

Mike Davis  
Ecology of fear (1999)

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THE CASE  
FOR LETTING  
MALIBU BURN

Late August to early October is the infernal season in Los Angeles. Downtown is usually shrouded in acrid yellow smog while heat waves billow down Wilshire Boulevard. Outside air-conditioned skyscrapers, homeless people huddle miserably in every available shadow. A few blocks away, in poorly ventilated garment sweatshops, thousands of *operadoras* pant for breath in front of their sewing machines. Irritable bosses, their dress shirts stained with sweat, bark endless orders in Spanish, Armenian, Korean, or Cantonese.

Across the Harbor Freeway, the overcrowded tenements of the Westlake district—Los Angeles's Spanish Harlem—are intolerable ovens. Suffocating in their tiny rooms, immigrant families flee to the fire escapes, stoops, and sidewalks. Anxious mothers swab their babies' foreheads with water while older children, eyes stinging from the smog, cry for *paletas*: the flavored cones of shaved ice sold by pushcart vendors. Shirtless young men—some with formidable jail-made biceps and mural-size tattoos of the Virgin of Guadalupe across their backs—monopolize the shade of *tienda* awnings. Amid hundreds of acres of molten asphalt and concrete there is scarcely a weed, much less a lawn or tree.

Thirty miles away, the Malibu coast—where hyperbole meets the surf—basks in altogether different weather. The temperature is 85 (20 degrees cooler than Downtown), and the cobalt blue sky is clear enough to discern the wispish form of Santa Barbara Island, nearly 50 miles offshore. At Zuma surfers ride the curl under the insouciant gazes of their personal sun goddesses, while at Topanga Beach, horse



Malibu erupts—the view from Santa Monica (1993)

trainers canter Appaloosas across the wet sand. Elsewhere along the coast, naked screenwriters poach in Point Dume jacuzzis, au pairs trade gossip in French (*quelles familles bizarres!*) over cappuccinos at Malibu Colony Plaza, and tourists get lost in the hills searching for a view of Streisand's elusive palace. Indifferent to the misery on the "mainland," the residents of Malibu suffer through another boringly perfect day.

Needless to say, the existential differences between the tenement district and the gilded coast are enormous at any time. But late summer is the beginning of the wildfire season in Southern California, and that's when Westlake and Malibu suffer a common lot: catastrophic fire.

According to recent estimates, Westlake (including adjacent parts of Downtown) has the highest urban fire incidence in the nation: one

of its two fire stations was inundated by an incredible 20,000 emergency calls in 1993.<sup>1</sup> Some tenements and apartment-hotels have continuous fire histories dating back to their construction in the early twentieth century. The notorious Hotel St. George, for instance, experienced fatal blazes in 1912, 1952, and 1983. Moreover, almost all of the deadly tenement fires in Los Angeles since 1945 have occurred within a one-mile radius of the corner of Wilshire and Figueroa, Downtown.

#### FATAL TENEMENT FIRES, 1947-93: DOWNTOWN/WESTLAKE

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Location</i>   | <i>Deaths</i> |
|-------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 1947        | 656 Maple         | 1             |
| 1952        | St. George        | 7             |
| 1960        | 906 E. Sixth      | 1             |
| 1969        | 320 S. Rampart    | 8             |
| 1970        | Ponet Square      | 19            |
| 1972        | Barclay           | 3             |
| 1973        | Stratford Arms    | 25            |
| 1976        | 335 S. Witmer     | 10            |
| 1979        | Oxford            | 2             |
| 1982        | Dorothy Mae       | 24            |
| 1983        | St. George        | 1             |
| 1986        | 116 S. Flower     | 5             |
| 1993        | 330 S. Burlington | 10            |
| 1993        | 1100 S. Grand     | 3             |
|             | Total             | 119           |

Sources: *Los Angeles Examiner* and *Los Angeles Times*.

Malibu, meanwhile, is the wildfire capital of North America and, possibly, the world. Fire here has a relentless staccato rhythm, syncopated by landslides and floods. The rugged 22-mile-long coastline is scourged, on the average, by a large fire (one thousand acres plus) every two and a half years, and the entire surface area of the western Santa Monica Mountains has been burnt three times over this century. At least once a decade a blaze in the chaparral grows into a ter-

rifying firestorm consuming hundreds of homes in an inexorable advance across the mountains to the sea. Since 1970 five such holocausts have destroyed more than one thousand luxury residences and inflicted more than \$1 billion in property damage. Some unhappy homeowners have been burnt out twice in a generation, and there are individual patches of coastline or mountain, especially between Point Dume and Tuna Canyon, that have been incinerated as many as eight times since 1930.<sup>2</sup>

**MALIBU FIRESTORMS, 1930-96**  
**(10,000+ ACRES)**

| <i>Date</i>    | <i>Locality</i>    | <i>Acres</i> | <i>Homes</i> | <i>Deaths</i> |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1930 October   | Potrero            | 15,000       |              |               |
| 1935 October   | Latigo/Sherwood    | 28,599       |              |               |
| 1938 November  | Topanga            | 16,500       | 350          |               |
| 1943 November  | Woodland Hills     | 15,300       |              |               |
| 1949 October   | Susana             | 19,080       |              |               |
| 1955 November  | Ventu              | 12,638       |              |               |
| 1956 December  | Sherwood/Newton    | 37,537       | 120          | 1             |
| 1958 December  | Liberty            | 17,860       | 107          |               |
| 1970 September | Wright             | 31,000       | 403          | 10            |
| 1978 October   | Kanan/Dume         | 25,000       | 230          | 2             |
| 1982 October   | Dayton Canyon      | 54,000       | 74           |               |
| 1993 November  | Calabasas/Malibu   | 18,500       | 350          | 3             |
| 1996 October   | Monte Nido         | 15,000       | 2            |               |
|                | Total              |              | 1,636        | 16            |
|                | Plus smaller fires |              | app. 2,000   |               |

Source: Los Angeles County Fire Department records.

In other words, stand at the mouth of Malibu Canyon or sleep in the Hotel St. George for any length of time and you eventually will face the flames. It is a statistical certainty. Ironically, the richest and poorest landscapes in Southern California are comparable in the frequency with which they experience incendiary disaster. This was emphasized tragically in 1993 when a May conflagration at a Westlake tenement that killed three mothers and seven children was fol-

lowed in late October by 21 wildfires culminating on 2 November in the great firestorm that forced the evacuation of most of Malibu.

But the two species of conflagration are inverse images of each other. Defended in 1993 by the largest army of firefighters in American history, wealthy Malibu homeowners benefited as well from an extraordinary range of insurance, landuse, and disaster relief subsidies. Yet, as most experts will readily concede, periodic firestorms of this magnitude are inevitable as long as residential development is tolerated in the fire ecology of the Santa Monicas.

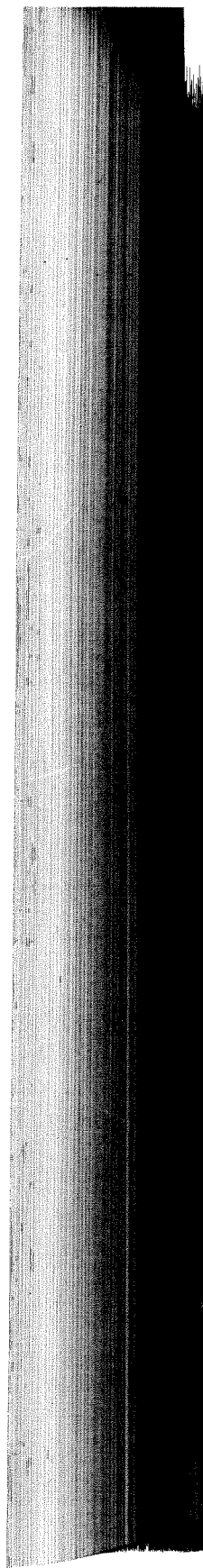
On the other hand, most of the 119 fatalities from tenement fires in the Westlake and Downtown areas might have been prevented had slumlords been held to even minimal standards of building safety. If enormous resources have been allocated, quixotically, to fight irresistible forces of nature on the Malibu coast, then scandalously little attention has been paid to the man-made and remediable fire crisis of the inner city.

## 1. THE FIRE COAST

*Homes, of course, will arise here in the thousands. Many a peak will have its castle.*

*John Russell McCarthy, These Waiting Hills (1925)*

From the beginning fire has defined Malibu in the American imagination. In *Two Years Before the Mast*, Richard Henry Dana described sailing northward from San Pedro to Santa Barbara in 1826 and seeing a vast blaze along the coast of José Tapia's Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit. Despite—or, as we shall see, more likely because of—the Spanish prohibition of the Chumash and Tongva Indian practice of annually burning the brush, mountain infernos repeatedly menaced Malibu through the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> During the great land boom of the late 1880s, the entire latifundio was sold at \$10 per acre to the Boston Brahmin millionaire Frederick Rindge. In his memoirs, Rindge described his unceasing battles against squatters, rustlers,



and, above all, recurrent wildfire. The great fire of 1903, which raced from Calabasas to the sea in a few hours, incinerated Rindge's dream ranch in Malibu Canyon and forced him to move to Los Angeles, where he died in 1905.<sup>4</sup>

From the time of the Tapias, the owners of Rancho Malibu had recognized that the region's extraordinary fire hazard was shaped, in large part, by the uncanny alignment of its coastal canyons with the annual "fire winds" from the north: the notorious Santa Anas, which blow primarily between Labor Day and Thanksgiving, just before the first rains.<sup>5</sup> Born from high-pressure areas over the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau, the Santa Anas become hot and dry as they descend avalanche-like into Southern California. The San Fernando Valley acts as a giant bellows, sometimes fanning the Santa Anas to hurricane velocity as they roar seaward through the narrow canyons and rugged defiles of the Santa Monica Mountains.\* Add a spark to the dense, dry vegetation on such an occasion and the hillsides will explode in uncontrollable wildfire: "The speed and heat of the fire is so intense that fire-fighters can only attempt to prevent lateral spread of the fire while waiting for the winds to abate or the fuel to diminish."<sup>6</sup>

Less well understood in the old days was the essential dependence of the dominant vegetation of the Santa Monicas—chamise chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and live oak woodland—upon this cycle of wildfire. Decades of research (especially at the San Dimas Experimental Forest in the San Gabriel Mountains) have given late-twentieth-century science vivid insights into the complex and ultimately beneficial role of fire in recycling nutrients and ensuring seed germination in Southern California's various pyrophytic flora.<sup>7</sup> Research has also established the overwhelming importance of biomass accumulation rather than ignition frequency in regulating fire destructiveness. As Richard Minnich, the world authority on chapar-

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\* The same canyons, however, also allow cool ocean air to refresh the polluted San Fernando Valley. The Santa Monica Mountains, according to air-quality researchers, are the most vital "airshed" for metropolitan Los Angeles.

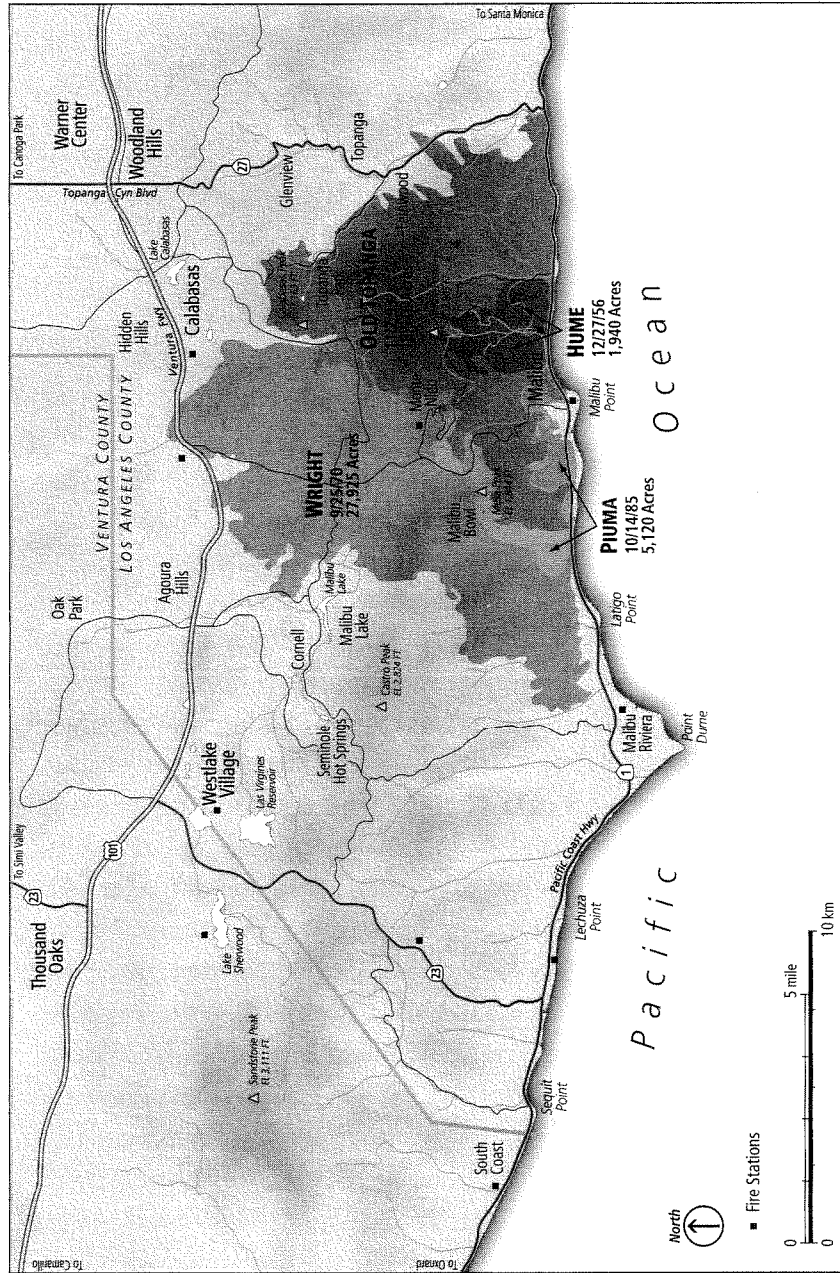


The Rindges' Shangri-la in the 1920s

ral brushfire, emphasizes: "Fuel, not ignitions, causes fire. You can send an arsonist to Death Valley and he'll never be arrested."<sup>8</sup>

A key revelation was the nonlinear relationship between the age structure of vegetation and the intensity of fire. Botanists and fire geographers discovered that "the probability for an intense fast running fire increases dramatically as the fuels exceed twenty years of age." Indeed, half-century-old chaparral—heavily laden with dead mass—is calculated to burn with 50 times more intensity than 20-year-old chaparral. Put another way, an acre of old chaparral is the fuel equivalent of about 75 barrels of crude oil. Expanding these calculations even further, a great Malibu firestorm could generate the heat of three million barrels of burning oil at a temperature of 2,000 degrees.<sup>9</sup>

"Total fire suppression," the official policy in the Southern California mountains since 1919, has been a tragic error because it creates enormous stockpiles of fuel.<sup>10</sup> The extreme fires that eventually occur can transform the chemical structure of the soil itself. The volatilization of certain plant chemicals creates a water-repellent layer in the upper soil, and this layer, by preventing percolation, dramatically



The Fire Coast

accelerates subsequent sheet flooding and erosion. A monomaniacal obsession with managing ignition rather than chaparral accumulation simply makes doomsday-like firestorms and the great floods that follow them virtually inevitable.\*

For a generation after Rindge's death, his widow, May, struggled to keep the family Shangri-la isolated and intact in the face of state attempts to push a highway through the rancho. Like one of the iron-fisted heroines played by Barbara Stanwyck, the so-called Queen of the Malibu closed the ranch roads in 1917, strung barbed wire along the perimeter, and posted armed fence-riders with orders to "shoot to kill." In one episode during the 1920s, Rindge cowboys provoked a tense confrontation with deputy sheriffs after driving away a road survey crew at gunpoint. Hysterical newspaper headlines warned of "Civil War in Peaceful Southern California!"<sup>12</sup>

But the pressure during the 1920s boom to open the coastal range to speculative subdivision was unrelenting. In the hyperbole of the era, occupation of the mountains became Los Angeles's manifest destiny. "The day for the white invasion of the Santa Monicas has come," declared real estate clairvoyant John Russell McCarthy in a booklet published by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1925.<sup>13</sup> In anticipation of this land rush, the county sheriff had been arresting every vagrant in sight and putting them to work on chain gangs building roads through the rugged canyons just south of Rancho Malibu. (Radical critics at the time denounced this system as "deliberate real-estate graft" meant only to enhance land values in mountain districts "which the population of this city does not even know exists.")<sup>14</sup>

Widow Rindge, in any event, would not be allowed to stand in the way of "the march of adventuring Caucasians," as McCarthy put it. After one of the most protracted legal battles in California history, the

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\* Minnich has compared in great detail the contrasting fire histories of Southern California and neighboring Baja California. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on fire suppression in Southern California's increasingly urbanized mountains, while fire control is virtually nonexistent in Baja's wild northern uplands. As a result, only Southern California is plagued by recurrent firestorms. Baja wildfires are more frequent, but smaller, "patchier," and never catastrophic.<sup>11</sup>



Conquering the Santa Monicas

court granted the state right-of-way through Rancho Malibu. Opened to traffic in 1928, the Pacific Coast Highway gave delighted Angelenos their first view of the magnificent Malibu coast and introduced a potent new source of ignition—the automobile—into the inflammable landscape.

The indefatigable May Rindge continued to fight the road builders and developers in the courts, but in the end the costs of litigation forced her to lease choice parts of Malibu beachfront to a movie colony that included Jack Warner, Clara Bow, Dolores Del Rio, and Barbara Stanwyck herself. The colony's unexpected housewarming was a lightning-swift wildfire that destroyed 13 new homes in late October 1929.<sup>15</sup> Exactly a year later, walnut pickers in the Thousand Oaks area accidentally ignited another blaze, which quickly grew into one of the greatest conflagrations in Malibu history.

The 1930 Decker Canyon fire was a worst-case scenario involving 50-year-old chaparral and a fierce Santa Ana. Faced with a five-mile front of towering flames, 1,100 firefighters could do little except save their own lives. As the firestorm unexpectedly wheeled toward

the Pacific Palisades, there was official panic. County Supervisor Wright, his nerves shaken by a visit to the collapsing fire lines, posted a hundred patrolmen at the Los Angeles city limits to alert residents for evacuation. Should the "fire raging in the Malibu District get closer," he gasped, "our whole city might go."<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, this apocalypse (which may have given Nathanael West the idea for the burning of Los Angeles in his novel *Day of the Locust*) was avoided—no thanks to human initiative—when the fickle Santa Ana abruptly subsided.

In hindsight, the 1930 fire should have provoked a historic debate on the wisdom of opening Malibu to further development. Only a few months before the disaster, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.—the nation's foremost landscape architect and designer of the California state park system—had come out in favor of public ownership of at least 10,000 acres of the most scenic beach and mountain areas between Topanga and Point Dume.<sup>17</sup> Despite a further series of fires in 1935, 1936, and 1938 which destroyed almost four hundred homes in Malibu and Topanga Canyon, public officials stubbornly disregarded the wisdom of Olmsted's proposal for a great public domain in the Santa Monicas.<sup>18</sup> The county of Los Angeles, for example, squandered an extraordinary opportunity in 1938 to acquire 17,000 acres of the bankrupt Rindge estate in exchange for \$1.1 million in delinquent taxes. At a mere \$64 per acre, it would have been the deal of the century.<sup>19</sup>

Instead, in December 1940, an impecunious and heartbroken May Rindge was forced to put her entire empire on the auction block. Potential buyers were advised to make "an early selection" of "ocean-front lots, sites for villas, hotels, golf clubs, estates, beach and yacht clubs, income and business lots, small summer home places, ranchitos, 100–640-acre ranchos, and acreage for further subdivision."<sup>20</sup> The disconsolate Queen of the Malibu died two months later.

During the Second World War—severe drought years on the West Coast—hundreds of firewatchers were sent into the Southern California mountains to guard against rumored Axis saboteurs. A few months after the watchers were withdrawn, 150 Malibu homes were



The 1938 Topanga fire

incinerated in another November fire. Yet this new disaster failed to discourage a postwar migration of artists, printers, bookdealers, poets, screenwriters, and architects (including Olmsted himself)—many of very modest means, some seeking to escape the scrutiny of McCarthyism—who envisaged Malibu as Carmel south. In an engaging memoir of this period, UCLA librarian Lawrence Clark Powell described a genial way of life devoted to Mozart and beachcombing.

He also provided a classic account of the onslaught of the terrible firestorm of Christmas week 1956, which, burning its way to the sea, retraced the path of the 1930 blaze.<sup>21</sup>

The wind was still savage when we went to bed at ten, the sky swept clear, aglitter with stars, Anacapa flashed its warning light. The cypresses, pines and eucalyptuses were noisier than the surf. Cats' fur threw sparks when stroked. We slept in spite of the sinister atmosphere.

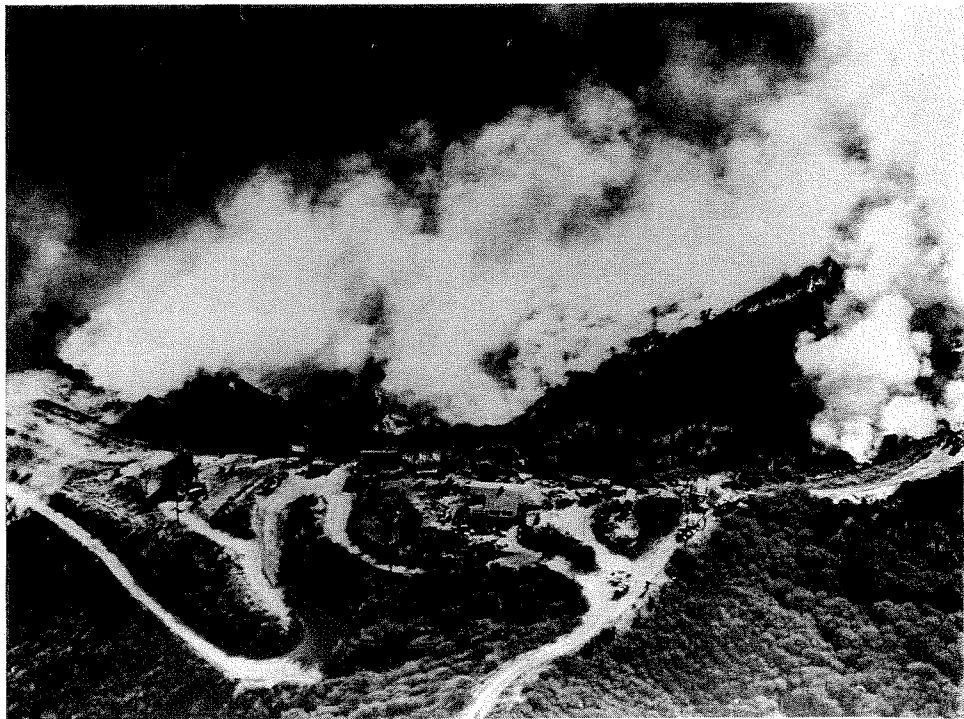
I woke abruptly at four to see a fierce glow in the sky. . . .  
God, the whole face of the mountain was burning, in a long line  
just below the summit, and moving toward us on the wind.  
Fear dried my mouth. I knew doom when I saw it.<sup>22</sup>

A Forest Service analysis of this disaster, which killed one person and destroyed one hundred homes, stressed the impossible challenge of combating such erratic and untamable natural forces.

Malibu fires combine most known elements of violent, erratic and extreme fire behavior: fire whirls, extreme rates of spread, sudden changes in speed and direction of fire spread, flashovers of unburned gases complicated by intense heat and impenetrable smoke held close to the ground.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed the conflagration, which coincided with a waxing of Cold War anxieties, had unexpected political repercussions. "If the government could not defeat wildfires in the Santa Monicas," critics asked, "how would it deal with possible nuclear holocausts?" Accordingly the Eisenhower administration acknowledged the Malibu blaze as "the first major fire disaster of national scope," and Congress—more concerned with the credibility of a vast civil defense establishment than with the tragedy of local homeowners—debated how to provide "complete fire prevention and protection in Southern California."<sup>24</sup> (Large Malibu fires, moreover, would later be used by researchers to model the behavior of nuclear firestorms.)<sup>25</sup>

According to fire historian Stephen Pyne, the Malibu blaze also marked the transition from the traditional forest fire problem to a "new fire regime" characterized by the "lethal mixture of homeowners and brush." This artificial borderland of chaparral and suburb magnified the natural fire danger while creating new perils for firefighters who now had to defend thousands of individual structures as well as battle the fire front itself. "Whereas it was often remarked that chaparral, particularly that composed largely of chamise, is a fire-



1956: a national turning point

climax community, it is now joked that the same is true of the Southern California mountain suburb.”<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately the 1956 fire—followed by two blazes, one month apart, in 1958–59 that severely burned eight firefighters and destroyed another hundred homes<sup>27</sup>—proved the beginning of the end for bohemian Malibu. A perverse law of the new fire regime was that fire now stimulated both development and upward social succession. By declaring Malibu a federal disaster area and offering blaze victims tax relief as well as preferential low-interest loans, the Eisenhower administration established a precedent for the public subsidization of firebelt suburbs. Each new conflagration would be punctually followed by reconstruction on a larger and even more exclusive scale as landuse regulations and sometimes even the fire code were relaxed to accommodate fire “victims.”\* As a result, renters and modest home-

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\* After the 1978 fire, for example, many rebuilding Malibu homeowners were exempted from the new standards governing water pressure and width of access roads adopted by the county during the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

owners were displaced from areas like Broad Beach, Paradise Cove, and Point Dume by wealthy pyrophiles encouraged by artificially cheap fire insurance, socialized disaster relief, and an expansive public commitment to “defend Malibu.”

In the absence of fire-risk zoning of the sort that Olmsted had earlier advocated, the only constraint on development was the limited supply of water for firefighting and domestic consumption. The completion of a trunk water line, connecting Malibu to Metropolitan Water District reservoirs, was the signal for a new land rush. The county’s Regional Planning Commission promptly endorsed developers’ wildest fantasies by authorizing a staggering 1,400 percent expansion of the Malibu population over the next generation: from 7,983 residents in 1960 to a projected 117,000 in 1980.<sup>29</sup> Although the California coastal acts of 1972 and 1976, under the populist slogan “Don’t Lock Up the Beach!” eventually slowed this real estate juggernaut (as well as squelching such nightmarish proposals as a Corral Canyon nuclear power plant and an eight-lane freeway through Malibu Canyon), the urbanization of the Malibu coast—Los Angeles’s “backyard Big Sur”—was a *fait accompli*.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, even as they were opening the floodgates to destructive overdevelopment, county and state officials were also turning down every opportunity to expand public beach frontage (a miserable 22 percent of the total in 1969). Nor did they show any interest in creating a public land trust in the mountains, which were now entirely under private ownership, right down to the streambeds.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, most of Malibu remained as inaccessible to the general public as it had been in the Rindge era. (For people of color, moreover, it was absolutely off-limits.)\* As historians of the coastal access battle put it: “The seven million people within an hour’s drive of Malibu got Beach Boys music and surfer movies, but the twenty thousand residents kept the beach.”<sup>33</sup>

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\* Once in the 1950s there was a rumor that Nat King Cole might attempt to move to Malibu. Art Jones, the Colony Association’s “dictator,” vowed that “he would personally head a vigilante group to burn him out.”<sup>32</sup>

Returning for a final look, UCLA librarian Powell bitterly decried the aristocratization of his beloved coast:

In a feverish buying and selling of land, the coast has become utterly transformed and unrecognizable. Each succeeding house, bigger and grander, takes the view of its neighbors in a kind of unbridled competition. . . . Once lost, paradise can never be regained. . . . Developers have bulldozed the Santa Monicas beyond recovery.<sup>34</sup>

The Malibu nouveaux riches built higher and higher in the mountain chamise with scant regard for the inevitable fiery consequences. The next firestorm, in late September 1970, coupled perfect fire weather (drought conditions, 100-degree heat, 3 percent humidity, and an 85-mile-per-hour Santa Ana wind) with a bumper crop of combustible wood-frame houses. According to firefighters, the popular cedar shake roofs “popped like popcorn” as a 20-mile wall of flames roared across the ridgeline of the Santa Monicas toward the sea. With the asphalt on the Pacific Coast Highway ablaze and all escape routes cut off, terrified residents of the famed Malibu Colony took refuge in the nearby lagoon. Firebrands fell like hellish rain on the beach, and day became night under the gigantic smoke pall. Coalescing with another blaze in the San Fernando Valley, this greatest of twentieth-century Malibu firestorms ultimately took 10 lives and charred 403 homes, including a ranch owned by then-governor Ronald Reagan.<sup>35</sup>

Furious property owners—ignorant of the true balance of power between fire suppression and chaparral ecology—denounced local government for failing to save their homes and demanded new, expensive technological “fixes” for Malibu’s wildfire problems.\* Elected officials, acutely sensitive to Malibu’s national prominence in political

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\* Thus Malibu homeowners’ leader and state Democratic chieftain Paul Ziffren, after the 1970 fire: “What I don’t understand is how we can do all those things like playing space basketball and yet we’re still fighting fires the same way we did 25 years ago.”<sup>36</sup>

fund-raising, were quick to oblige. A celebrated example occurred in the late 1970s when the Malibu Colony was being pounded by the heaviest surf in a quarter-century. Larry Hagman, *Dallas*'s J. R. Ewing, is reported to have told Jerry Brown, the governor of California: "Jerry, do something. Goddammit, we're in real trouble. Get your ass down here!" In short order, Malibu was declared a disaster area and National Guardsmen were helping sandbag Hagman's—and sometimes Brown date Linda Ronstadt's—homes.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, developers—racing to stay ahead of proposed "slow growth" coastal legislation—redoubled their subdivision efforts. The subsequent boom only provided more fuel for the three successive "Halloween" fires that consumed homes in October 1978, 1982, and 1985. The first two blazes both began in Agoura and roughly followed the route of the 1956 fire through Trancas Canyon, while the third repeated the itinerary of the 1930 Decker Canyon conflagration.

The 1978 fire, which consumed million-dollar homes in the Broad Beach area (where Powell had lived in the more humble 1950s), also



"Balls of flaming fur"

set a new speed record: the fire crossed 13 miles of very rugged terrain in less than two hours (the 1970 fire had taken twice the time). One eyewitness described how the rampaging fire front “turned thousands of wild rabbits into balls of flaming fur that darted insanely about, only to start new fires at the spots where they fell.” The surviving beasts—domestic pets and wild animals alike—“mingled in chaos with human evacuees along the beach at Point Dume while oblivious surfers rode the waves.”<sup>38</sup> Traumatized Malibu residents, also battered by disastrous floods and landslides in 1978 and 1980, could be forgiven for imagining that nature was getting angrier at them.

## 2. THE BURNED-OVER DISTRICT

*Furnaces with chimneys. You couldn't build better boxes to fry people in if you tried.*

*A Los Angeles firefighter (1973)*

On 25 March 1952, spectators outside 115 East Third Street were mesmerized by the desperate figure hanging from the third-story windowsill of the burning skid row tenement. They shouted to him to hang on. “He clung there for several minutes before his grip loosened, and he fell, screaming, to his death in the paved alleyway below.”<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile every available ambulance in the city was rushing toward the building. Scores of injured tenants—some with third-degree burns and multiple fractures—sprawled piteously on the sidewalks while skid row missionaries prayed over them and grim-faced firefighters scaled ladders onto the blazing roof. They would eventually recover six more bodies from the Hotel St. George. And, for a few days, debate over such avoidable but chronic fire tragedies would chase Korean War news out of the headlines of Los Angeles’s four daily papers.<sup>40</sup>

Like wildfires in Malibu, Los Angeles’s tenement holocausts have been astonishingly faithful to a fundamental fire ecology (or perhaps we should say “disaster algorithm” since none of the variables



Threatening to jump (1952 Hotel St. George fire)

involved are natural). Consider, for example, the infamous and amazingly still extant Hotel St. George. It hardly ever seemed to stop burning: scores of fire alarms over the decades were climaxed by fatal blazes in 1912 (six dead), 1952 (seven dead), and 1983 (one dead). Moreover, 10 of the 11 fatal tenement fires that followed the 1952 disaster broke out in structures of strikingly similar configuration, and

all 11 occurred within the same three-square-mile fire zone overlapping Downtown and Westlake.

The brief if brutal debate over responsibility for the 1952 fire, which pitted Councilman Davenport, chairman of the Police and Fire Committee, against Fire Chief Alderson, exposed widespread official culpability. On the one hand, Chief Alderson pointed to the city council's repeated failure to enact new fire safety regulations recommended by his department three years earlier. On the other hand, Councilman Davenport excoriated the chief for failing to enforce existing regulations. At the time of the fire, the Hotel St. George was in blatant violation of almost every section of the fire code: "bolted nailed door at bottom of rear stairs; unusable drop ladder; rotten standpipe fire hoses; landings of stairways blocked with furniture storage"—the list was endless. Raising the specter of corruption in the fire department, Davenport acidly told the press:

It looks to me that there is evidence here of dereliction on the part of the fire inspectors. It might even develop that the whole building should have been closed. . . . For some reason—which I won't even guess at—[Chief Alderson] lets these old buildings get away with murder.<sup>41</sup>

This vicious circle of inadequate regulation and negligent enforcement was compounded by the lethal design of the most common tenements. Built of cheap brick and soft mortar, without steel reinforcement, these structures had been promoted as a safety innovation in the wake of the great San Francisco earthquake and conflagration of 1906: "the modern, fireproof answer" to the old-fashioned combustible wooden building. Brick construction in Los Angeles received additional impetus in 1924 after 24 children were burned to death in "an ancient wooden home for mentally deficient girls" in Del Rey, and another 35 died in a blaze at a claptrap Venice hotel.<sup>42</sup>

Originally designed mainly as two- to six-story "economy" hotels for often elderly tourists, who arrived at a rate of a thousand per day each winter season, these brick structures were built by speculators

who sold them to middle-class investors, especially doctors and dentists, as “rent mines.”\* The typical plan featured large, open stairwells, steam heat, shared hallways, common lavatories, high ceilings, and fold-down murphy beds. In 1980 there were still 1,079 of these hotel and apartment tenements—comprising 46,000 units and housing 137,000 residents—in Los Angeles, primarily in Downtown and the Westlake and Wilshire districts.<sup>44</sup>

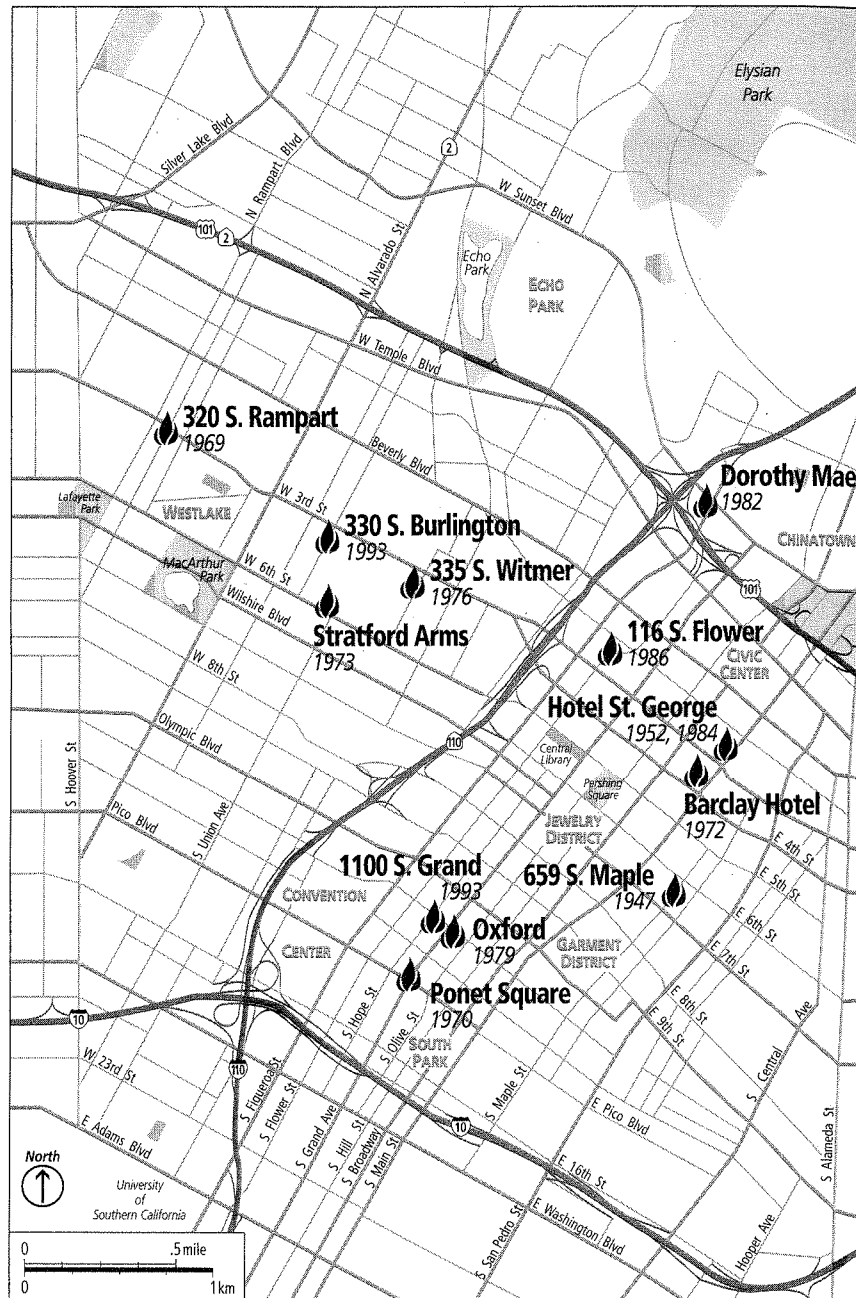
The deadly propensities of these unreinforced masonry buildings were revealed during the March 1933 Long Beach earthquake, when hundreds of them collapsed, crushing more than 120 people to death and injuring thousands more. New brick construction without steel reinforcement was quickly outlawed, although almost a half-century passed before seismic retrofitting was required for the thousands of pre-1933 unreinforced structures that remained. In the meantime, as auto courts and motels began to coopt the tourist trade, the economy hotels quickly metamorphosed into squalid tenements for the depression’s lost souls. (Robert Aldrich’s 1955 film version of Mickey Spillane’s *Kiss Me Deadly* offers an extraordinary noir tour of the decaying residential hotels that before demolition in 1961 crowded the flanks of Los Angeles’s Bunker Hill neighborhood.)

Fire officials soon recognized that these structures were as much damned by fire as by earthquake. Their most diabolical feature was the ubiquitous open stairwell that in a blaze invariably acted as a huge flue spreading fire through the upper stories. A similar stairwell-as-chimney design—also advertised as “fireproof”—had been responsible for the terrible Winecoff Hotel holocaust in Atlanta which killed 120 in December 1946, still the worst hotel fire in American history.<sup>45</sup>

Although open stairwells were barred from all new construction by a 1947 ordinance, the city council—yielding to the same “slumlord lobby” that delayed reparations for seismic safety—refused to make

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\* A chamber of commerce study in 1919 found that 20 percent of winter tourists leased bungalows or homes, 33 percent rented apartments, while the rest made do with sleeping rooms in boardinghouses or tourist hotels. There was a chronic shortage of accommodation for poorer tourists as well as for the large number of Eastern workers seduced to the coast by the false advertising of plentiful jobs.<sup>43</sup>



The burned-over district

the standard retroactive.<sup>46</sup> The controversy surrounding the St. George tragedy, while dramatizing the stairwell-as-flue danger, failed to shift the council majority on this matter. In the same period, Los Angeles's public housing coalition of trade unions, civil rights groups, and liberal churches, which had been crusading since the late 1930s to demolish Downtown firetraps and rehouse the poor, suffered a crushing electoral defeat. California voters, inflamed by the *Los Angeles Times's* and *Oakland Tribune's* statewide campaign against "socialist housing," passed a constitutional amendment in November 1952 requiring two-thirds-majority local approval for public housing construction. As a result, not a single unit of new public housing has been built anywhere in Los Angeles County since 1953.<sup>47</sup>

For nearly a generation politicians were able to forget about the tenement fire problem. Although serious blazes, often with casualties, were reported virtually every month in skid row or the Westlake district, there were no headline-grabbing tragedies. Then, on 12 October 1969, a ground-floor fire broke out in a 1920s wood and masonry structure on Rampart Boulevard, just west of MacArthur (formerly Westlake) Park. Following the deadly pattern of the Hotel St. George fire, superheated gases literally exploded up an open stairwell. With the front fire escape cut off by flames, dozens of tenants had no choice but to jump from the upper stories. The eight dead included a pregnant woman killed in a leap from a third-floor window.

Eleven months later, a virtually identical fire broke out in the lobby of the Ponet Square, a four-story Downtown apartment-hotel built in 1910. According to an incident analysis later released by investigators, flames from a deliberately set fire raced up the fluelike stairwell at a velocity of five feet per second. At each landing, fire "back-drafted" down the hallways. Fire escapes at the ends of those hallways were engulfed in flames before residents could reach them. Within a few minutes, the temperature in the stairwell and hallways reached the same extreme heat as a mountain firestorm: about 2,000 degrees. Dozens of residents, meanwhile, were trapped inside their rooms with the temperature rapidly climbing to 400 degrees. Again the only choice was to jump or be baked to death. "I could hear bod-



"I could hear bodies hitting the ground" (1970 Ponet Square Fire)

ies hitting the ground all around me," said Fire Captain James Williams. Demolition crews worked for a week to recover the bodies of the last of 19 victims.<sup>48</sup>

The back-to-back Rampart and Ponet Square disasters finally forced the council to require the retrofitting of pre-1947 tenements. Owners were given the options of installing sprinkler systems, enclosing stairwells with fireproof doors, or simply demolishing their buildings. With sharp teeth, the "Ponet Square" ordinance might have made a serious difference. But the council, ever solicitous of property owners, gave them a four-year grace period to make improvements and exempted all two-story structures—loopholes which condemned scores more to death by fire.

Three years later, only 6 percent of owners cited had bothered to bring their buildings into compliance with the law. On the evening of 15 November 1973, a fire started in a lobby sofa near an open stairwell in the ancient, unretrofitted Stratford Hotel near MacArthur

Park. It proved an uncanny repeat of the previous conflagrations. Although firefighters reached the building within five minutes of the alarm, 25 tenants were already dead. It had taken no time at all for the blast-furnace heat to burn through their thin apartment doors. In one room, five dead children were found huddled around the body of their mother.<sup>49</sup>

Over the next decade, one fire tragedy after another exposed the defects of the Ponet Square ordinance. A few days before Christmas in 1976, for example, 10 Central American and Mexican immigrants were killed when another open-stairwell fire destroyed a two-story tenement in the Westlake district. A firefighter who had been at the scene wrote a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* complaining that “vested interests” had blocked the extension of the stairwell ordinance to hundreds of dangerous two-story structures. “It’s the old story: Cost versus Safety.”<sup>50</sup> His point was grimly reinforced by more fatal tenement fires in 1979 and 1981.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, in the 1970s, the elderly white population in the Downtown and Westlake firetraps was largely replaced by poor immigrant families—*recien ilegados*—from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Poverty and overcrowding ensured that fires would claim even higher body counts. Responding to the 1976 Witmer blaze, for example, firefighters were amazed to discover 75 adults and children crammed into nine single-room units on one floor, with a single shared kitchen and toilet.<sup>52</sup> The new immigration also transformed the economics of slumlordism. As no affordable new residences were being constructed, the owners of older tenements found themselves with a monopoly on bottom-end housing. As a result, the percentage of total income that the poorest families paid for rent soared from 37 percent in 1977 to 60 percent by 1987. Rents, profits, and overcrowding increased in lockstep, while standards of maintenance and building safety deteriorated rapidly from their already scandalous levels.

Savage budget cuts, meanwhile, in the wake of California’s 1978 tax reduction revolution (Proposition 13), shrunk the fire department by 15 percent at a time when demand for its services had increased by more



“Little Salitre”

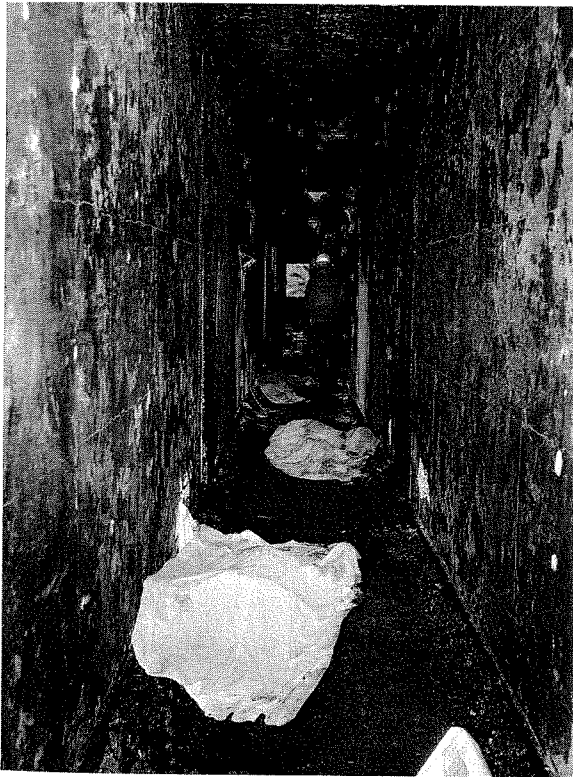
than 50 percent. Local fire stations, undermanned and overwhelmed by emergency calls, began to neglect regular fire inspection. Slumlords, in turn, routinely disregarded citations for fire code violations. When investigators did have time to pursue noncompliance cases, they typically found ownership not only unresponsive but often undiscoverable, having been disguised behind various fronts and straw men.<sup>53</sup>

The Dorothy Mae Apartments—a four-story brick tenement built in 1927—was a microcosm of new immigrant life on one of these rent plantations. Most of its residents had migrated together—an entire transplanted village—from El Salitre in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. Fathers and mothers worked together in Downtown garment sweatshops, while grandparents and older children took care of toddlers and infants. On the weekends “Little Salitre” celebrated christenings in the Dorothy Mae parking lot or held communal picnics and soccer matches in nearby Elysian Park. They paid rent to an abstraction called HLL Management Company, a facade as it turned out for attorney Hiram Kwan and his 10 anonymous partners. Although the Dorothy Mae was equipped with fireproof “Ponet

doors," these were illegally propped open. The absentee owners had pointedly ignored repeated citations from fire inspectors.

The ensuing tragedy on 8 September 1982 was a virtual repeat of the fire at the Hotel St. George 30 years before. A blaze in a first-floor utility room burned through to the stairwell and within seconds became a miniature firestorm sucking every molecule of oxygen out of the building. The 200 residents had almost no warning: 24 died (including 7 members each of the Díaz and De La Torre families), 150 were injured. Little Salitre was devastated.<sup>54</sup>

Eight months later, while the city council was supposedly debating a "Dorothy Mae" ordinance mandating automatic sprinklers and smoke-activated fire doors, the postwar history of tenement fire came back, full circle, to the Hotel St. George. The skid row crematorium's latest owner was a Palos Verdes millionaire who had changed nothing



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They never had a chance (1982 Dorothy Mae fire)

but the name (to the “LA Six Motel”). He was under criminal investigation for 121 separate health, building safety, and fire code violations. The six-story structure’s misdemeanors included fire escape doors that opened the wrong way, missing fire hoses, inoperative smoke detectors, and substandard wiring. There were gaping holes in the walls, cracks in the ceilings, no heating, sagging floors, and one of the largest vermin populations on the West Coast. Superior Court judge Dickran Tevrizian, who toured the former St. George in 1982, called it “a time bomb.”<sup>55</sup>

It went off on 13 May 1983. Although an elderly man was burnt to death, alert firefighters, primed to the perils of the hotel, stopped the blaze before it became “a major catastrophe.” Fire Chief Donald Manning then urged the city council to pass the Dorothy Mae ordinance. The response of Robert Farrell, chairperson of the Building and Safety Committee, spoke volumes about communications between the fire department and the council. “What ordinance?” he demanded.<sup>56</sup>

### 3. NOUVELLE INFERNO

*This is hell, dude!*

*Malibu resident fleeing fire (1993)*

As in 1970, when Ponet Square and Malibu went up in flames in the same few weeks, tenement fire and wildfire were again in stark counterpoint to each other in 1993. If Southern Californians seemed unprepared for this trial by fire, they had no one to blame but themselves. The conflagrations of 1993 came down grimly familiar pathways—and there was no shortage of omens.

Harried fire inspectors, for example, knew the tenement at 330 South Burlington Avenue only too well. Since 1988 they had repeatedly cited its owners for failure to repair defective smoke detectors and fire doors. Building and safety officials had also slapped the sprawling 69-unit structure with a notice of substandard maintenance, while health inspectors had responded to innumerable tenant com-

plaints about broken plumbing, leaking ceilings, and obscene infestations of rats, cockroaches, and fleas. True, there were other tenements in the Westlake district with comparable dereliction, but they were 60 to 85 years old. The Burlington Apartments had been built in 1985.<sup>57</sup>

The belief that Los Angeles's tenement problem would gradually be reduced by the sheer attrition of blighted buildings was confounded in the 1980s by the appearance of huge four-story stucco boxes precariously supported by their parking garages. These poorly constructed "super-cubes," containing from 36 to 112 cramped units, were scarcely more than instant slums designed to exploit a desperate demand for cheap shelter in the central city. Speculators—typically headquartered, like the Burlington's owners, in the affluent western end of the San Fernando Valley—took advantage of federal tax exemptions and Los Angeles's unreformed zoning code to impose exorbitant new population densities (amplified by tenant overcrowding) on poor neighborhoods in the Westlake, Mid-City, and Hollywood districts.

When fire inspectors visited the Burlington on three separate occasions during April 1993, they found people living in closets and infants sleeping in dresser drawers. They also discovered that the Ponet fire doors were nailed open and that few of the smoke alarms actually worked. After the first inspection they ordered the owners to post an emergency 24-hour firewatch until the violations were corrected. The owners—Sidney and Frances Kaufman of Woodland Hills—did not comply. A week later, after two further visits, the inspectors reissued the order. Once again the Kaufmans disregarded it. At this point departmental regulations required the inspectors to take the citations to the fire marshal for an emergency hearing and possible prosecution. They failed to do so.

Two weeks later the predictable tragedy occurred. Breaking out on the second floor, fire erupted through the open fire doors to the third floor, then blasted out the windows facing the interior courtyard. Residents—many of them Kanjobal (Mayan) Indians from Guatemala—were trapped between the inferno in the hallways and the toxic smoke which quickly filled the tiny courtyard. Desperate parents dropped screaming babies and toddlers from upper-story windows



Ten died (1993 Burlington fire)

into the arms of people on the street. A local Eighteenth Street gang member, Carlos Ingles, became an instant neighborhood hero when he caught six children, then, hearing cries, entered the building to rescue a young couple from their blazing bedroom. Still, it was too late for 10 victims, including two pregnant women.<sup>58</sup>

The wildfires came six months later. The rains of the previous winter had produced exorbitant new brush growth, now dried and highly combustible. As in other recent fire years, the Santa Anas began howling just before Halloween. On the morning of Tuesday 26 October, Southern California woke up to perfect fire weather. Los Angeles Fire Chief Donald Manning accurately assessed "a potential day for disaster" and dispatched 10 city engine companies to the rim of the San Fernando Valley where chaparral meets suburb. And shortly after lunch, a blaze flared up in that crucible of so many Malibu fires: just across the Ventura County line in the grassland corridor between Agoura and Thousand Oaks. A regional fire war room was quickly established in the Los Angeles County Fire Department's new headquarters in the Montebello Hills.

Early Wednesday morning, as a 50-mile-per-hour Santa Ana whip-sawed power lines and ripped the fronds off palm trees, fires erupted one after another in Chatsworth (northwest San Fernando Valley) and Santa Paula (eastern Ventura County). Meanwhile, a transient, camping in Eaton Canyon along the flank of Mount Wilson, tried to keep warm by kindling a small fire which immediately spread to century-old, unburnt chaparral. Within 24 hours it would destroy 118 homes in Altadena and Sierra Madre. As dawn broke on the 27th, the Thousand Oaks/Malibu, Chatsworth, and Altadena fires were out of control, five firefighters had already been critically injured, and new blazes were being reported throughout five Southern California counties. As local forces were overwhelmed, statewide mutual aid agreements kicked in, and 100 engine companies were sent southward on Interstate 5, sirens screaming, from Bay Area and San Joaquin Valley fire departments.

They arrived too late to save the two dozen homes destroyed by the first Malibu fire, which ultimately incinerated 39,000 acres. But events in Malibu were overshadowed by the fire that began on Thursday just after lunch and with incredible speed consumed Laguna Beach "as if it had been soaked in gasoline." Twenty-seven thousand residents were evacuated from the path of a conflagration whose coming had been long predicted and long disregarded.

The narrow streets of wood homes with shake roofs finally succumbed to the devastation that for decades officials had warned was the region's destiny. After the Oakland fire two years ago, Orange County Fire Captain Dan Young said communities such as Laguna Beach were "designed for disaster."<sup>59</sup>

The Laguna Beach blaze—the biggest Orange County fire since 1948—injured 65 firefighters, destroyed 366 homes (most of them valued at over \$1 million), and caused \$435 million in damage. It seemed to be the dramatic denouement to a catastrophic fire week. In fact, it was only the first act.

The second began on the morning of 2 November near a pair of water tanks on Mount Calabasas. Within a few minutes the Santa Anas transformed a careless—or deliberate—spark into the seed of a great firestorm. Two off-duty volunteer firefighters, driving up Old Topanga Canyon Road, spotted the initial plume of smoke and managed to hook up a hose to a hydrant, but they were quickly overwhelmed by the fire's explosive growth. "I immediately thought it was arson," one commented. "I don't exactly know why."<sup>60</sup>

While county crews were still racing to the scene, the implacably advancing fire ambushed its first victims at a ranch a few hundred yards downhill from the water tanks. Miscalculating the fire's velocity, residents Ron Mass and Duncan Gibbins attempted to defend their home with a garden hose. They recognized their mistake almost immediately, but it was already too late. Mass jumped into his jeep, but the fire caught him before he could get out of the driveway. Hideously burned, he managed to stagger to the edge of Old Topanga Canyon Road where firefighters found him: his blistered arms "outstretched like a scarecrow." Gibbins, who had dashed back to rescue his cat, ran right into the fire's deadly thermal pulse. It charred 95 percent of his body. Paramedics later discovered him, barely conscious, in the ranch's swimming pool. "I don't want to die," he said over and over. Smoke poured from his mouth, and he talked in the painful high-pitched squeal of a man with lungs scorched beyond repair.<sup>61</sup> Gibbins died later in the hospital, but Mass surprised doctors by surviving his terrible third-degree burns.

By the early afternoon the summit of the Santa Monicas was a funeral pyre. The ridgeline network of fuel breaks failed to slow the Santa Ana-fanned conflagration. Veteran county fire crews, aided by air tankers and helicopters, gamely defended their fire line on Old Topanga Canyon Road, but it was impossible to stop a 30-foot wall of flames, driven by 70-mile-per-hour winds, from cascading down the steep ravines and gorges that led to the Malibu coast. Multimillion-dollar estates in Carbon and Las Flores Canyons—some built on the ashes of humbler houses destroyed in 1956 and 1970—became so much fire fuel.<sup>62</sup> The situation was now out of control. From Los

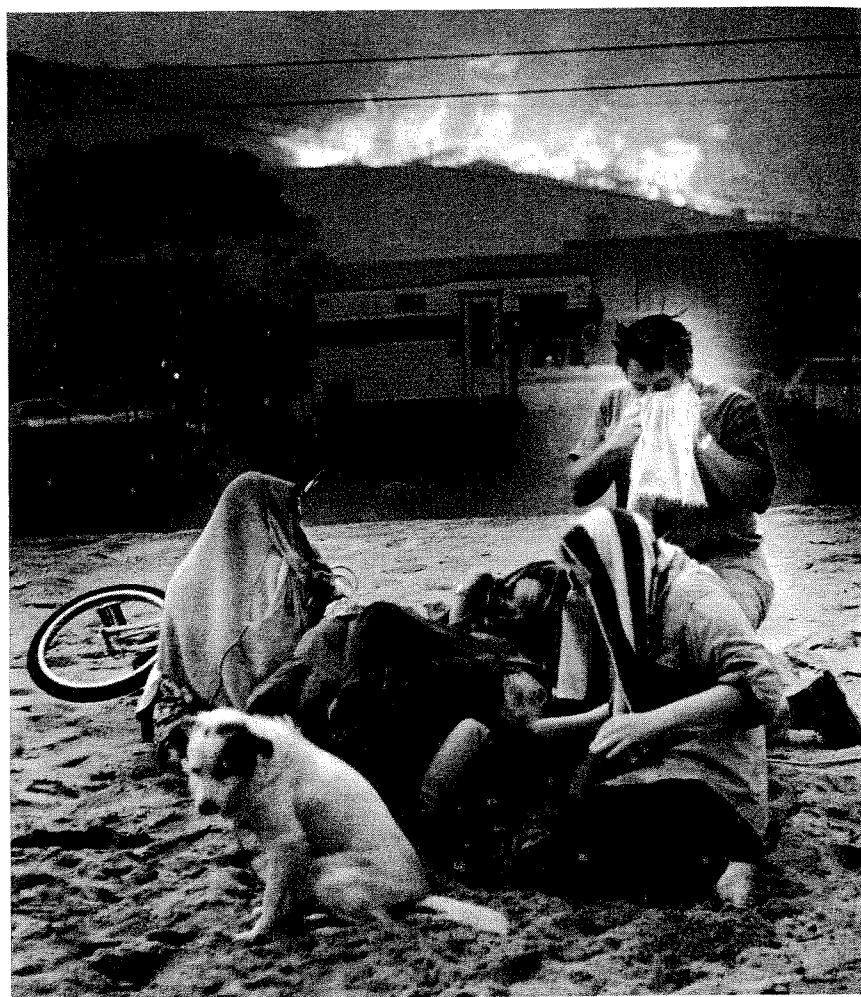
Angeles International Airport (LAX) or West L.A., the dark nimbus billowing above the Santa Monicas looked like a volcanic eruption. At 1:30 P.M. a sheriff's helicopter ordered Malibu Colony residents to evacuate their beach houses.

Meanwhile, in the hills above the ocean, overwhelmed firefighters and terrified residents fought for their lives. Some had to drive through barricades of fire, while others saved themselves in empty swimming pools. Sean Penn and Ali McGraw, among scores of others, saw their homes burn to the foundations. Time and again, firefighters were betrayed by the feeble water pressure in hydrants or trapped in the labyrinth of narrow mountain streets. In upper Los Flores Canyon, an Alhambra fire crew miraculously survived a fireball that incinerated their truck.

Don and Amy Yarrow were not so lucky. An elderly couple who lived in a modest trailer at the top of Carbon Canyon, they had been Malibu residents since the 1940s. They tried to outrun the firestorm in their Toyota pickup, but the flames were faster. They were engulfed a mere hundred yards down the road. It took several days to identify their charred remains.<sup>63</sup>

At dusk that day, Malibu was a surreal borderland between carnival and catastrophe. On the pier nonchalant crowds played video games while television news helicopters hovered overhead and the Coast Guard cutter *Conifer* stood offshore, ready to evacuate residents. Beneath the flaming hills, the Pacific Coast Highway was paralyzed by a hopeless tangle of arriving fire trucks and fleeing Bentleys, Porsches, and Jeep Cherokees. Hundreds more trekked out on horseback, by bike, or on foot. A few escaped on roller blades. Three hundred sheriff's deputies were brought in to guard against looting. The chaotic exodus was oddly equalizing: panicky movie stars, clutching their Oscars, mingled with frantic commoners. Confronted once again with its destiny as a fire coast, Malibu replied in the vernacular. "This is hell, dude," one resident told the *Los Angeles Times*. "I'm expecting to see Satan come out any time now."<sup>64</sup>

The crisis also tested Malibu's strange, bespoke morality. When the firestorm temporarily cut off the highway as an escape route, trapped



Not everyone was evacuated

residents had to make some tough choices. The *Malibu Times* celebrated the case of two intrepid housewives from the Big Rock area who loaded their jewels and dogs into kayaks and took to the sea, where they were eventually rescued by blond hunks from Baywatch Redondo. Only the fine print revealed that, in saving their pets, they had left their Latina maids behind. (The abandoned maids managed a narrow escape down the beach to Topanga.)<sup>65</sup>

Firefighters, meanwhile, began to have the eerie sense that they were struggling against supernatural cunning. After feigning a thrust

at Malibu Colony and Pepperdine University, the fire suddenly pivoted eastward toward Tuna Canyon. As frantic fire crews battled walls of flame in the lower canyon, the swirling red center of the firestorm easily outflanked them on the north, heading straight for Topanga, the Getty Museum, and, ultimately, the fat neighborhoods of the Palisades (where 70 city fire engines were already waiting).

By the early morning of 3 November, deputy county fire chief Donald Anthony had deployed 7,500 firefighters—some from as far away as Oregon and Oklahoma—for a last-ditch stand in Topanga Canyon. No one had ever seen such a gigantic mobilization of personnel and equipment. The urban ladder rigs, forestry pumper trucks, and bulldozers stretched almost bumper to bumper for 11 miles. Courageous helicopter pilots ignored their safety manuals to fly dangerous night water drops. At dawn they were relieved by C-130s capable of bombing the chaparral with 3,000 gallons of fire retardant at one time. Still the fire shrewdly parried each human tactic, repeatedly leaping over fire lines to ignite brush on the east side of the road. The battle raged savagely until late Wednesday afternoon when the firestorm literally ran out of fuel and wind at the edge of the ocean. It had lasted 36 hours.

As in previous years, the prime-time drama of a Malibu fire produced an extravagant outpouring of sympathy from government agencies and common citizens. FEMA director James Lee Witt assured fire victims that the Clinton administration, having declared Malibu a federal disaster area, would provide “all the aid they need to rebuild homes and lives.” Meanwhile, scores of trendy restaurants, bistros, and boutiques acted as an upscale equivalent of the Red Cross (which was also on the scene). Insurance adjusters set up camp in Winnebagoes next to the Malibu pier. The county promised tax relief. A group of German architects offered to work for free. Fire victims formed a support network. Anthony Hopkins offered an apartment to Dick Van Dyke. Zsa Zsa Gabor gave shelter to some homeless horses.<sup>66</sup>

Eleven days later, while the tabloids were still shedding crocodile tears for burned-out movie stars, another fire—invisible to most of

the media—killed three residents and critically burned twelve others in a dingy Downtown residential hotel. The death toll was the same as in the Malibu blaze, but property damage differed by several orders of magnitude. Once again, the double standard of fire disaster was rubbed in the faces of the poor—in this case, Mexican and Guatemalan garment workers. The owners of the Grand Avenue tenement—mere spitting distance from Ponet Square—had a notorious record of fire, health, and safety code violations. They had ignored long-standing tenant complaints about locked fire escapes, inoperable smoke detectors, vermin infestations, and crack addicts who monopolized the common bathrooms. When an evicted tenant threatened to burn the building down, however, the landlords did call the police. “They never came down. They said that if anything happens, call 911.” A police spokesperson later explained, unconvincingly, that it had been “an awful busy day.”<sup>67</sup>

#### 4. THE INCENDIARY “OTHER”

*I was extraordinarily liberal until I came to Malibu, now I'm a fascist.*

*Prominent screenwriter (1984)*

The LAPD's phlegmatic attitude toward tenement arson stood in sharp contrast to official hysteria about suburban wildfire. The 1993 firestorms, following so close on the heels of the Rodney King riots, opened a Pandora's box of white fear. One disaster was, not necessarily logically, superimposed on the other. From Laguna to Ventura, rumors spread that “some new breed of terrorist, or worse, several, were on the loose.” Public officials openly speculated that black gangs were at last making good on supposedly long-standing threats “to burn rich white neighborhoods.” In private, some even hinted darkly about a possible “Muslim connection” to New York's World Trade Center bombing.<sup>68</sup> Ironically, the burning hills had been full of

hundreds of present and former gang members: all risking their lives on state and county fire crews. (In addition, several thousand state prison inmates served bravely on Malibu fire lines.)<sup>69</sup>

The homeless also cast demonic shadows in Southern California's social imaginary. The Eaton Canyon fire, accidentally triggered by a transient, seemed to confirm the worst fears of mountain and canyon homeowners: that an invisible army of careless, embittered strangers was lurking in the brush. Clandestine hobo encampments, like those in Tuna Canyon along the Malibu coast, were singled out as intolerable fire hazards. Blazes of indeterminate origin were routinely ascribed to the homeless.<sup>70</sup>

As media-hungry politicians commuted from one fire scene to another, their rhetoric became inflammatory. Republican Governor Pete Wilson, desperately trying to toughen his image, compared arson with child molestation and proposed life sentences for the guilty. This failed to satisfy two even more bloodthirsty Orange County Republicans—Congressman David Drier and Assemblyman Ross Johnson—who insisted on the death penalty for instigators of fatal blazes. Drier even demanded one-year prison terms for those who caused fires accidentally.<sup>71</sup>

Fire investigators, for their part, zealously emulated the federal-local task force model first deployed during the 1992 riots. In an unprecedented effort, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) agents joined city and county fire officials, sheriff's deputies, and local homicide detectives to search for the arsonists believed to be responsible for setting 19 of the 26 recent wildfires. Thanks to private contributions, the reward for apprehension of the Malibu arsonist—initially described as a mysterious figure in a “blue pickup”—rose to \$350,000.<sup>72</sup>

The normally temperate *Los Angeles Times* blew an editorial fuse over the arson issue. Livid that a few thoughtless environmentalists had characterized homeowners in the fire zones as the real firebugs, the paper reassured readers that it was “hardly a crime against nature . . . to choose to live in the mountains, at the urban/rural inter-

face.” Instead, it called for “a true paradigm shift in the way that [Californians] think about fire.”

Fire prevention and crime prevention in California are becoming one and the same. . . . Californians need to stop viewing brush fires solely as acts of God and start thinking of them as sometimes acts of criminal—even pathological—man. What the arsonists did to us in the last two weeks they can do to us next week, or the one after that, if weather conditions are right for their evil crime. . . . We are no longer fighting “it”; we are fighting “them.”<sup>73</sup>

Ironically, the *Times*’s “paradigm shift” from “it” to “them” has been conventional wisdom in Southern California for generations. Although probably not more than one in eight blazes is caused by arson,<sup>74</sup> Anglo-Californians have always criminalized the problem of mountain wildfire. The majority have never accepted the natural role or inevitability of the chaparral fire cycle. (Conversely, there has been a persistent tendency to naturalize the strictly human causality of tenement fire.) Political as distinct from scientific discourse has long been obsessed with identifying an “incendiary Other” responsible for fire destruction.

In the early twentieth century, this “cruel-hearted and selfish man” (in Frederick Rindge’s words) was portrayed as an Indian, a sheepherder, or, most frequently, a tramp. During the First World War, the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) were believed to be lurking behind every burning bush in California. A decade later, major wildfires—like the 1930 Decker Canyon blaze—were usually blamed on itinerant farmworkers, especially the Okies. A year after Pearl Harbor, though, FBI agents and National Guardsmen were combing Las Flores Canyon for clues to the identity of “Axis saboteurs” responsible for the 1942 Malibu fire. Reflecting popular preoccupations during the Eisenhower era, the *Los Angeles Times* added new profundity to its reportage of the 1956 Malibu fire by linking arson to sexual perversion. According to a psychologist consulted by the



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A new breed of terrorist?

paper, arsonists “set fires at night in order to see women run out of their homes in a state of undress.”<sup>75</sup>

The political backlash to the 1993 firestorms, however, was unprecedented in its virulence and the scope of the blame that was leveled. Seedlings of neo-McCarthyism sprouted in the charred ruins of affluent subdivisions. Following the demagogic lead of Governor Wilson, conservatives claimed to trace the web of a vast conspiracy against the sacred rights of property. In addition to spectral “terrorists” directly responsible for the fires, vengeful homeowner and pro-development groups indicted such fellow travelers of arson as gays, liberals, the Sierra Club, and an endangered rodent.

In Laguna Beach, for instance, pro-growth forces attacked openly gay council member Robert Gentry, who had lost his home in the fire, for devoting “too much attention to AIDS victims and not enough on fire protection.” Scorning the charge that homes with wooden roofs and siding virtually invited incineration, the so-called Laguna Coalition instead vilified environmentalists for opposing construction of a three-million-gallon reservoir.<sup>76</sup> On Orange County talk radio stations, the Sierra Club was denounced as “arson’s fifth column.”

In Riverside County, burned-out homeowners charged that federal regulations designed to protect the rare Stephens kangaroo rat had prevented them from clearing tall brush around their homes. "My home was destroyed by a bunch of bureaucrats in suits and so-called environmentalists who say animals are more important than people," claimed one distraught resident. "I'm now homeless, and it all began with a little rat." But the allegation that wildlife regulations prevented fuel clearance was a canard. In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had encouraged the *mowing* of grasses around homes as a reasonable fire safety measure. The problem has been that many homeowners find mowing too troublesome, preferring simply to rototill their ecosystem under.<sup>77</sup>

These attacks were, in effect, the opening salvos in a major new political offensive to unleash further pyromanic suburbanization. Thus, Congressman Ken Calvert (R-Riverside), supported by the powerful Riverside Building Industry Association and the Farm Bureau, proposed a radical revision of the Endangered Species Act in order to protect property rights. At stake were 77,000 acres of federally protected habitat that developers had long coveted. Likewise along the Laguna coast, pro-growth forces were orchestrating a similar hue and cry against the California gnatcatcher. This small, almost extinct bird was depicted as an arsonist through a bizarre syllogism that equated any undeveloped landscape or protected habitat with an *ipso facto* fire hazard.

In Malibu, local wrath fell on advocates of greater public access to beaches and critics of hillside development. It was a replay of an old battle. After the 1978 fire, the California Coastal Commission, which is mandated to protect public access to coastal areas, asked celebrity homeowners to provide rights-of-way to exclusive Trancas Beach. Governor Jerry Brown's Malibu friends, however, generated such an uproar against "government by extortion" that he denounced his own stunned commissioners as "bureaucratic thugs."<sup>78</sup> Four years later, while state officials were preoccupied with fighting the 1982 Trancas Canyon firestorm, local defenders of the status quo sabotaged a public access project at El Pescador Beach. "Tires were

slashed, sand put in gas tanks, machinery pushed over the bluff, and site improvements trashed.”<sup>79</sup>

In late 1993, Malibuites were again frothing at “radicals” who advocated more beachfront rights-of-way as well as stricter fire safety regulation of new and rebuilt housing. “They have forsaken our constitutional rights, and have shown a shocking insensitivity to [our] traumatic situation.” Public access was equated with freedom of movement for arsonists. Residents demanded restricted access to mountain roads during periods of acute fire danger and raged against critics of the California Fair Plan, a state-mandated insurance pool that subsidizes fire-zone dwellers by spreading the costs among the mass of homeowners. Those who wanted the rich to pay a fairer share of the cost of protecting their homes were accused of instigating a “new class struggle between flatlanders and hillsiders.” As in the wake of past fires, declarations of “victimhood” preempted any serious debate about the social costs of sustaining luxury lifestyles along the fire coast.<sup>80</sup>

By the end of summer 1994, however, the great arson manhunt had dissipated into a maze of false leads, misidentifications, minor arrests, and interagency squabbles. The evil “Fedbuster,” whose menacing letters the previous fall had suggested a vast conspiracy (“They burned me now I’m going to burn back. I fight fire with fire. You like puns, chumps? Sizzle, sizzle”), turned out to be a delusionary former sex offender with no role in setting any of the fires. Similarly, the dramatic confession of a homeless Satanist that he started the Laguna Beach fire “in order to commune with a demon” left egg all over the face of Orange County District Attorney Michael Capizzi when it was discovered that the suspect had been in a Mexican prison at the time of the fire.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, the investigation of the Malibu fire came full circle to focus on the original heroes: the two off-duty firefighters on Mount Calabasas. The result was an unseemly tug-of-war between Sheriff Sherman Block, who publicly accused the two of setting the fire so that they could put it out and become heroes, and District Attorney Gil Garcetti, who refused to indict them for lack of evidence. As the fire-

fighters were left to writhe in the agony of unproven accusation, the ATF assumed control of the bungled investigation but quietly abandoned it after several years of desultory effort.

There was no breakthrough in any of the fire origin investigations until the fall of 1997. Then suddenly in October, the chief legal counsel for the California Department of Forestry identified the serial arsonist believed responsible for six recent fires in the Los Angeles area, including an October 1996 Malibu blaze that injured 11 residents and firefighters. The suspect was none other than Southern California Edison, whose main office near Los Angeles was raided after its executives refused to cooperate with state investigators. The sweep by state officials—who confiscated records, equipment, even tree limbs—followed up earlier charges by Ventura County fire officials and the U.S. Forest Service that Edison had deliberately withheld, tampered with, and destroyed critical evidence that linked negligent power-line maintenance to the fires. California forestry officials told the press that the giant utility was being investigated under a criminal statute “that makes it a felony to ‘recklessly’ cause a fire that results in serious bodily harm.”<sup>82</sup>

## 5. REDLINING FIRE SAFETY

*Separate and unequal fire protection is only the tip of the iceberg.*

*Councilmember Michael Hernandez*

Councilmember Mike Hernandez’s field office is a suite of tiny rooms above a pool hall and El Pollo Loco restaurant. The principal decoration is a wall map of his First Council District, a sprawling archipelago of Spanish-speaking neighborhoods consolidated by 1980s voting rights litigation to increase Latino representation on the Los Angeles City Council. Half of Hernandez’s quarter-million constituents are crowded, 50 per acre, into the fire tenements of the Westlake area; the other half live, 15 per acre, in the bungalow belt

that extends from Echo Park across the Elysian Hills to Garvanza.<sup>83</sup> Westlake is an electoral desert, with the smallest percentage of registered voters in the entire city. As a result, Hernandez's predecessor devoted most of her attention to politically active homeowners and small businesses in the other half of her district.

Hernandez, a large, quick-witted man with the cherubic face of Diego Rivera, has tried to redress this inattention to Westlake's predominantly immigrant population. He and his staff daily confront slum conditions of Dickensian dimensions. Although Hernandez has no tolerance for private exploiters, his wrath is especially directed against public agencies that negligently dismiss Westlake as Los Angeles's Third World. Whether the issue is garbage collection, recreation, school crossing guards, street cleaning, library facilities, or housing inspection, Westlake is the city's orphan. "We are still light years away," Hernandez emphasizes, "from per capita equality in city facilities or services."<sup>84</sup>

Fire inspection is a major case in point. In 1993, shortly after the Burlington fire, the *Los Angeles Times* surveyed tenements in the Westlake district and discovered that, despite epidemic safety violations, fully two-thirds had not undergone the annual fire inspection required by law. Hernandez was outraged and ordered the city's chief administrative officer (CAO) to prepare an independent audit of the entire city. The CAO, sampling 10 inspection records in each of 30 fire stations, found that only half of the mandatory inspections had been made. He also confirmed that 62 percent of the inspected structures were in blatant violation of the fire code.<sup>85</sup>

Hernandez's indignation about the Burlington disaster also jolted the fire department into conducting its own internal audit, employing the *Times's* methodology of randomly selected buildings. Despite frequent boasts by Fire Chief Donald Manning that his department had "the best fire inspection program in the nation," his own auditors uncovered a stark double standard. "Under the current system," they pointed out, "inspectors spend the least time in many of the areas with the greatest fire hazards." Annual fire inspection rates, for example, were almost three times higher in upper-income areas, like Bel

Air and Encino, than in poor and fire-prone Westlake or South Central. The auditors argued that such disparities were the inevitable result of the much higher levels of emergency response common in inner city areas. Overworked and understaffed fire companies, in other words, were too busy battling blazes to have time to complete their entire schedule of safety inspection.<sup>86</sup>

The auditors found it more difficult to explain other anomalies. There was, for example, the “startling pattern of neglect of fire prevention records,” 85 percent of which did not even indicate when buildings needed to be reinspected; inspectors, moreover, were negligent in referring persistent code violators to the city attorney for prosecution.<sup>87</sup>

Hernandez scoffs at the idea of an unavoidable trade-off between fire suppression and fire prevention in the tenement belt. “A two-tier system of fire safety—one for the Westside, another for the inner city—is morally indefensible.” What the audits really demonstrate, he argues, is an urgent need to redeploy resources to beef up fire inspection in areas like Westlake and South Central. Although acknowledging that the department is severely understaffed, having lost four hundred firefighters to budget cuts since the late 1970s, he is fiercely critical of what he characterizes as a “discriminatory policy of allocating personnel by the number of structures in an area rather than its population.” Although they have roughly equivalent numbers of structures, for example, Westlake has almost 25 times the per acre population density of Brentwood, Bel Air, or the Palisades. Hernandez also complains that desperately needed fire units have been shifted from his district to tony new subdivisions in the northwest San Fernando Valley.<sup>88</sup>

When I first interviewed him in June 1994, Hernandez—together with council allies Jackie Goldberg (Hollywood) and Mark Ridley Thomas (South Central)—had spent a long, frustrating year trying to move city housing agencies and the fire department into action on proposed fire reforms. Their proposals ranged in graduated intensity from withholding rent from noncompliant owners to placing their buildings under city receivership. By the first anniversary of the Burlington tragedy, however, nothing had been accomplished.

Although the city council had ordered the housing department to submit regular fire safety progress reports, none had been issued. Nor had the fire department taken even the first steps to implement Fire Chief Manning's promised reforms, including the computerization of fire inspection records and the creation of a special task force for the Westlake area.<sup>89</sup>

Hernandez and Goldberg have also had to fight the formidable influence of the landlord lobby on the city council. Incorporating the "bottom-line recommendations" of both the CAO and the fire department, their proposed "Burlington ordinance" ordered the installation of sprinkler systems in some 5,600 hotels and apartment houses with more than 15 dwelling units, built between 1943 and 1990. At an estimated cost ranging from \$450 to \$900 per unit and stretched out over a compliance period of seven to nine years, the ordinance, according to Goldberg and Hernandez, would not be "cost prohibitive." Landlords, however, immediately denounced it as a "death-knell for affordable housing" and applied fierce pressure on the council to eviscerate the measure. Yet the Burlington ordinance (still under debate at time of writing) is the essential third leg of a tripod of comprehensive fire reform that includes a high-density-area fire inspection task force and new fire code sanctions incorporated into the city's slum abatement program.

In historical perspective, these initiatives are little more than a determined effort to complete the reforms begun after the Ponet Square fire a quarter-century earlier. Yet the struggle for basic fire safety remains desperately uphill. In spring 1997, Hernandez was still battling the mayor's office over the decision to open the city's only new firehouse, after a decade of cutbacks, in the San Fernando Valley. "I'm surprised that we continue to focus the projects where the children are not," Hernandez told reporters. "The mayor continues to cater to that population he believes votes."<sup>90</sup> A few months later, the Blue Ribbon Committee on Slum Housing blasted the city's building and safety department for its conjugal relationship with landlords as well as its continuing failure to enforce codes in the city's 108,000 rat-infested slum apartments.<sup>91</sup>

## 6. THE FIRE BOOM

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*I have this sense of impending doom. . . .*

*Fire historian Stephen Pyne (1993)*

In 1981, in one of his last articles, Los Angeles's best-known environmental writer, Richard Lillard, challenged Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis that the American frontier—and with it, the frontiersman—disappeared in 1890. As a matter of fact, Lillard asserted, the frontier was alive and well in the Edenic canyons above Malibu and Hollywood. The unique challenge of the wild mountains so near the big city brought out the true grit in the self-selected population of hill dwellers. "The whole hillside and canyon ambiance, almost always fresh and wildsmelling, both attracts and holds the kind of individual that Frederick Turner and many a traveller, Tocqueville included, knew in the backwoods districts." The neighborly and self-reliant hill folk, moreover, were tempered to heroic mettle by the implacable constancy of the fire danger, "keeping an outlook for arsonists or children playing with matches, as their forefathers once kept alert for hostile aborigines."<sup>92</sup>

At the same time, however, Lillard warned harshly against the creeping threat of mountain society's nemesis: sloping suburbia.

It is not habitation amid wilderness. Mankind has conquered nature instead of adjusting to it. Often the new instant enclaves have a supermarket, a cleaning and dyeing establishment, and a laundromat. The immigrating mini-city populace consists of country club types rather than hillsideers.<sup>93</sup>

Although Lillard was writing only a decade and a half ago, his mountain frontier is now extinct. "Country club types" have everywhere conquered and now monopolize the picturesque seacoasts and foothills. Despite brave but belated attempts at open space conservation, like those of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy,

Southern California's remnant natural landscape continues to be destroyed or privatized. As we saw earlier, fire itself accelerates gentrification and the replacement of bohemian lifestyles by snobbery and exclusiveness. The real impetus of this movement to the hills is no longer love of the great outdoors or frontier rusticity, but, as critic Reyner Banham recognized in the 1960s, the search for absolute "thickets of privacy" outside the dense fabric of common citizenship and urban life.

Hillside homebuilding, moreover, has despoiled the natural heritage of the majority for the sake of an affluent few. Instead of protecting "significant ecological areas" as required by law, county planning commissions have historically been the malleable tools of hillside developers. Much of the beautiful coastal sage and canyon riparian ecosystems of the Santa Monica Mountains have been supplanted by castles and "guard-gate prestige." Elsewhere in Southern California—in the Verdugo, Puente, San Jose, San Joaquin, and San Raphael Hills, as well as the Santa Susana, Santa Ana, and San Gabriel Mountains—tens of thousands of acres of oak and walnut woodland have been destroyed by bulldozers to make room for similar posh developments.

And the "flatland" majority—including the poor taxpayers of the Westlake district, most of whom have never seen a Malibu sunset—will continue to subsidize the ever increasing expense of maintaining and, when necessary, rebuilding sloping suburbia. As Richard Minnich points out, hillside homeowners, unlike tenement dwellers, have access to almost unlimited fire protection.

The money flows to the Santa Monica Mountains instead of poor areas of Los Angeles because fighting firestorms is an emergency action. In fact, all wildland fires, even one acre spots, are treated as emergencies. The Forest Service and other land management agencies have no *a priori* budget. After the fire is suppressed, they just send a bill to the government. Budgeting is *a posteriori*, which means there are no strings. They can spend as recklessly as possible. Urban fires aren't treated this way.<sup>94</sup>



A Malibu castle

Meanwhile, the suburbanization of Southern California's remaining wild landscapes has only accelerated in the face of a perceived deterioration of the metropolitan core. As middle- and upper-class families flee Los Angeles (especially its older, "urbanized suburbs" like the San Fernando Valley), they seek sanctuaries ever deeper in the rugged contours of the chaparral firebelt. The population, for example, of the Thousand Oaks-Agoura Hills corridor—the crucible of almost all Malibu firestorms—has tripled since 1970 (to nearly 60,000), with hundreds of new homes scattered like so much kindling across isolated hilltops and ridges.<sup>95</sup>

Ignoring every lesson of the recent fires and earthquakes, two new megadevelopments, Newhall Ranch and Ritter Ranch, totaling 42,000 homes, are under construction in the environmentally sensitive, fire-prone Santa Clarita and Leona Valley areas of northern Los Angeles County. Statewide, some seven million inhabitants—the whitest and wealthiest segment of the population—now live in the suburban-

chaparral border zone where wildfire is king. Excluding national parks and military bases, California suffered an incredible 10,000 wildfires per year during the 1980s.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time, suburban firestorms are becoming ever more apocalyptic. The social cost of fire has increased in almost geometric relation to the linear growth of firebelt suburb populations. Two-thirds of all the homes and dwellings destroyed by wildfire since statewide record keeping began in 1923 have been burnt since 1980. If, as Stephen Pyne has suggested, the 1956 Malibu fire inaugurated a new fire regime, then the 1991 Oakland fire (\$1.7 billion insured damage) and the 1993 Southern California fire complex (\$1 billion) marked the emergence of a new, "postsuburban" fire regime.

#### CALIFORNIA URBAN WILDFIRES, 1923-93

| <i>Period</i> | <i>Homes Destroyed</i> | <i>Percentage of Total Destroyed</i> |
|---------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1923-64       | 1,626                  | 17                                   |
| 1965-79       | 1,539                  | 16                                   |
| 1980-93       | 6,303                  | 67                                   |
| Total         | 9,468                  |                                      |

Source: Data (except 1993) from California, Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, *Fire Safety Guides for Residential Development in California* (Sacramento, 1993).

The increased dangers of this "fire boom" are most obvious to those who risk their lives every year fighting mountain firestorms. As Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt complained while visiting the Malibu fire scene in 1993: "Fire-fighting is getting more expensive, more hazardous." To use a military analogy, the new density of hillside housing has transformed the battle against wildfire from a wide-ranging war of maneuver into the equivalent of street fighting. Firefighters' energies are now dispersed into house-by-house defenses, while traditional wildfire techniques, like the use of backfires, are vitiated by the threat to nearby homes. As a result, there is a dramatically increased risk of firefighters' being trapped by erratic and rapidly moving fire fronts.

This is exactly what happened to four engines from the Glendale and Los Angeles city fire departments on the second day of the 1996 Malibu fire. Although the fire did little property damage, it came close to wiping out an entire fire line of defenders. The firefighters had been dispatched to save some ridge-top homes perched above Malibu Bowl in Corral Canyon, when shifting winds suddenly fanned flames up a steep south-facing hillside. The captain in charge of the Glendale fire crew, who would normally have watched for such flare-ups, was preoccupied with laying line to protect the homes. As the fire unexpectedly erupted across the eucalyptus-planted ridge, "Engine 24's captain felt a blast of heat followed by a rain of embers. He ordered his personnel to abandon their hose line and run." One firefighter, 53-year-old William Jensen, held his position with almost suicidal courage in order to cover his fleeing comrades with spray from his hose. He was hideously burned over 70 percent of his body and, although he lived, required 16 separate skin-graft operations before he left the hospital four months later.

Meanwhile, nearby units from Los Angeles were desperately trying to escape from the closing circle of flames. The heavy smoke, however, stalled Engine 10, and "the four men on board were only able to open one of the aluminized blankets each carried as protection. Three crawled under it; the fourth—the captain—was only able to get his upper body under the shield." He was seriously burned. Two other Los Angeles crews suffered smoke inhalation after they were forced to drive through the red wall of flame. A subsequent internal review by the two fire departments narrowly, and probably unfairly, focused on the role of "inexperienced leadership" in the near catastrophe, while ignoring the larger issue of house-by-house deployment under dangerous firestorm conditions.<sup>97</sup>

Indeed, a growing risk of entrapment and death is inevitable as long as property values are allowed to dictate firefighting tactics. The exponential growth of housing in foothill firebelts, moreover, increases the likelihood of several simultaneous conflagrations and stretches regional manpower reserves to their limit, or beyond. As one national



Endangered firefighters

forest official observed: "These fires in Malibu prove that you could throw in every firefighter in the world and still can't stop it."<sup>98</sup>

Most experts agree that the most effective way to curb the rising fire danger is regular "prescriptive burning" every five to seven years to reduce fuel accumulation. This return to Tong-va practice, however, has proved almost impossible to implement in Southern California, outside of unpopulated national forest jurisdictions. All controlled burns entail some small risk of runaway fire, and local fire departments are understandably intimidated by their potential liability. Hillside homeowners' associations, moreover, vehemently oppose prescriptive burning because of the belief that "blackened hillsides and ash in the swimming pools reduce property values." In a typical case, the Los Angeles County Fire Department was recently sued by a Topanga Canyon resident who claimed that controlled burns would make it impossible to sell his home.<sup>99</sup>

Mountain homeowners also continue to reject any special fiscal responsibility for the defense of their precarious habitats. Penny-pinching Malibuites, for example, have resisted every effort to force them to update their notoriously inefficient water system or widen their narrow, winding streets. Yet thanks to their disproportionate political clout, they continue to expect that the general public will bear the exploding costs of a scientifically discredited strategy of total fire suppression. As Alan Kishbaugh, the president of the powerful Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associations of Los Angeles (which includes Malibu affiliates), recently put it: "We're sitting here in our homes, doing our part, and expecting the best protection available. . . . When it comes to fire protection, Californians are entitled to the best that exists."<sup>100</sup>

As in the aftermath of each previous fire tragedy, homeowners have invariably been seduced by the idea of a technological fix to the problem of wildfire ecology. The latest fetish is the CL-415 "Super Scooper": a gigantic amphibious aircraft capable of skimming the surface of the ocean and loading up to 14,000 gallons of water per fire drop. For years the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associations has been fiercely lobbying state and local officials to purchase a fleet of these Canadian-built planes at \$17 million each. Since the 1993 evacuation of Malibu, moreover, the federation has enjoyed the support of the powerful West L.A. Democratic machine as well as most of the regional media, including the *Los Angeles Times*. In 1996 the state introduced the big planes on an experimental basis.<sup>101</sup>

Once again, politicians and the media have allowed the essential landuse issue—the rampant, uncontrolled proliferation of firebelt suburbs—to be camouflaged in a neutral discourse about natural hazards and public safety. But "safety" for the Malibu and Laguna coasts as well as hundreds of other luxury enclaves and gated hilltop suburbs is becoming one of the state's major social expenditures, although—unlike welfare or immigration—it is almost never debated in terms of trade-offs or alternatives. The \$100 million cost of mobi-

lizing 15,000 firefighters during Halloween week 1993 may be an increasingly common entry in the public ledger. Needless to say, there is no comparable investment in the fire, toxic, or earthquake safety of inner-city communities. Instead, as in so many things, we tolerate two systems of hazard prevention, separate and unequal.

