THE MOUNT VISION FIRE

big leaf maple

by Joel Reese

The following account of the Vision Fire was written for this *report by* Point Reyes Light *reporter Joel Reese who covered the fire and later won the Peninsula Press Clubs "Best News Story» award for his article "Wildfire" in the October* 5th Light. m, *thank Marin County Fire Department Chief* Stan *Rowan and Woodacre Station Commander Jim Selfridge for their contributions.*

THE AFTERNOON OF TUESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1995, had an uneasy feel to it. The air was thick and hot, with temperatures reaching the mid-80's. Humidity was low and still falling, soon to reach the lowest of any day last year. The sky was clear, with only an occasional thin cloud disturbing the azure.

And there was the wind. Gusting at speeds up to 20 mph from the north-northwest, the wind gave the slow afternoon a feeling of hurriedness. Dust whisked down Main Street in Point Reyes Station, while out on the National Seashore the beaches were desolate because of blowing sand.

Gusts also buffeted the hills of West Marin. At these higher elevations, an even more dangerous condition was brewing - chaotic easterly winds so strongly associated with fire season in California.

Winds that blew over the southern slopes of Mont Vision on October 3rd swirled leaves and dirt - as well as embers from a recent campfire. The coals had lain undisturbed in the earth, covered with dirt that had been carefully trampled upon by some campers three days earlier. But the people hadn't anticipated the wind. .

Early that afternoon the embers, probably nothing more than tiny orange sparks, flew onto some dry cinder. From there, the gusting air blew them into a small fire, which soon spread as the small flames reached piles of dry branches and grass. The Mount Vision area had not had a fire in 65 years, and the area abounded with a dense accumulation of fuel.

Adding to the already heavy fuel load, the eastern knoll between Mount Vision and Point Reyes Hill is densely forested with bishop pines and bay laurel trees. Fire Commander Tom Tarp, who came down from the Lake/Napa counties area, defined bishop pines as "big, heavy, nasty Stuff that drop a lot of things onto the ground, which builds up a lot of fuel." In addition, bay trees defoliate when they get excessively wet, and the extremely rainy winter had produced piles of branches and bark from the bay trees on the knoll.

Inverness contractor Rufus Blunk was the first to spot the fire from a roof near the ridge top where he was working. Ironically, he had heard that the day was an extreme fire danger and was constantly surveying the Inverness Ridge for evidence of a blaze.

"In my subconscious, I was sort of worried about it: he said. "I was thinking, 'Is this the day we're going to have a fire?'"

Blunk said he saw smoke coming off the ridge line at 1:15 p.m. and immediately told his brother to call 911. Then he took the phone: "I told the dispatch to send the air attack immediately, because I knew right away it was going to be very hard to get people there fast enough

on the ground. I knew this was a really grave situation. It was really heartbreaking to see it take off, to see the smoke get bigger and then see the flames."

The fire lookout on Mount Barnabe called in the smoke at nearly the same rime, 1:27 p.m., but due to the remote location and rugged terrain, it was 1:54 p.m. before the first fire equipment could reach the site.

Marin firefighters came by the truckload to battle the blaze: ten engines, a bulldozer, a helicopter, one air tactical and two air tankers. As the first teams swarmed through the thickets with hand tools and water, the initial grass fire was contained at about two acres. Before all the hot Spots were completely extinguished, however, conditions changed for the worse. At about 2:45 p.m., winds nom the northeast surfaced; they blew 20 mph and gusted to 30, sending embers into the air. Sparks jumped a lower canyon and reached a dwarf bay forest, where flames reached easily into the canopies of these low trees. From several spot fires that ignited in this fashion, fire raced up to the top of the ridge, beginning its rapid advance southward along two branching corridors.

Marin Fire Chief Stan Rowan later said the wind kept the planes - which came from farther afield and provided the firefighters' only real weapon *for* reaching the inaccessible flames - nom hitting their targets. "One air tanker pilot told us the wind was raising heck with his plane - he said he couldn't hit the spot," Rowan said. "We had four air tankers hitting the fire and they couldn't dent it." .

Tomales Bay State Park Ranger Carlos Porrata said the blaze gained unstoppable speed and momentum after jumping the first canyon. "That's where it started getting some really dry material," he said. "As soon as it hit the bishop pines, it was like an explosion."

Propelled by the heavy amount of fuel on the ground, the flames reached the homes on upper Sunnyside Drive in the Paradise Ranch Estates subdivision within three hours. At 4:27 p.m., Marin County Fire Marshal Jack Rosevear called for a mandatory evacuation of the area, leaving many homeowners helpless at the bottom of Drakes View Drive while yellow fire trucks streamed up the steep, serpentine road. .

Tuesday night, people who knew their homes were lost mingled vacant-eyed with others who prayed their houses might be spared. A Red Cross shelter at the West Marin School in Point Reyes Station provided a meeting place, and many residents of the fire zone took refuge in the homes of friends. The thick smoke produced a beautiful, haunting red sunset. Throughout the night Inverness Ridge glowed orange with the fire out of control, and the quiet was periodically interrupted by propane tanks exploding into flame.

The huge wildfire raged through the darkness, but the wind regime that originally spurred the blaze may have in fact saved the towns of Inverness and Inverness Park. Instead of the normal evening breeze that blows nom the ocean over the land, that night the wind shifted toward the ocean and picked up speed. By 2:00 a.m. Wednesday the wind blew westward at a steady 40 mph with gusts to 60, sending the flames racing into the Seashore and away from the homes.

While the wind shift may have been good news for the two towns, it trapped a team of firefighters in the Limantour Beach parking lot between the ocean and a wall of fire. Members of the crew reported driving through a runnel of fire on Limantour Road, and when they reached the parking lot they sprayed water on a blaze so hot that it melted the asphalt beneath their feet.

The next day, Tarp noted that, while the wind may have shifted, it didn't die down: "Last night, the fire was burning better at 2:00 a.m. than it was in the afternoon," he said. By that rime, the Park Service estimates that 20 homes had been destroyed.

Wednesday, West Marin resembled a war zone as planes and helicopters swarmed through the air over the ridge, dumping thousands of gallons of water and red flame retardant on the hills. More than 2,000 firefighters, £tom as far as Solano and Butte counties, sprayed water and beat trails for 12- and 16-hour shifts, slept a few hours in local B&B's and at an impromptu encampment set up at the Bear Valley trailhead, then attacked the fire again. The incident command center at Point Reyes National Seashore headquarters set strategies aimed first and foremost at protecting human life and property. Stories of individual stands against the fire were abundant and dramatic.

By 9:00 a.m. Thursday, October! 4th, an estimated 40 homes were already lost, and the fire had covered more than 2,000 acres. When an early morning breakout threatened homes at the top of Highland Road, a large number of firefighting resources were immediately stationed there to protect structures. At dawn concerned residents watched through binoculars from Highway One on the east side of To males Bay as helicopters, expertly flown by pilots who specialize in such demanding, high-risk operations, dipped 3,000-gallon "Bambi buckets" into the bay to support the ground efforts atop the ridge. The effort succeeded. .

By 6:00 p.m. Thursday, 45 homes were lost and another 12 damaged. The Park Service estimates that, just two days after the fire began, the flames had scorched 11,720 acres.

Partly because of the massive fire suppression effort, as well as a long-awaited weather change that brought moist fog off the ocean by early Friday morning, the fire was fully contained by Saturday evening at 6:00 p.m. Had the wind kept blowing as strong as it initially was, though, the blaze could have raced through the Seashore: "It's entirely possible this could have gone all the way to Bolinas," Fire Commander Tarp said.

Flare-ups continued throughout the area, though, up to 11 days after the fire started, and it wasn't until October 16th - nearly two weeks after it began - that full control over the fire was declared.

All told, the fire burned 12,354 acres and destroyed 45 homes. But, as Rowan said, it could have been worse.

"When the wind did a right-angle rum and took the fire to the ocean, that saved a lot of houses," he said, noting trucks were stationed along Vallejo, Laurel, and Balboa streets. "We expected to lose a lot more homes up there."

Most importantly, no one was injured in the blaze, Rowan added.

The Mount Vision Fire of October 1995 left an indelible mark on the minds of those who were here for the conflagration. And while we will always remember the smoke, the flames, the red sunsets, and the tears, the fire is behind us.

"The Seashore will recover from this, " explained Stan Rowan. *As* of this writing in May 1996, charred stumps in the wild lands of the Point Reyes peninsula have given way to soft greenery and brilliantly colored flowers. .