

FIRE HISTORY AT LAS POSADAS  
STATE FOREST

FIRE CAMP AND CCC CAMP HISTORY OF  
LAS POSADAS STATE FOREST

SURVEY OF LAS POSADAS STATE FOREST 1931

by

E. A. Erickson  
State Forest Ranger  
May 1953

## FIRE HISTORY AT LAS POSADAS STATE FOREST

In May 1931, a fire started back of the ball park. There was a strong north wind and the fire burned a strip south past the old ranch house up Wildcat Canyon and to Conn Valley.

In those days the Division of Forestry was not very well organized, and the ranger, being on only during the six summer months with no paid help, had not been able to organize the volunteer help too strongly. At that, I gathered what students I could secure from Pacific Union College and few volunteers from the St. Helena area and Conn Valley and started a fire line from the Wildcat Canyon road opposite the cemetery knoll and took it on to the William Hess property. That night we took it south past lookout rock into the Overacker property. The next day the wind died down so it was rather easy to mop up the south line, with the volunteer help of the ranchers in that area. This area will be found on the map enclosed, dated May 1931.

Again, on September 8, 1931, a fire started on the Braskee ranch at the head of Big Canyon about four miles northwest of the Pacific Union College, headed with a very strong west wind and very low humidity fire spread in all directions with the main fire headed for Pacific Union College. All available help was gathered from Pacific Union College, Pope Valley, St. Helena Sanitorium and people from the town of St. Helena. No fire trucks were available in those days, nor bulldozers - just good old hard work, strong back and weak mind!

At that time we operated out of Palo Alto, which was the North Coast Headquarters. Mr. Frank Thompson, who was the district ranger, flew to St. Helena and then flew me over the area. I could see that at 7 p.m. the fire had already crossed the main county road leading to Pope Valley. Landing at St. Helena, I made plans for fire lines. I had split the volunteers into several groups with a leader in charge of each, keeping all Advent people by themselves as they much prefer to be kept that way. Laying out their duties, I started on the front leading from Martin Springs to Redwood Canyon near the Etna Springs. By next morning we had most of the fire line under control, but the big job was to hold volunteers for patrol. That afternoon, September 9, the wind came up strong again and scattered fire east and south of Martin towards Las Posadas. I requested more help from Sacramento, but was told to gather up more local help. At this time I had approximately 300 students and local volunteers on the line, which was approximately 6 miles. I also had a kitchen set-up in the college garage with the ladies of the Legion Auxiliary from St. Helena in charge, making up sandwiches and serving hot meals to those volunteers who were not Advents. The Adventists took charge in serving their people - mashed potato sandwiches and milk. As some of our men were served this food, it soon spread over the whole state that I was serving mashed potato sandwiches and milk on the fire line.

That night after the fire burned about 400 cords of 4' wood which belonged to the College and which was cut and stacked, it was put under control on the Las Posadas and College property line. Sacramento had sent the Napa County game warden in with 15 men to assist. Although these men were picked up out of pool halls etc., I placed them on the line to patrol under the supervision of Game Warden Johnson. As I had so much to supervise, it kept me busy covering such a large area. As I left this group, I instructed them to take all precaution, especially the next day when the wind was sure to come up again. I got back to this line again about daylight of September 10, and found most of the men asleep. After again warning them of the danger, I saw that all were fed and left for other fronts, which were holding rather good. About 10 a.m. that day I saw a black column of smoke rise in the Las Posadas direction and on arriving found the fire had spotted over into Las Posadas (red crosses shown on map) where several fires had spotted and were burning hot. No men were to be found. On the fire line, as I arrived

in front of the fire, I could see that with some help at this moment I was sure I could save the dense forest below Roosevelt forest and the ball park. When I arrived at Moore Creek where the footbridge crosses to the swimming tank, I found the game warden had left his men early that morning and they had gone down to the creek to sleep. No effort was made by this group to combat this fire. In fact they complained they were tired from being kept up all night and did not care to fight this fire. Since I had been up day and night on this fire from the day it started, September 8, without sleep or rest, I discharged the entire crew and went to the College and called for more help from St. Helena. A group of merchants and a few good ranch hands responded. By this time the fire had burned well down toward Moore Creek. It was late afternoon and I took the most able men and started back of the ball park where we had the spring burn and ran a line to Moore Creek past the present swimming tank and then up Moore Creek to the top of the ridge. I left the balance of the men on patrol. At daylight I had gained the top of the hill. Traveling back and forth over the boulders in Moore Creek was very dangerous as in those days we had no such thing as flashlights. After daylight, while I was checking on the line and seeing that the men were awake, I came across a stranger to me. After I had spoken a few words to him, he proceeded in a slow manner to introduce himself: "I am Chick Fowler from the Sacramento office they sent me over to see if I could give a hand." He had come in sometime during the night and stayed on patrol on this line. I felt a little better to think that the State of California had not entirely forgotten me - at least they furnished a man.

I pushed the line back to the College property between what is now Roosevelt Forest and the powder house, and tied it into the old fire line of Martin Spring road. That afternoon about 3 p.m. the humidity started to rise, and with a few men I had the entire front patrolled and the lines hold; but the sight in Las Posadas Forest on the north side of Moore Creek where such a wonderful stand of Douglas fir, oak and madrone stood and no fire scars showed where there had ever been a fire, was very sad looking indeed with nothing standing but a lot of fir and madrone snags - this surely resembled a ghost town. More about this area later.

#### FIRE CAMP AND CCC CAMP HISTORY OF LAS POSADAS STATE FOREST

In the spring of 1934 the state allotted me a four man fire suppression crew to be stationed at Las Posadas.

A crew of four local boys was hired and a hole was cut in the brush at the entrance gate and a tent set up. This was a dry camp. Water was hauled in a 50-gallon wine barrel, which I had borrowed, on a 1932 Dodge pickup which was used as the fire truck and transportation. Water was hauled from the 4-H Camp.

The crew cooked and ate outdoors. The yellow jackets got so bad that summer that the crew had to wait until after dark to eat their meals.

Even such a small crew as this helped a great deal, especially in patrolling the fire line after it was put under control by the volunteers whom I had organized throughout the county.

About September 1934, word came from Sacramento that a CCC camp from Pine Grove planned to move to lower altitude for the winter months and had chosen Las Posadas for their location and that it was up to the ranger to select the spot and get the grounds ready immediately for they had to have the camp built before the

rains set in. I picked the site and advised Sacramento office of it. In time they sent several officers and Forest Service men to look over the location. They were well pleased and gave me the go-ahead signal in preparing the grounds, hiring 30 local carpenters, some plumbers and electricians.

No money was set up for clearing of the grounds and the Division of Forestry had no equipment. I contacted the supervisors and they loaned me a dozer and pull-grader. Before the grounds were really ready the lumber arrived on the scene and orders were for me to have it checked. This was quite a chore with my four fire fighters. Then to locate the carpenters, etc., was a headache. This all had to be done right now and still we had fires to take care of, but finally I located and had 28 carpenters on the job, some "wood butchers" included. The CCC camp had sent me a few hand-picked boys experienced in this work from their Pine Grove Camp to assist the carpenters, which was a great help. The camp was near enough completion to allow the 200 CCC boys to move in the first of November, before the rains set in. With this additional help the camp was put in A-1 condition in a hurry.

Now came the time to decide what field projects were to be selected for the boys to work on. I sat down with Mr. Earl Branson, Camp Superintendent, and went over the different projects I had thought up. Mr. Branson, being a very level-headed man, made it much easier to work out a plan.

The first thing I had in mind was to try and do some fire prevention work at Las Posadas so that in case of another fire we might be able to save the balance of the area from burning off. The plan was:

1. Cut all burned snags off the burned area on the north side of Moore Creek which were left by the fire in September 1931, and dispose of them.
2. Cut a fire trail around the boundary lines of Las Posadas.
3. Cut and clean up all underbrush along Moore Creek.
4. Cut and clean up all underbrush on the flat on both sides of the CCC camp.
5. Brush and clean up along roadside from Las Posadas to St. Helena and on over to Pope Valley, also from the CCC camp to the 4-H camp.
6. Build a fire road from camp past what is now the powder house and Roosevelt Forest and on down to the ball park.

These were the main projects and in the order they were to be carried out, although as time went on several small projects were added to this list. I hired several local citizens as foremen and everything worked out very well.

After the slope was cleared of burned snags and they were disposed of, the area looked terribly barren so one day when Prof. Woodbridge Metcalf called to see me, I brought his attention to this. It was decided to plant some trees and dedicate the area the "President's Birthday Grove." (Metcalf's suggestion.) I made arrangements with the Sacramento office for trees from the State Nursery at Davis, and a group of CCC boys planted the trees on Roosevelt's birthday in 1934. The trees were Monterey, Coulter and Knobcone pines. The first spring after the planting a flock of goats from the college came through the fence and ate the tops out of the pines. Although most of the trees came back, it did set the growth back some.

The following three years I took upon myself to plant additional trees at odd times. I planted Monterey, Coulter, Leppo, Knob Cone and Yellow pine, and some redwoods. Although there is rather a good stand in this plantation the brush has come back strong and has choked back the growth a great deal, but at that the trees are holding their own. At this writing there are some Montereys 60' tall.

During April 1935, the CCC camp moved back to Pine Grove with the understanding that they would be back in the fall and finish up the balance of the projects and some additional ones which I had been working up.

In May 1935 the State Division of Forestry allotted me a nine-man fire camp to be housed in the CCC camp buildings. These men were drawn from the SERA camp on Noyo River, Mendocino County. I hired Roy Neil as foreman and a local boy named Gene Bell for my truck driver. This gave me a nine-man crew in all.

The state gave me a one-ton express body Chevrolet truck for my crew's transportation - I felt rich!

In the fall of 1935 the CCC camp moved back to Las Posadas camp again with Mr. Hathaway as project superintendent. During the summer months I had worked hard to convince Sacramento that I needed a lookout on Mt. St. Helena and if this was approved a road would have to be built to get lumber and materials for the lookout. Also, I needed communication (telephone) service to Monticello. After much discussion and several trips to Mt. St. Helena, Mr. M. B. Pratt, State Forester, managed to put these two projects over, using all justification that could be secured.

Work for the boys was:

1. Projects that had been approved the previous winter and not completed were to be cleaned up.
2. New road or truck trail to the top of Mt. St. Helena to be surveyed and built (6 miles).
3. Lookout to be built.
4. Telephone line to the lookout from the Calistoga-Middletown trunk line.
5. Telephone from St. Helena to Las Posadas Camp and on to Monticello - 26 miles.
6. 4-H Club swimming tank to be built. This was M. B. Pratt's pet project and he was to see how material could be secured for the project. For several years the 4-H Camp children used Moore Creek to swim in by having it dammed just below the 4-H Camp footbridges. In the winter of 1935 and 1936 during a heavy storm, the dam was washed out, it being of dirt construction. This served as a crossing so had to be repaired in order to get materials to the swimming tank area. A small crew was put to work rebuilding this dam. The swimming pool was completed as the final accomplishment of the CCC crew. The 4-H Leaders named it the Merritt B. Pratt Pool.

It was decided to build a log cabin at the entrance to Las Posadas for use as office headquarters, and to use the burned timber that was cut down for this purpose. The building still stands and is used to house the fire crew. All projects were pretty well cleaned up by spring of 1936 and the CCC camp moved back to Pine Grove once more.

This summer our fire camp was operated by the hiring of some of our local boys and again housed at the CCC camp.

During the winter of 1936-37 a four-man spike camp was loaned me from Willits, Howard Forest CCC Camp to do some work on Mt. St. Helena road wall building. After I completed this work I had a few sacks of cement left so decided to build a sidewalk around the swimming tank at Las Posadas. The winter of 1937-38 Las Posadas CCC Camp was occupied by 250 SRA men, who worked on different projects. One project was to clean up any cut brush that was left by the CCC camp, also to cut some additional firebreaks around the boundary of Las Posadas and some fire protection work within the Las Posadas area as well as outside of this area.

Also a crew was used to build our new headquarters at St. Helena, which we occupied starting the spring of 1938.

Las Posadas CCC Camp was vacated 1939 and all buildings except laundry room and tool house were taken down. Materials were used for the building of different fire camps in the state.

In the spring of 1946 a fire camp was set up for Las Posadas. During the time when there were no fires to fight the crew did fire prevention work around the Las Posadas area.

During the summer of 1950 the fire crew built a new concrete catch basin at the spring. In 1952 the crew built a new pump house at the spring to house the water pump and engine.

During the winter of 1951-52 the fire road leading from the camp to the ball park was rebuilt, with an extension of this road on in to Chiles Valley through the Reeves property. Also, during the fall of 1952 a bridge was built across Maxwell Creek on this road and most of the road was graveled to make it passable the year around.

During the months of February and March of 1953, and at the time this is being written, a new road was built to the spring. Also, the road from the fire camp to the 4-H Camp is being repaired and surfaced so as to make it safer for women drivers.

We do hope to do some work on our firebreaks around the area soon and also build a new garbage disposal dump in Henry Canyon, for the use of the different groups who use the 4-H Camp.

This spring we hope to erect the three new signs - one at the swimming pool, one at the entrance to the 4-H Camp and one at the entrance gate to Las Posadas camp.

The different 4-H groups who use the camp must file an application each year showing that the group will use this area to study trees, birds and wildlife as it was set up to be used by the Blake family.

Las Posadas keeps its gates locked at all times to keep anyone from obtaining a right of way through the property. Any group, or groups, who use the Forest must call for the key at St. Helena fire station and sign for it. No fires are to be built on the property during the fire season months unless a permit is issued to build a small open fire in the 4-H Camp circle during high humidity weather conditions.

#### SURVEY OF LAS POSADAS STATE FOREST 1931

In March 1931, C. R. Clar, Deputy State Forester of Sacramento called on me in regard to the boundary lines of the Las Posadas property. Not being familiar with this property, it was decided to make a survey of it.

Although at the time I was not on the Division of Forestry pay roll (Napa County was allotted a ranger for only six months of the year - May 1 to November 31), I still was very interested to know the corners and boundary lines of the Forest. We started gathering what information we could from the county records and, also, from land owners on Howell Mt., but very little was learned. We secured some help from Mr. Hjalmar Lundell who at one time had worked on the property for the Blake family.

After tramping over the area we located a section corner on the north section of the south boundary. This was a large live oak tree stump approximately 50" in diameter. Here we planted a steel stake and started our survey of the east boundary, then the south, and so on until we had surveyed the entire property. This became quite a task, for the brush was very tall and thick, and to cut the time down we used a compass and chain tape and Abney hand level and mirrors. At that, it took us three weeks of hard work.

We had to run cross section, such as the LaJota Grant Line to help locate stakes and witness trees. Several were located, especially one which became very interesting. It is located on the south boundary of the LaJota Grant Line, and is a large Madrone tree. After close examination a very slight scar was found and Mr. Clar decided to chop in. Sure enough the witness was located and upon close scrutiny and counting the rings on the tree, it was decided that this was scribed about fifty years back. Mr. Clar cut the scar out and has it in his Sacramento office.

This is what makes surveying so interesting, especially in the Spanish Grant areas, when you can find a witness tree or stake.