

**SANTA BARBARA CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT**

**Report of Activities**

**During the**

# **GREAT COYOTE FIRE**

**22-24 September 1964**



**By E. L. (Lou) Dartanner**

## FOREWORD

The following report is not an account of the entire Coyote Fire. It is a narrative of the activities directly concerning the Santa Barbara City Fire Department, its equipment, and its personnel.

Unfortunately, we can not even begin to relate the many reports of heroic actions by our men on the lines. Men who continued to fight back the relentless wall of flame, time after time after time. Men who somehow found the energy to keep in the battle without food or rest.

We in the fire service never really realized how many kind, wonderful friends we had. The residents who volunteered not only to fight the fire, but who came forth with food, soft drinks, coffee, and cigarettes for our men. They ran many errands for the men at the stations. They offered their homes for evacuees. They cooperated with an ensuing burning ban.

We felt the brotherhood of the City of Santa Barbara, too. From the mayor, who was on the scene almost constantly, to the

messenger boys. Members from the Water Department, the Street Department, the Public Works Department, Civilian Defense Office, not to mention the Police Department, whose members "ate" almost as much smoke as some of the firefighters.

And thank God for mutual aid. What wonderful neighbors we have! From all over California they came: Fresno to San Bernardino. Working under a tremendous handicap of not being familiar with the area, they raced from scene to scene, lending desperately needed assistance to local crews.

The fire continued to race northward and eastward to the "back country" of Santa Barbara County. It was not fully controlled until 1 October 1964. Santa Barbara City firemen continued to answer calls for spot fires and smoldering logs through October.

But the battle had been won. We hope a lesson has been learned. We certainly can be proud of our Department and the way its members worked for so long to conquer our enemy.



## Tuesday, 22 September 1964

At 2:03 p.m., an alarm was sounded at Santa Barbara Fire Department Headquarters for a brush fire at Coyote Road and Mountain Drive.

Engine 2, Engine 7, Water Tank 1, Water Tank 7, and Squad 1, with Cars 33, 39, 49, and 47, were initially dispatched. Montecito Fire Department, on automatic mutual aid, rolled its two engines and its squad. A United States Forest Service pumper, stationed at Montecito Station 2, also responded.

A large column of smoke was immediately visible and this was reported to the Alarm Office by responding equipment.

Engine 7 had hooked up to the hydrant at Coyote and Mountain, but not without considerable difficulty from extreme heat, and the crew attacked the fire in this area.

Upon arrival at the scene, the U.S. Forest Service rig immediately began working the west edge of the fire. Montecito Engine 2 hooked up to the lower hydrant on Coyote Road, below Mountain Drive, laying a working line east off Coyote Road on the south flank, making a stand there. Almost immediately the fire, pushed by a 10 to 12 mile per hour easterly wind, jumped Coyote Road, now burning east and north of Coyote Road.

The fire was running parallel to Mountain Drive and jumped Mountain Drive to the north. Montecito's Engine 1 and Squad 1 attempted to get their pre-connected lines into operation, but before they could do so, the fire went over them, burning four firemen and scorching their apparatus. These units were out of service for some time after this, one because of mechanical difficulty and the other because its crew had suffered burns.

In the meantime, the Fire Department switchboard was jammed with reports of the fire and the remaining Engine 1 crew assisted the Operator in answering the telephones and radios.

At 2:18 p.m. a second alarm was called, and Engine 3 and Engine 1 responded, with instructions to proceed up Cold Springs Road and west on Mountain Drive. This pulled all personnel out of Headquarters except the Alarm Operator, one Fire Inspector, and two Secretaries. The Master Mechanic, in accordance with second alarm procedures, responded to the fire. The Training Officer had responded from the Drill Tower on the first alarm. Recall of all off-duty personnel was immediately begun by the Junior Secretary and the Inspector. The Senior Secretary assisted the Operator in handling the switchboard and radio. Engine 6 reported to Station 1 on automatic move-up and the crew assisted in answering phones and radios and in recall.

Ironically, the Santa Barbara County Fire Department received its first report of the fire at 2:09 p.m. from the Federal Aviation Agency's control tower at Municipal Airport Goleta. Tower operators, nearly 15 miles from the fire, reported the rising head of smoke. The County Fire Chief started toward the area and when he saw the size of the smoke head, immediately called all three trucks in the Goleta Valley District. He also alerted the northern county stations to ready their bulldozers.

One County truck reported to Coyote Road and Mountain Drive, laying a line and assisting in this area, and then in the Hyde Area. The other two units worked the fire line along Mountain Drive.

The Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Department dispatched one unit from its Summerland station at 2:20 p.m., sending it to work with the Montecito crews.

Upon arrival at the fire area, Engine 1 laid a line on the lower side of Mountain Drive, eventually saving several homes there.

Santa Barbara Squad 1 and Water Tank 1, with the Battalion Chief in Car #39, were directed to proceed east on Mountain Drive

to try to get ahead of the fire. However, they were forced to stop momentarily when dense smoke hampered visibility. They came upon the two Montecito rigs, racing west, about 200 yards from Coyote Road.

The fire quickly headed up the steep hillsides north of Mountain Drive and toward some homes in the Hyde Area. Engine 3 hooked up and pumped water for the Forest Service rigs fighting the fire in this nearly inaccessible area. Most of the water was shuttled to the working engines by small pickups. The roads were very steep and the brush extremely dense. Many structures in this area were saved by joint efforts by the Santa Barbara Fire Department, Montecito Fire Department, and the United States Forest Service, aided by local residents.

The Forest Service units in the Hyde Area asked for a 2 ½" line from the hydrant in the 200 block of East Mountain Drive up the road through the Hyde Area. Engine 7 laid a 1550 foot line, but when the Forest Service was advised that they would have to furnish its own pumper to supply this line, they decided they would not use it after all. At this time, Water Tank 1 and Engine 7 both needed more hose and were instructed to return to the station to reload.

The Forest Service dispatcher had been alerted of the fire's progress by its pumper at the scene. At about 2:25 p.m., two air tankers from the Goleta Airport were making drops on the fire with fire retardant chemical. There were eventually to be ten air tankers on the fire. [The tanker base was at Santa Barbara Airport.]



Two City-owned water tankers, equipped with fire department connections, were requested to report to Headquarters Station. There, they were loaded with water and sent to the fire area with one City fireman assigned to each as a guide.

The Forest Service had set up a command post at the Westmont College athletic field, and a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was called at 5:30 p.m. to plan and coordinate activities. It was decided at this meeting that the U.S. Forest Service would assume firefighting responsibility of all areas north of Mountain Drive and the four coastal departments would assume responsibility for everything south of Mountain Drive. The Forest Service agreed to feed all Civilian Defense personnel that may have to be called to the fire.

At dusk, a strong, hot, northeast wind began blowing and whipped the quiet fire into an inferno from Cold Spring Road to Mountain Drive to Coyote Road. The fire reversed its direction of travel and was heading into the populated areas south of Mountain Drive, toward the Westmont College and the City's Riviera.

Engine 5 was sent east on Mountain Drive to the Terminal Reservoir area to lay a line and pump to a Montecito rig located along Mountain Drive. Engine 3 and Engine 1 were deployed above Mountain Drive, in about the 1000 block. They, with a Montecito pumper, were supplied with water by a Carpinteria-Summerland truck pumping from a hydrant on Mountain Drive. Their efforts saved, among other structures, the Pickett home.

A stand was made at Westmont College and joint efforts by Santa Barbara City and Montecito firemen saved the college buildings from major damage.

When the fire quieted down, Engine 3 was dispatched to the Westmont Drive, Circle Drive, Stanwood Drive area. All residents of this section were ordered to evacuate.

With the fire heading toward the Riviera, a stand was to be made at Stanwood Drive. Engine 3, Engine 6, and Engine 5 were among the equipment working this area. Engine 3 and Engine 5 patrolled lower Stanwood and Engine 6 laid lines to a dwelling at 1960 Stanwood Drive, where they fought the fire with its intense heat and dense smoke and saved the home. Engine 2 was stationed on a private road above Conejo and below Stanwood at Sycamore Creek to keep the brush wet. The fire did not get into this area and the line on Stanwood Drive held. Fire-fighting efforts on this stand were aided by a change in wind direction. Humidity in the fire area was extremely low and the temperature very high, even though it was late evening.

At 10:25 p.m., a report was received by radio that the small dormitory at Westmont College had burned.

Confirmation was received that 10 Los Angeles County units, requested earlier, were being dispatched and should begin arriving in Santa Barbara at 1:00 a.m. Wednesday.



Mutual aid from Ventura County was requested shortly after 10:00 p.m. and four trucks and two chief's cars arrived "Code 3" at 11:20 p.m. The crews were immediately briefed on the conditions of the fire and dispatched to the fire. Each unit was provided with a City fireman to act as guide or "bird dog" and a walkie-talkie to provide communications on our own frequency. Ten minutes later, two more Ventura County pumpers arrived, were briefed, equipped, and dispatched. Car #8 was sent with these rigs to the Chelham Way area and joined a City water tanker and a Montecito unit and directed fire fighting until the fire was put down here.

At 11:45 p.m., Coyote Road was added to the evacuation list.



## Wednesday, 23 September 1964

Mayor MacGillivray ordered food for breakfasts from Prips to supplement the sandwiches, cookies, donuts, coffee, soft drinks, and other snacks provided throughout the afternoon and evening by the Ladies Auxiliary, Salvation Army, private residents, and other organizations and individuals.

The Mayor also ordered the City Recreation Center, 100 East Carrillo Street, and the Santa Barbara High School, 700 East Anapamu Street, activated as evacuation centers for refugees of the fire.

Colonel Farley, Assistant City Civil Defense Director, notified the Alarm Office that he would be either at the Recreation Center, 5-328, or at City Hall, 6-7171.

At 12:30 a.m., three Air Force fire fighters had reported to Station 7 for assignment.

Main power lines throughout the fire area were down and service as far west as the Goleta Valley was interrupted.

An estimate was received that 11 homes had been destroyed. This was a rough guess by the firemen on the lines.

James Quick, a regional Coordinator for the California Disaster Office, notified the Alarm office that the Civilian Defense Center in the Courthouse basement had been activated and he will be at LD-3 or LD-4.

Chief May asked the Alarm Office to determine the location of the badly needed Los Angeles County equipment. Using LD-1, the Senior Secretary was able to contact the Ventura County Sheriff's office and ascertained that some equipment was just passing through Camarillo. It was 1:05 a.m. Their estimated time of arrival in Santa Barbara was 2:20 a.m., when they were to meet an Assistant Chief at Salinas and Highway 101. They began arriving at 2:12 a.m.

City street maps were provided by Lyons Van and Storage, and maps were issued to each apparatus and chief's car after the chiefs had been briefed at Station 1.

The Los Angeles units were to report to our Battalion Chief in the Stanwood Drive area, where they would be dispatched, with our Fire Marshal, to cover the area from the 1900 block of Stanwood Drive to Stanwood and El Cielito.

Chief officers from Santa Barbara City, Santa Barbara County, and Los Angeles County had a conference around 3:00 a.m. and decided to backfire from Stanwood Road east. However, this backfire proved ineffective because the brush was so wet.

During the early morning hours the fire was relatively quiet in an area bounded by Stanwood Drive from Sycamore Canyon to Parma Road, on a line to the 100 block of West Mountain Drive.

Before dawn, the Los Angeles County equipment was requested by the Forest Service and was sent from the Stanwood area to Gibraltar Road.

Until dawn, most of the men on the lines concentrated on hitting hot spots in the Stanwood Road area and the Westmont-Coyote Road sections.

At 6:00 a.m., the first containers of food were picked up from Prips and taken to Station 7, where crews were brought in from the lines to eat as quickly as reliefs could be arranged. This was the first hot meal most had eaten since noon Tuesday. At 7:00 a.m., the remainder of the food was ready and taken to Station 1 for the crews there.

Due to the unusually high volume of water being used, the City Water Department had to by-pass into El Cielito Reservoir and continued to do so throughout the day.

During the morning, the Senior Secretary converted the Captain's Office into an information center. The County Fire Department radio and the State radio were both put into this office to remove as much confusion as possible from the Alarm office. The Civilian Defense Warning Center Board was also turned toward this office. Maps of the

City and of the south coast area were taped on the wall and the fire areas were colored in red pencil. This arrangement helped out-of-town personnel and members of the press quickly comprehend the fire's progress.

By closing the door between the Alarm office and the Captains' office, the Alarm office was relatively isolated from noise and confusion, and visitors could be handled at the information window in the Captains' Office. Messages could be passed back and forth between the two offices through the revolving Warning Center Board. The Captains' office has both a Fire Department switchboard extension phone for incoming calls and a direct outside private line for outgoing calls.

The Junior Secretary assisted in keeping the offices supplied with essential equipment and forms, hot coffee, soft drinks, and food, and attended to necessary errands, in addition to keeping radio and occurrence logs, answering phones, and handling routine business.

The fire was relatively quiet most of the morning on the City and Montecito side, but by noon the rising temperature, falling humidity, and increasing winds combined to give the fire new life and vigor. It began a new rampage by jumping from Cold Spring Canyon to Hot Springs Canyon, far up the ocean side of the Santa Ynez Mountains on Montecito Peak.

During the day Wednesday, Santa Barbara County crews made a fire break from Mountain Drive to Parma Road, off Stanwood Drive. This break held until the wind changed and the fire jumped it later Wednesday evening. Several stands against the fire were made on Parma Road and on Coyote Road.

At 2:15 p.m., despite efforts of firefighters and air tankers, the fire roared over the top of Camino Cielo on the crest of the coastal range, and down the north side into the Santa Ynez watershed.

At 3:00 p.m., a meeting was called with chief officers of Montecito Fire Department,

Santa Barbara City Fire Department, Santa Barbara County Fire Department, Ventura County Fire Department, and the United States Forest Service.

The experience the night before made the chiefs wary of the quietness of the fire, recognizing identical circumstances as those encountered the evening before. As a precautionary measure should the fire be fanned back into raging life by evening winds, they ordered additional mutual aid equipment. Two units from Ventura County and 25 Civilian Defense trucks from various cities were requested for Montecito. A short time later, 25 pieces of equipment were ordered for Santa Barbara City, including 10 fire fighting units from Los Angeles City, with 7 command cars, and 8 OCD units, with two service units. The 12 Los Angeles County units requested by the U.S. Forest Service were already in Santa Barbara. Santa Barbara County fire officials asked for assistance from the State Department of Forestry, in addition to 6 OCD units, which eventually reported to Montecito by mistake.

At 6:30 p.m. the eastern boundaries of the Coyote Fire were at Hot Springs Road due north, and the western boundaries at Gibraltar Road northward over Camino Cielo.

Shortly before dusk the predicted and feared change in wind direction materialized. As the breeze became stronger in its shift to the southwest, it picked up glowing brands and flung them into unburned areas and whipped the dormant embers into a swirling conflagration.

For the third time, the fire mercilessly came back toward the City Limits and into Montecito. Stanwood Drive, El Cielito Road, Mountain Drive, and Gibraltar Road were among the first sections to become involved.

At 10:15 p.m. the fire was very bad in the Skofield Park area and above Las Canoas Road. If the present winds continue, one Chief remarked, "It looks like Mission Canyon will go."

He was correct.

In ten minutes, the order was received to evacuate Mission Canyon in the upper areas of Tunnel Road, Mission Canyon Road, and Palomino Road.



At 8:55 p.m. the fire jumped Mountain Drive at Cold Springs Road and was headed down Cold Springs. At 9:00 p.m. Montecito requested any assistance they can obtain and Santa Barbara City units were sent to Ashley Road and Coyote Road areas.

Evacuation orders were issued for residents of Mountain Drive, Rivenrock Road, and Hot Springs Road to East Valley Road.

Haskall and McNall both offered use of their cement trucks as water tankers. They were requested later in the evening.

At about 9:30 p.m., the fire jumped the County fire break off the 2000 block of Stanwood Drive and made a run into the area below Parma Road and Stanwood Road. Two spot fires started on the Conejo Road side of Stanwood, but City crews were able to hold them and prevented the fire's fingers from reaching into the Riviera.

Minutes later the fire jumped the breaks in the 1000 block of Mountain Drive and headed toward the El Cielito and Mountain Drive areas.

Desperately needed mutual aid units began arriving; however, Los Angeles County units scheduled to arrive at 10:30 p.m. did not report in until 2:30 a.m. Thursday.

Another fire started in the area of Gibraltar Road below Mount Calvary, and this blaze was to eventually join the main fire, traveling west over Mount Calvary into the

1700 and 1800 blocks of Las Canoas Road, and in the El Cielito and Mountain Drive section.

The Mount Calvary Monastery was completely surrounded by the intense fire. One room of the structure was severely damaged when the valve of a butane tank blew off, directing a blow-torch like flame directly at the structure. Stubbornly, City firemen kept up their attack against the fire and confined the damage to the one room.

At 9:30 p.m. a report was received that the San Ysidro Ranch dining room was involved and assistance was requested. Five minutes later another call for assistance was heard and every piece of equipment any fire department could spare had already been dispatched. There was nothing left to send.



Simultaneously at 9:45 p.m., the fire was on the Freeman property, in Rattlesnake Canyon, and Skofield Ranch; the Plow and Angel Bar was threatened. The fire jumped across Gibraltar Road and headed back, again crossing the City Limits. It also jumped Las Canoas Road but was quickly knocked down.

The Mayor ordered emergency lighting facilities set up when the fire had destroyed major Edison lines in its rampage. Facilities at Headquarters had been on emergency generator power frequently since the fire's outbreaks earlier in the evening. Everything operated smoothly and department service was not interrupted at any time.

## Thursday, 24 September 1964

Meanwhile, the fire was still raging in the El Cielito, Mountain Drive, Mount Calvary, and Las Canoas area, and the fire jumped El Cielito at Gibraltar at 12:30 a.m.

The new seminary at 1965 Las Canoas Road, its construction still unfinished, was believed burning when fire could be seen all around it. It was later found to be completely unharmed, probably due to its stucco and tile construction. It stood safe atop a hill, completely surrounded by charred, denuded earth.

For two hours men and equipment made stand after stand against the tongues of flame. At Mission Canyon Road, then Tunnel Road, then Memory and Holly Lanes. The fire, beaten back in one canyon, would only jump to another and race downward, toward the populated City, in an attempt to outrun the fire fighters.



At 2:45 a.m. evacuation was ordered for Dorking Place, Montrose Place, Williams Way, Ben Lomand Drive, Edgemound Drive, Cheltenham Road, Exeter Place, Arriba way – the entire Mission Canyon Heights. Here, as so many times before, came a procession of adults, children, horses, cattle, dogs, cats, geese, ducks, chickens, goats, and even peacocks as they rode, drove, walked, ran, waddled, or were carried or led away from the fire.

Wood Glen Residential Hall for the elderly was also evacuated, and the fire was stopped just short of the building by Santa Barbara City crews.

At 3:00 a.m. the fire was whipped into San Roque Canyon and Laurel Canyon. City crews made a stand at Santa Teresita and Ontare Road, but nearly lost the fire when a fire storm developed at 3:40 a.m. In answer to pleas for assistance, as much equipment as could be spared was sent to help.

Four Civilian Defense units laid a line up from San Roque Canyon and stopped the advancement of the fire. A Los Angeles City truck was dispatched to Laurel Canyon, after refueling at Station 4.

Civilian Defense units reporting into the City were assigned to Car #8 for assignment. One was sent u to Canyon Acres Drive, one to a police officer who took it to Stevens Park, and two remained with Car #8, with the remainder sent to Northridge Road accompanied by a State car.

Car #8 and the OCD pumpers went to San Roque Road where they fought the fire just beyond the filtration plant. When this area was secure, one engine was called to Alamar Avenue above Foothill Road, and the other was dispatched to Glen Albyn to assist on backfiring.

At 3:50 a.m. a check of the stations revealed a need for gasoline at Stations 1, 4, and 7. The Secretary in charge of the office placed a call to Seaside Oil Company, the contract dealer for the City, and was informed Seaside was unable to make this delivery. Upon approval by the Mayor, fuel was ordered from Mobile.

At 4:05 a.m. six County units were dispatched to Laurel Canyon Road. At 4:15 a.m. one County rig was asked to assist on Arriba Way and one at the rear of Wood Glen Hall. Shortly afterward, five OCD pumpers were dispatched to Ontare Road.

With the efforts of the OCD pumper assigned to the area, a home and garage on Canyon Acres suffered relatively mild damage when the fire roared down San Roque Canyon. The garage and contents were damaged but the attached home escaped. This was

the only major structure in the City of Santa Barbara to suffer a loss.

At 4:30 a.m. the County reported that they are losing one home on La Vista Road, just west of Northridge Road, and are going to have to sacrifice it for four other dwellings.

A City unit radioed that it is chasing the fire that has jumped Foothill Road into Stevens Park on Canon Drive.

At 4:45 a.m. the City notified the County of a reported fire at 1126 La Vista Road, which was reported to the City Fire switchboard, and five minutes later of one at 2932 Kenmore. The County was requested to send its units to Ben Lomand and Williams Way and meet the Los Angeles unit there.

At 5:00 a.m. the fire jumped San Marcos Pass Road, one mile north of its intersection with San Antonio Creek Road. Upon request from the U.S. Forest Service, four OCD pumpers at Stations 4 and 7 were released to that agency.

At this time, however, it was nearly daylight and the winds were beginning to lessen. The fire crews were able to contain the fire in most areas of Mission Canyon and attention was concentrated on hitting hot spots that continued to develop.

Arrangements were made to feed crews at City Fire stations.

The County suffered major home losses during the night. At daylight a survey was made of City property and the officials determined that a few outbuildings, such as stables, sheds, and tool houses, had been lost, but the only major structure damaged was on Canyon Acres.

At 7:30 a.m. the County was asked if they wanted the Civilian Defense and Los Angeles City equipment released. County officials requested the units be retained, and most of that equipment was eventually sent to Santa Barbara County Station #1.

A meeting was called at 9:00 a.m. with the Chiefs involved, and the Ventura County and Los Angeles City rigs were released to the Santa Barbara County Fire Department. Four CD rigs released earlier to the Forest Service had been sent to the Painted Cave area.

The remainder of the day was spent in getting fresh relief crews into the fire areas to allow firemen, exhausted from an all-night battle, to come in and eat and rest. City equipment patrolled the lines, knocking down numerous hot spots that occurred, and collecting hose and fittings.

At 4:00 p.m. a meeting was called at Montecito Station #1 to plan for the night. Santa Barbara City was given the responsibility for the entire south coast area from Montecito to Goleta. The County still had most of its equipment on upper San Marcos Pass and in Painted Cave.

Several cars and trucks from Santa Barbara City continued to patrol the lines on the City and Montecito side throughout the night. Except for a few flare-ups, firemen enjoyed a quiet night.

That evening brought cool, moist air from the ocean instead of the predicted hot winds from the north.

A milky veil of fog gently blanketed the entire south coast, where only hours before raged a sweltering inferno.