

The Griffith Park Fire

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A Case Study

On October 3, 1933, a hot dry day in southern California, a fire broke out in the Mineral Wells Canyon area near the old Los Angeles Zoo. As part of the Los Angeles County welfare relief program, a group of 3,780 men were clearing brush in the canyon that afternoon. When the fire started at the bottom of the slope, some of these men were ordered or volunteered to fight it.

When workers arrived at the source of the fire, they found a pile of burning debris under an oak tree; they believed a transient started the fire because they found empty coffee cans and paper sacks nearby. Sudden winds sent a line of flames up the slope. Despite efforts by these untrained workers to dig fire lines, the fire soon raced 50 feet up the canyon slope. Ladder fuels carried the fire into the tops of trees, showering the men with hot embers. Twenty-nine workers were killed and more than 150 others were injured. Soon 50 Mountain Patrolmen, equipped with engines and hoses, responded and managed to contain the blaze.

Overconfidence and an under appreciation of the potential danger were major factors in the loss of life in the Griffith Park Fire. Untrained men were trying to contain a fire that weather, topography, and tinderbox conditions had combined to create an explosive situation for even the best trained firefighters.