

Tillimook Burn catastrophe not all about Mother Nature

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Summer 2015 found forest fires sweeping across the West, and indeed Oregon, with a ferocity that has not been experienced in quite some time. Several historically minded reporters dredged up allusions to The Tillamook Burn as a sort historical barometer to gauge the severity of the current conflagrations. It is

an appropriate exercise.

Doug Kenck-Crispin is a co-producer of the podcast Kick Ass Oregon History. Find more at ORHistory.com.

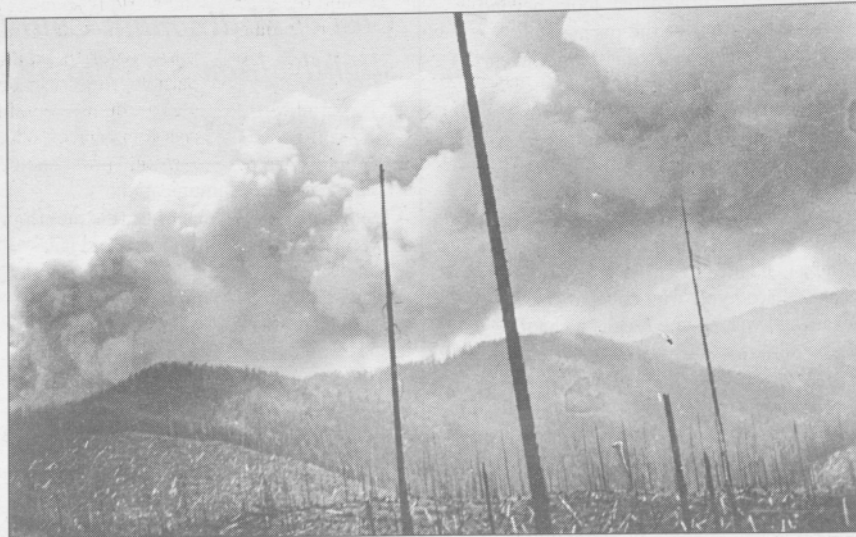
As a child in Portland, I had the opportunity to attend Outdoor School in sixth grade. A few years later, I was a high-school student

counselor and later a staff member of Multnomah County Outdoor School. I assisted with telling scores of sixth grade students about the environmental calamity that befell Oregon in 1933. The Tillamook Burn. The dramatic results from a single careless act in our beautiful forest.

The problem with these historical comparisons is context. It is the societal awareness that we possess, and the different consciousness that 1930s Oregon had.

That date was just another day in a stretch of unbearably oppressive summer weather. Mother Nature was feeling quite parched and dry, and she was punishing web footed Oregonians with her arid whims. Mid-day, Aug. 14 found the temperature in the 90s, and the relative humidity in the low 20s, according to the local newspaper. It was a dangerous, combustible combination.

The fire is generally attributed with having originated in Gales Creek Canyon, out Forest Grove way. The official story states that Mr. Elmer Lyda's logging company started the fire just after lunch, before the official state order to shut down logging activities had come to the outfit. For some time, controversy was rampant that the Lyda's operation was going for just "One. More. Log," and had not heeded the



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A ravine after The Tillamook Burn, 1933.

"halt operations" warning. Lyda's steam donkey (a large engine with cables and pulleys used to haul the felled logs) was dragging a huge, dry Douglas fir across an even drier long-ago-felled cedar tree.

Friction. Heat. Almost no moisture in the air. A tiny, unseen wisp of white smoke rose from the felled cedar as the steam donkey drug that last, massive log across the desiccated forest floor.

The fire burst with great intensity just after the 1 p.m. whistle. The Gales Creek loggers did all they could to battle this vicious and growing fire – but by the end of the day, the blaze had consumed 1500 acres. And in the days that followed, the weather became dryer, and the fire grew larger.

In the first few days of the burn, even with the tenacity with which the fire grew, there seemed to be at least a hint of optimism that Mother Nature would play nice and become friendly again.

"All we can do is hope favoring winds will carry enough moisture to the coast range summit so our boys can check the fire's progress," said C. C. Scott, manager of the

Northwest Forest Fire Protective Association. (The Oregonian, Aug. 17, 1933)

But Mother Nature played with the operations and became, well, unnatural. As just one of many examples, Scott had been in an airplane, flying over the fire, attempting to ascertain the progress of containment. He saw that air currents described as "freakish" had lifted the conflagration over an entire mile of virgin, unscathed, green forest, and then abruptly crashed the blaze to the ground, where it began to spread with massive damage and resolve. B. B. Thurber, The Oregonian's "flying reporter," flew at 12,000 feet above the blaze and observed trees actually exploding from the heat, hurling dust and flying embers about as they burst with a roar.

The fire kept burning for a week more. On Aug. 24, the fire grew. Impossible to imagine, the resulting blaze reached what would be almost comical proportions. The fire literally exploded. An atomic blast is the only comparable incident we can use to illustrate this burst. A dull red, angry cloud

rose from the inferno that was 40 miles wide and 40,000 feet high. The very blaze itself created hurricane force winds that uprooted gigantic fir trees and hurled them great lengths. Ships 500 miles at sea were rained upon with smoldering forest debris.

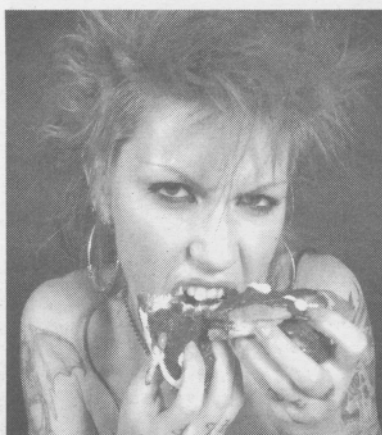
As inconceivable as it may be, conditions just continued to worsen. By Sunday the 26, the humidity had dropped to 18 percent, and the east wind was howling to nearly a gale. Some residents of Portland were able to actually see the glow of the burn in the night sky.

In the aftermath, as Historian Ellis Lucia stated, "a new American desert was created." More than 230,000 acres were destroyed – or an area of about 375 square miles. The amount of lumber these ancient trees would have yielded to the screaming sawmill blade would have built 1 million homes.

The Tillamook Burn was an absolute catastrophe in the eyes of 1930s Oregonians. But the calamitous nature of this horrific event wasn't expressed in terms of the environmental damage that was the result of the fire. Rather, the outrage over the fire was focused mainly on the board feet of lumber lost in the blaze. The loss wasn't expressed in trees, but in billions of board feet of lumber.

One important factor seems to be missing from the historical comparisons. You see – the forest consumed by the Tillamook Burn? They were going to cut it all down anyway. Every. Single. Tree. You and I would have never walked in that virgin, old growth forest – they were going to cut the whole damn thing down – a significant consideration when you read the next article lamenting the loss from the 1933 Tillamook Burn.

Sources: *The Oregonian*, Ellis Lucia, "Tillamook Burn Country; a Pictorial History," Bill Gulick, "Roadside History of Oregon," From the interpretive display entitled "Fires Shape The Tillamook Burn," Tillamook Forest Center Museum.



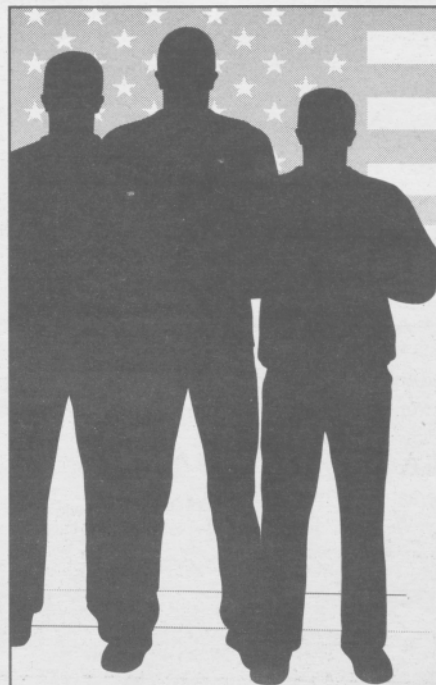
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