

Wild Fire!

A raging grass fire like the one that swept the reservation August 2 plays out the drama of man against nature in classic form. And as ever with nature, man comes away with renewed respect for a force that resists his control.

Matching wits with a wild fire is something only our species would attempt. While wild animals flee, we gather forces in military fashion and do battle. But much to our frustration, there are times when we can do little more than let nature take its course—and simply minimize the damages.

With a fire like the one that consumed 1,630 acres of grass, sagebrush and juniper during the night of August 2, humans understandably feel responsible. Preliminary investigation has ruled out a natural cause and pinned the blame on either human carelessness or mischief. All the "Keep Oregon Green" signs in the state will not prevent that one match from dropping to dry grass nor halt the rolling flames and smoke in their single-minded race across open ground.

Man tried desperately to fight the effects of strong winds that fanned the fire from a state of containment to, as one firefighter described it, a "holy roaring bitch." Leaping the Warm Springs River from its origin northeast of the fish hatchery, the inferno rolled through a remote roadless area, gathering up momentum and jumping the Kah-Nee-Ta Road. Cats trundled awkwardly over the rugged ground, etching fire lines but barely keeping pace with the southeastward progress of the flames (below left).

Maxine McKinley (below, second from left) and her neighbors, whose homes lay in the fire's path, were evacuated at dusk. Huddled in blankets as darkness

descended, they were truly helpless — watching the red glow on the horizon come closer, a wall of hungry flame that rolled over junipers, crept within yards of their homes, and finally retreated.

The careful plotting of Fire Control and Forestry, although at times apparently futile, did divert and slow the fire's march. Fire boss Bob Bolton (right in photo below) reviewed the course of the flames with Forestry head Ken Engelbretson (left) and Fire Control officer Grover Sixkiller (middle). Besides building fire lines, the strategy was to "burn out" areas in the path of the fire to eliminate fuels. It worked at two points along the highway, much to the relief of Maxine, a forty-year resident of her nearby home site. Volunteer firemen and equipment from Warm Springs and North Unit also stood by to protect threatened dwellings.

But no sooner were Maxine and her neighbors safely back in their homes, shortly before midnight, but the focus of attention switched dramatically to Kah-Nee-Ta Village. The teepees held their ground in defiance, (right) while campers fled—some for home and others for a safe plot of grass. Resort manager Bill Pauli clung to his house till flames crept down the hillside to within feet. Tiny silhouetted figures could be seen wielding shovels and gunny sacks on the waves of fire—and winning. When the threat was gone, Pauli looked unfazed, mingling with River Room employees and volunteer firefighters who were constructing and

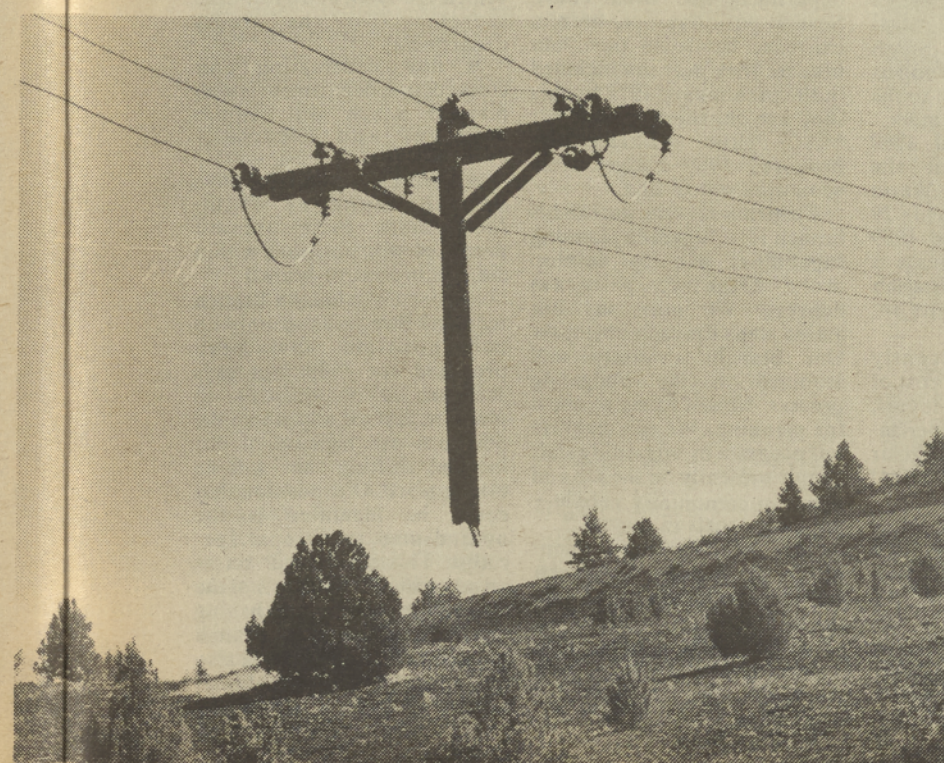
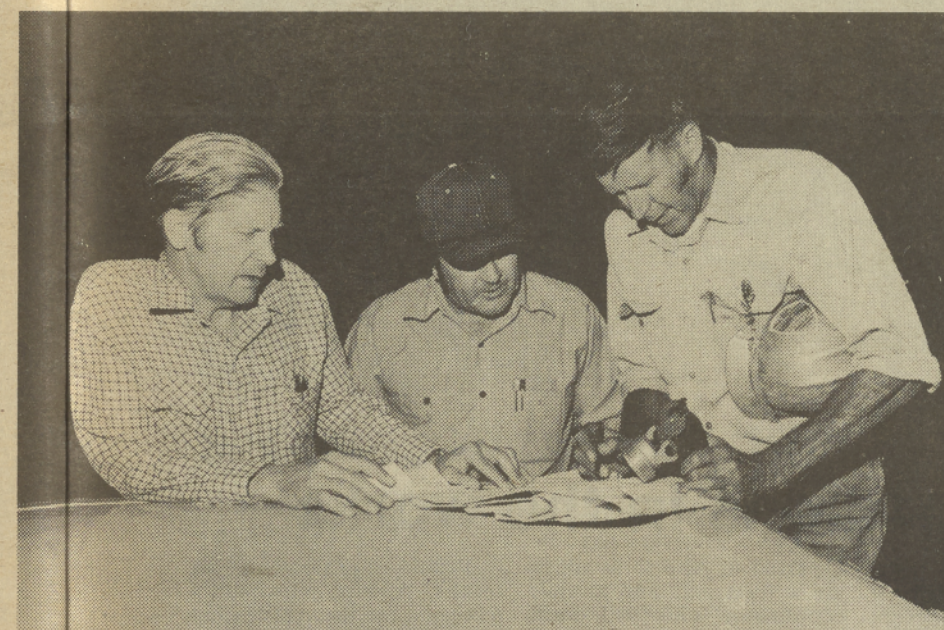
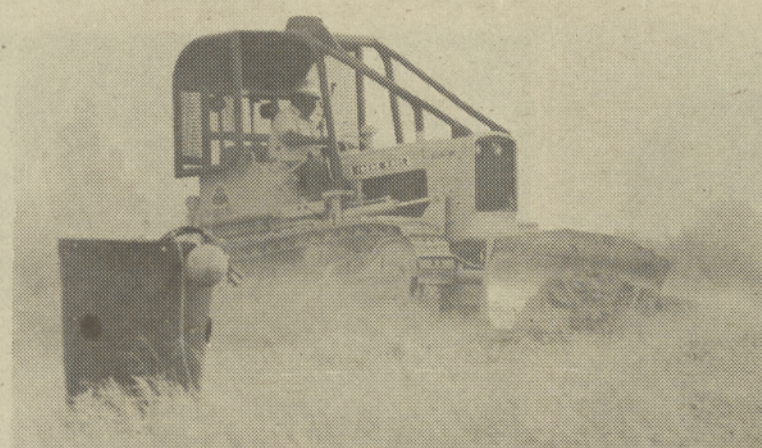
consuming hard-earned sandwiches.

Fire lines on the eastern front contained the blaze by about 2:00 a.m., with the help of slackening winds. But later that morning forces forty-strong from Gifford Pinchot National Forest arrived with two helicopters and tackled spot fires in the remote areas. Jim Neilson sorted through Kah-Nee-Ta-supplied rations and government equipment prior to airlifting them to crews (bottom left). Later in the morning the transport helicopter became a firefighter, dipping 150-gallon buckets of water from the Warm Springs River at the hatchery and dumping them along the lines and on stubborn hot spots. Three helicopters, one on a season contract with Fire Control, kept up a steady drone throughout the day and into the next, cooling the ravaged landscape.

The results of the runaway blaze were dramatic. While no power was lost, at least one telephone pole became victim to the excessive heat (bottom middle), hanging from the lines it had previously held aloft. A half-burned juniper near the start of the fire gave visual testimony to the heat and speed of the blaze—hot enough to scorch and scar the landscape but too impatient to linger and complete the job.

Miles of blackened hills and flats lay quietly by daylight, seeming to harbor memories of the nightmarish boiling of flame and smoke. But man will most probably step in again to reseed the charred soil, helping nature renew itself as if in apology for the carelessness of his kind.

Man vs. Nature



Sid Miller Photo

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