

BRIEF SUMMARY - RATTLESNAKE FIRE
Mendocino National Forest - July 9, 1953

The Chrome fire in State protected territory was set by an incendiary early in the afternoon of July-9, 1953. It was successfully controlled by State Division of Forestry suppression crews.

The incendiary then started the Rattlesnake fire at approximately 2:20 P.M. on the same afternoon. The build-up in organization, scouting, planning and suppression action was satisfactory according to accepted fire fighting principles. The fire - pushed by a southeast wind - spread in a westerly direction up slope all afternoon and during the evening hours.

8:00 P.M.

Turbulent wind activity caused spotting from the main fire below the Alder Springs road about .4 mile from Powder House Turn. The Missionary spot fire probably started from this activity.

8:15 P.M.

The Missionary spot fire was inspected by a forest officer. It was decided it probably would run uphill some 300 feet to the ridge, at which time fire fighting crews could start from the ridge top, build flank lines down each side and control it. At this same time the owner of a heavy bulldozer decided not to send his equipment to the spot fire because of the steep terrain and risk to the tractor by rolling. A tractor line was constructed along the top of the ridge above the spot fire.

9:00 P.M.

The southeast wind which had been blowing all afternoon and early evening subsided and the Missionary spot fire died down. A decision was made to suppress it by direct attack. The first crew of Missionaries consisting of four men, led by a straw boss with some previous training and fire experience, was sent in to the Missionary spot fire.

9:30 P.M.

Fourteen more missionaries were sent to work on the Missionary spot fire under a regularly employed seasonal fire foreman who had several years of previous training and fire experience.

9:45 P.M.

A regular forest officer and four more missionaries were dispatched to the Missionary spot with lunches for all of the men. The regular-forest officer had several years previous fire training and experience.

10:00 P.M.

The westerly change of wind became effective and during the next few moments several spot fires from above the Alder Springs road were started below the road 300 to 400 feet from Powder House Turn.

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Pumper trucks were immediately brought into play to quench the spot fires which started below the road. There was another spot about 300 feet below the road which was not visible to the tanker crews.

The two Forest Service fire overhead on the Missionary spot discussed the increasing fire activity near Powder House Turn. They conjectured whether to go up to the bulldozer line 300 feet away and eat their lunch or to stay on the spot fire. They also discussed the safety aspects of the missionary spot fire in case there was a blow-up from the main fire. Apparently it was decided that the Missionary spot did not afford enough safe area. The entire crew then withdrew to the small draw on the east side of the Missionary spot fire to eat their lunches - a spot hidden from view of the main fire near Powder House Turn.

10:00 to 10:15 P.M.

This unseen lower spot fire became visible and instead of travelling directly up slope to the road, which was normally expected, the jet-like effect of a stronger air current caused it to spread rapidly toward the north in the direction of Powder House Saddle. Hose lines were started down to the draw from Powder House Turn in an attempt to stop it with water.

During these same few moments, a forest officer ran over toward the Missionary spot to warn them of danger.

The rapid spread of the fire from the draw was heading directly toward the forest officer and his vantage point. With the information which was immediately available to him, he gave escape instructions to the best of his ability. The first instruction issued was to "come out of there." The crew started out in an orderly manner without haste, thinking they were going to another fire. It became apparent to the forest officer that all of them would not have time to escape up the ridge and his next instruction was for the lower group to "go east" and away from fire.

The full effect of the sudden wind change through the small saddle at Powder House Turn caused the east side of the tongue of fire to become the front and spread rapidly down canyon in an easterly direction.

Nine men going uphill in a northeasterly direction had time to reach the top of the ridge. The other 15 men, including 2 forest officers, kept going in an easterly direction retreating away from what had been the eastern flank with the objective of reaching the top of the ridge. It was only a matter of a few minutes before the entire canyon was burned and the 15 men overtaken by the flames. The rate of fire spread was six times as great during the blow-up as its run all afternoon and during the early evening hours.

11:30 P.M. (Approx.)

Two tractors were started clearing out the Powder House road and preparing it for firing so as to hold this new run of the fire out of Grindstone Canyon. When it was determined that the Missionaries could not possibly

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be in the narrow strip between the road and the edge of the burn on Powder House Ridge, backfiring was started. Firing began at approximately midnight and was completed to the bottom of the hill near the Gillaspay ranch by about 4:00 A.M. This action controlled the north flank of the fire and stopped the threat to Grindstone Canyon. Action on the fire beyond this point had no bearing on the tragedy or the search and recovery of the bodies of those who perished.

Details of final suppression action were not covered by the investigation. It should be noted that the suppression action was carried to a successful conclusion and in an orderly manner. Final control was obtained at 5:20 A.M. on July 11 after the fire had burned a total of 1200 acres.

11:30 P.M. (approx.)

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