

LOS ANGELES AGAINST THE MOUNTAINS

by John McPhee SEPTEMBER 26, 1988



In “Los Angeles Against the Mountains,” a 1988 installment in the New Yorker series “The Control of Nature,” John McPhee described how Southern California’s dry chaparral produces devastating fires.

When fire comes to the mountains, it puts the nutrients back in the ground. It clears the terrain for fresh growth. When chaparral has not been burned for thirty years, about half the thicket will be dry dead stuff—twenty-five thousand tons of it in one square mile. The living plants are no less flammable. Most of the plants are full of solvent extractives that burn intensely and ignite easily. Their leaves are glossy with oils and resins that seal in moisture during hot dry periods and serve the dual purpose of responding explosively to flame.

Ignitions are for the most part caused by people—through accident or arson. Ten per cent are lightning. Where the Santa Anas collide with local mountain winds, they become so erratic that they can scatter a fire in big flying brands for a long distance in any direction. The frequency and the intensity of the forest fires in Southern California are the greatest in the United States, with the possible exception of the wildfires of the New Jersey Pine Barrens.

The canyons serve as chimneys, and in minutes whole mountains are aflame, resembling volcanoes, emitting high columns of fire and smoke. The smoke can rise twenty thousand feet. A force of two thousand people may fight the fire, plus dozens of machines, including squadrons in the air. But Santa Ana firestorms are so violent that they are really beyond all effort at control. From the edge of the city upward, sixteen miles of mountain front have burned to the ridgeline in a single day.

So momentous are these conflagrations that they are long remembered by name: the Canyon Inn Fire, August, 1968, nineteen thousand acres above Arby’s by Foothill Boulevard, above the world’s foremost container nursery, above the chief executive officer of Mackinac Island Fudge; the Village Fire and the Mill Fire, November, 1975, sixty-five thousand acres above Sunland, Tujunga, La Crescenta, La Cañada. The Mill Fire, in the words of a foreman at Flood, “burnt the whole front face off.”

In millennia before Los Angeles settled its plain, the chaparral burned every thirty years or so, as the chaparral does now. The burns of prehistory, in their natural mosaic, were smaller than the ones today. But with cleared fire lanes, chemical retardants, and other means of suppressing what is not beyond control, people have actually conserved fuel in large acreages. So, when the inevitable fires come these days, they burn hotter, higher, faster than they ever did in a state of unhindered nature. ♦