water near a cattle hollow," Ames tells people afterwards.

While hundreds of people line Carpinteria Valley roads and streets to watch the fire's downhill surge, unmindful of the tragedy unfolding above them, Jerry Hotchkiss and another dozer operator, Leonard Kaiser, run down into the canyon, trying vainly to outrace the flames, but the burning front catches them. Still, they are fortunate. When the two of them stagger out of the brushy inferno, their clothes on fire, and exposed flesh burned and blistered, at least they are still alive.

Four others are not so lucky. Caught between the potential escape route down Santa Monica Canyon and almost sure safety up on the ridgeline, the men choose the uphill route. They are found at 2 am, three of them beneath their tractors, where they have taken refuge as they have been taught to do. The fourth man is found about 15 feet away, near a toppled Edison tower which has been melted by the extreme heat. The combination of heat and fire has literally sucked the air out of their lungs. They have died even before the flames touched them. On one of the victims is a charred watch, stopped at 10 pm, the time apparently of their deaths.

Despite the tragic deaths of these men, the word has gone out—"Do everything you can to save the Carpinteria watershed." Early the next morning Fire Boss Ben Lyon takes a long look at maps, weather reports, and information coming back in from the line crews, hot shots, and the air tankers. "Our job now is keeping the fire out of urban areas," he tells his men. At that moment the southeast flank is about two miles from downtown Carpinteria. "We've got to stay on top of it. We have to go up and across the ridges and get to the other side."

By this time a full, bright sun has topped the foothills and weary firefighters eat breakfast and prepare for the effort to save Carpinteria. The food is being prepared by a volunteer crew of minimum security inmates from the California Men's Colony at San Luis Obispo. They may be the only happy men on the fire line, enjoying the few day's freedom and what is for them a huge salary—35 cents an hour. "Maybe it is hard and hot work," one of the grizzled men says, "but it sure beats being inside."

"The men at the fire camp are tired," News-Press writers Dewey Schurman and Bill Downey write. "Exhausted after a night and a day on the fire line, some try to catch some sleep in disposable paper bag bedrolls laid anywhere there is shade. Others eat hamburgers and drink cold drinks at

tables set up in the middle of an old potato field. But some of the men, too tired for eating or sleeping, just walk around the camp, looking occasionally at the ever-present smoke, still billowing from hot spots in Romero Canyon behind the camp.”

“It’s hard to sleep, no matter how tired you are, when the fire’s there in the back of your head,” one of the men comments. Jim Morgan, who is a student at UCSB, like many others has been rushed into the field with barely any training. “There wasn’t even enough time to show the men how to use the tools they had,” he says, “They just had to learn it all at once.”

At base camp, Ben Lyon continues to pour over the maps. During midday the wind has been negligible and mostly the Forest Service crews wage a holding action but Lyon knows this may change once evening approaches. He plans as if this is a military campaign, looking to see where the enemy is the most vulnerable, trying to shore up defenses where he is weakest, attacking when conditions favor his men, retreating when they favor the fire. The attack, when it should come, will most likely be near Divide Peak, which seems to offer the last hope of keeping the fire out of Ventura County.

For the moment Lyon waits in frustration, for his afternoon update on the weather, praying that there will not be a repeat of last night’s sundowner.

AT THE JACKSON RANCH fire camp in Montecito Clive Countryman, a fire behavior expert from the Riverside Fire Lab, and George Ellis, a meteorologist from the National Weather Service, are huddled, attempting to predict what conditions will confront the men on the fire line that night. They study the latest weather information and check data obtained from the flight of test balloons which have been put up in various parts of the county. Countryman, a veteran Forest Service officer, has originated the modern art of predicting fire behavior forecasting in 1945.

“We can’t be right all the time,” Ellis says. “That’s something that’s beyond the state of the art at this stage of the game.

“But we have hit the major weather changes quite well,” he insists, “The problem is that in predicting weather for a fire zone we are only working with a small area, a few square miles. And the men in the field don’t care about what’s happening up the coast, they want to know what is going to happen in the canyon they’re working in.”

“And,” Countryman adds, “the winds along this coast are probably the most unpredictable in the country because of the variables of the normal marine conditions and the continental weather patterns meeting each other. Add to the problem the unpredictable santa ana winds....and you have some idea why we win a few and lose a few in our forecasts.”

When Ben Lyon receives his weather report for that evening he relaxes. Conditions are favorable and it looks like they will be able to hold the line outside of Carpinteria Valley.

“UP ON THE FIRE LINES it is another story,” the News-Press reports. The air tankers hover over massive clouds of gray-white smoke like disturbed hornets. It flames up in one spot and the control plane sends in a ship to drop its load of red-dust fire retardant. The old Navy SBD slides in, its prop taking big bites out of the smoke and suddenly it is out of sight. The pilot seems to be flying on instruments through the smoke. Then he throttles out and climbs for elevation.

“Then the foot troops move in. The fire has burned off the heaviest pockets of brush and been smothered out by air drops in some and the work becomes the putting out of hundreds of small fires that burn like abandoned campsites in every direction. The work is in 95 degree heat that is 20 degrees hotter after the fire has passed.

“The men work in spurts then hang on their shovels to get their breath. The smoke and heat drive out the oxygen in the air and physical exertion starves the lungs. The sensation is like an asthma attack.

“The ten thousand ‘campfires’ burn on.”

BY SATURDAY MORNING not much has changed. The valley is still secure, though the fire in the foothills still remains out of control. On the eastern flank eight bulldozers gouge a wide break on the ridge above Rincon Canyon that leads to Divide Peak, described by Lyon as a “secondary measure” should the fire get that far. “No problem is expected for Carpinteria tonight unless the weather changes—and no adverse change is forecast,” he tells the public. “Right now we feel pretty secure.”

But that night, contrary to reports fed to him by Ellis and Countryman, the foothills above Carpinteria again explode into flames when the sundowner winds return, destroying a great portion of the watershed. By 10 pm the fire has burned to the town’s edge near Carpinteria High School.

Eventually sea breezes do what firefighters cannot--turning the direction of the fire away from town, but unfortunately also eastward towards Ventura. Unlike the Coyote Fire which burned across the mountainside at a fierce speed, the flames burn at a steady rate, continuing slowly to the east. But because of the steepness of the Santa Ynez Mountains and the lack of ridgelines there is still no place from which to gain a foothold. The fire burns in a continuous three mile line from the foothills to the mountain crest.

“This is not a good place to fight a fire,” Don Roberts of the Forest Service explains to reporters, “The terrain is against us, the weather is against us. It is not tractor country. It’s tough to get in firelines.”

At this point Lyons makes the decision to concentrate his troops at Divide Peak. More and more he pins his hopes on the ability of the armada of planes he has at his disposal to hold down the intensity of the fire and slow it enough for the tractors and the hot shot crews to establish a line that can be held. On Saturday alone 300,000 gallons of fire retardant are dropped by the fleet of 17 planes.

Still, Lyon worries. For the next three days the aircraft fly continuous sorties, most from the Goleta air base, some from Burbank, supporting a desperate holding action by the ground crews as the flames work their way towards Divide Peak. “We still have some very serious problems up there,” Lyons says, “it is by no means under control—or even contained.”

On Tuesday, the fire burns its way out of a canyon below the 4,700 foot peak, advancing in a wedge several hundred feet wide. “If we lose Rincon Ridge,” Lyon adds, “and we have to abandon the break we worked on the last three days, it’s the last line we have.” Oldtimers have told him that fires don’t cross Rincon Creek, which is still to the east and could provide a natural firebreak if the flames cross his man-made one, but this is not reassuring to Ben Lyon.

“It’s ahead of us, and maybe if the ridge goes, this fire won’t cross the creek,” he says hopefully.

But the Rincon firebreak proves vulnerable and the flames leap over it, heading towards the County line.

ON THE MOUNTAIN THE hotshot crews work furiously. Throughout the fire they have been helicoptered in to the hot spots, sprinting away from the choppers as soon as they drop in for a landing, where, with pulaskis, shovels, and axes they hack openings in the brush on the steep, inaccessible places where the bulldozers cannot go. The pulaski which these hand crews use is a mean looking tool—a combination of axe and mattox which is kept razor sharp. The hot shots take care of their tools just like a marksman would his rifle. It can cut through brush like a knife or dig them up by the root, whatever is needed. Wielded by the arms of these tough young men, it does its job well.

At camp in the evening the price paid is evident. “Faces caked with dirt, shoes heavy with sludge, grimy, sweaty, and quiet—they trudge past the long lines of the other hot shot crews waiting to hit the Romero Fire at Divide Peak,” Katherine McCloskey reports. “Nobody’s talking. That’s the strange part. There is no kidding. No catcalls at one another. No in-crew joking. Nobody asks what it’s like out there. They all know. They’ve been there before.

“But that was about it. They were too tired, too beat, too hot, too weary to do much more than give a polite grin.”

Not tired enough, though, to slip on the hats they wear when off duty. Arched above the Forest Service insignia on each of the caps is “Los Prietos Hot Shots.” Beneath is the slogan Incendi Proliatores, which in Latin means “Fighter of Fires.”

On Wednesday more than 2,000 men are supported by what is described as “the heaviest air assault ever mounted against a fire in Santa Barbara County.” The oldtimers are right. The fire does not cross Rincon Creek. Though it has blossomed to 14,500 acres in size, after nine days of furious battle, the Rincon Fire has been contained. On Saturday, October 16th, it is finally under control.

“FIRE IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD,” Barney Brantingham writes in his Santa Barbara News-Press column after the fire.

“It’s four dead hardhat bulldozer operators and two more with burn injuries, caught in a fire-storm trying to save a rancher’s avocados, a luxury Montecito home or a shack in Carpinteria.

“It’s mud slides and flooding the next hard rain figures to touch off.

“It’s beautiful and it’s horrible,” to a Goleta girl, 11, watching a jagged line of fire descending on Carpinteria at midnight.

“It’s more than a couple million dollars in damages.

“It’s the tragedy of a firefighter’s widow and children and the heartbreak of a lost painting collection or a dream house gone up in smoke.

“It’s a brave woman standing in the ashes of her home, telling how she’s going to rebuild.

“It’s the dawn to dusk throb and roar of B-17s and other fire bombers--and the FAA reporting not a single complaint from airport neighbors.

“It’s lines of cars pulled off roads in Carpinteria as people quietly watch the advancing flames,

their backs to the ocean.

“It’s wondering what kind of idiot started the arson-suspected fire.

“It’s a new insight that in spite of all the firemen’s knowhow, courage and technology, we’re pretty much at the mercy of the elements--the fire that kills and destroys, the vegetation it devours and the capricious wind that steers.”

IT IS NEARLY TWO YEARS after the Romero Fire that Pat Russ is charged with the crime of arson. In fact to this point, though arson is strongly suspected, there is no proof that it actually occurred. The origin of the fire in Picay Canyon, approximately 100 feet north of Bella Vista Drive, is in an uphill and difficult to access location, not a place where someone would accidentally start a fire. This makes the initial investigators suspicious.

Numerous reports of suspects are investigated. One is of a “hippie-type” group but they are never located. Another is of a red-bearded man riding a motorcycle with a girl on back who is spotted leaving the area shortly after the fire starts. After use of considerable manpower, the pair is located but their story is plausible enough to eliminate them as suspects. An 18-year old is seen on Stearn’s Wharf wearing a Forest Service shirt, and it is discovered that the young man and a friend had been caught the day before the fire illegally inside the fire closure area near Romero Canyon. But after intense questioning, they too, are not considered suspects.

“With the absence of physical evidence and eye witnesses, it is impossible to make an absolute conclusion as to the cause of the fire,” Special Forest Service Agent William Dyer concludes a month later. “However, certain circumstances tend to indicate that the fire was of incendiary origin....It is recommended that the file be kept open in this case as investigation of future fires in this area may develop significant leads.”

After Russ arrested in Orange County for a similar crime the string of horrible arsons he is responsible for begins to unravel. In August, 1972, the Santa Ana City Fire Department marshall who has investigated the crime for which Russ has been arrested is contacted by a state parole agent who says that the accused man wants to talk to him. At the meeting he confesses to starting a number of fires, including one in Malibu and the Romero Fire.

On April 13th, 1973, Pat Russ is indicted and arrested on first degree murder charges stemming from the deaths of the four men who died in the Romero Fire. He is brought to Santa Barbara from Atascadero State Hospital where he has been sent after indictment on the Orange County charges.

On June 28, after testimony by local psychiatrist Donald Patterson, review of mental reports from the state hospital, and a statement by Richard Dilz, chief criminal investigator for the CDF, Superior Court Judge Charles Stevens declares Russ legally sane and sets an August 3 trial date.

However, on September 20, he is found not guilty by reason of insanity to four counts of second degree murder and is returned to the custody of Atascadero State Hospital.

Four years later he is set free.