

Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation

(nonprofit 501(c)3 – Tax ID #87-1825043)

August Newsletter, 2023

FIRE! September 1961

Fire was a constant threat to the early rural mining communities. Sutter Creek survived at least 8 major fires in its first 20 years. Despite improvements in building codes, construction methods and firefighting resources, fires remain a serious threat to this day. The most recent major fire occurred in September 1961 and seriously threatened the cities of Amador City, Drytown, Fiddletown, Plymouth, Volcano and Sutter Creek. Firefighting resources in 1961 were much different than today.



Sutter Creek's brand new "store bought" fire engine ca. 1960. It got a real "trial by fire" in 1961.

There were no cell phones or computerized fire planning tools or equipment to efficiently coordinate wildfire fighting efforts. In 1961, local wildfire fighting efforts depended heavily upon trained and untrained volunteers. This newsletter presents accounts of the fire based on local news coverage as well as personal accounts by local fire personnel and citizens.

September 2

The first of two fires broke out on September 2, about a mile and a half west of Sutter Creek. Within 25 minutes another broke out on Dry Creek north of the old Rancheria Store. It is said that both fires were spotted from the Mt. Zion Lookout near Pine Grove.



Mount Zion fire look-out tower.

Quick action from fire crews at Sutter Hill managed to stop the first blaze short of reaching Sutter Creek. However, embers spread the fire to the roof of the gym. Initially the fire was thought to have been extinguished but it apparently smoldered until that night when it

erupted. The fire was not discovered until the gym was fully involved and beyond saving. The gym was left to burn while fire-fighters focused their efforts on saving the other buildings at the school with the help of water from the school's swimming pool.



Amador High School Gym set ablaze by wind blown embers on the roof.

Sutter Creek Fires - Sutter Creek had more than its share of fires with portions of the main town area burning down in 1862, 1865, 1868, 1870, 1875, 1877(x2), 1881, and 1888. This last major fire of 1888 wiped almost out all of the east side of Main Street from the creek, north to the top of Humbug Hill, where the Native Sons Hall stands today; and most of the west side of the street from Spanish Street to Keyes.



Letter to Mrs. (Georgia) Charles Bailey from sister, Gertrude Downs

Dear Georgia

By this time no doubt you have heard of the dreadful fire Sutter has suffered from. The wind blew terrible that day and carried fire everywhere. Early during the fire, Indelkoger's shed caught. Mrs. Bookger saw it and it was soon put out. The whole neighborhood had hoses out ready for action and many had to use them. I was alone here with Mary, when someone said that Stewart's barn was blazing and sure enough it was. So we had to get our hoses in one place for we had them all about, not knowing but (?) where we might have to use them any where. We had two boys to call on that fortunately were in the street and we some got ready and ladders up. But the wind blew so hard it seemed as though the water would never strike the right place. But very soon Robert and another man came and soon it was put out. It burned quite a hole in the barn roof and two smaller ones. Jansen house caught, John Brown's, Jim Hayes, Joe Fontainrosa's and I do not know how many more on our street. The men worked hard to save Mrs. Voorhies but succeeded. We all got a terrible scare and I am so lame I can hardly get up or down. Robert is no better, besides a terrible cold on his lungs. He came down from being soaking wet and clothes in rags. You may know that he was in the thickest of the fire for he always is. -----Letter goes on with other news.

Signed, Gert

Amador Ledger - Saturday - Mar 3, 1888

Sutter Creek in Ashes - The Heart of the Town Swept by Flames - Three Business Blocks Obliterated.

The most disastrous fire that Amador county has witnessed within the knowledge of the writer swept over Sutter Creek on Thursday afternoon, utterly destroying three-fourths of the business portion of the town. It broke out at a time when everything was favorable for the fire-fiend to assert his terrible supremacy. It was one of the windiest days experienced this season. A perfect hurricane was blowing from the south east, and before such a wind the flames laughed as it were at the puny efforts of man to stay their onward march.



The second fire, on the eastern front, sped past Plymouth and swept through New Chicago where the Fistolero home was destroyed. It raged over the Fremont Mine and on to Bunker Hill where it destroyed the Manassero residence and burned over the cemetery. By sundown Amador City was surrounded by the flames.

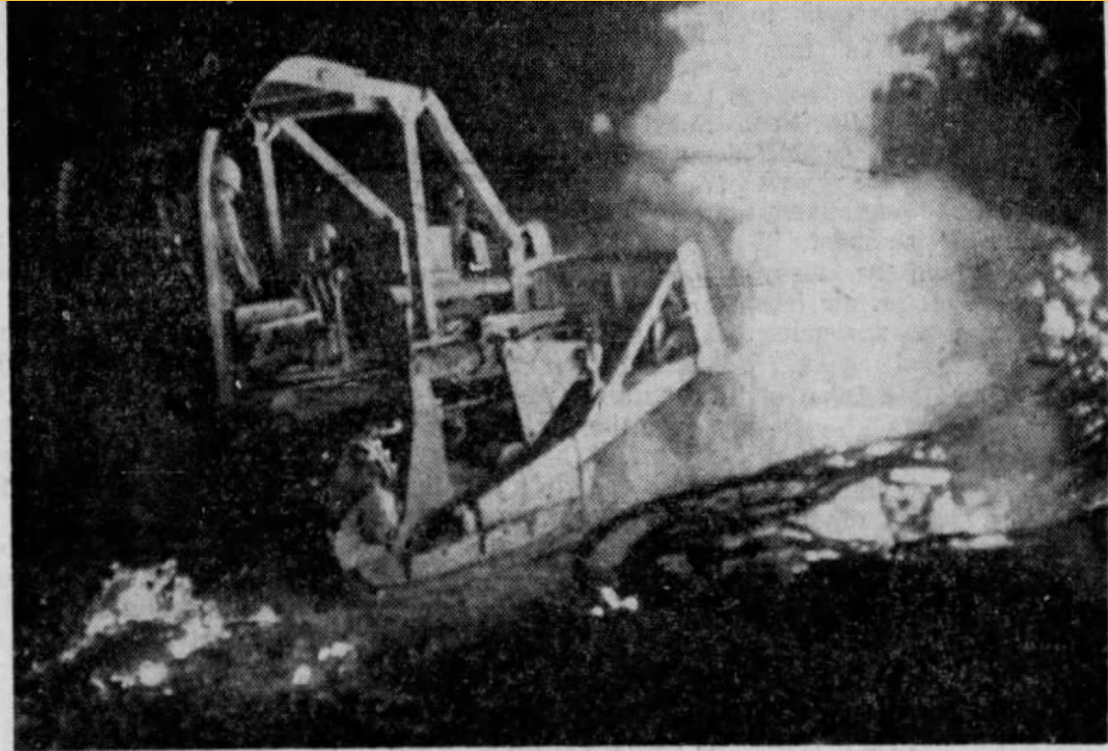


Beautiful downtown Amador City ca. 1961.

The Fire Marshall issued evacuation orders to the town. Women and

children were quickly moved to safety. A skeleton crew of firefighters was assisted by the men who remained behind to help fight the flames.

The call for the evacuation of Drytown came during a performance in the Claypipers Theatre. The audience was evacuated to the north, however several of the cast members became recruits to fight the fire.



A bulldozer fights to clear a line through the raging flames in the Amador County blaze.

The main villain in the cast decided to commandeer a road grader left unattended and began to cut a fire line still wearing his stage costume including his tall black hat.

Another interesting asset was brought to the fire by the City of Plymouth. The city dispatched its homegrown fire truck, a 1927 Chevrolet pickup truck that had been converted into a crude firetruck consisting of a 100-gallon tank and pump.



Early 1920's pickup converted to fire truck of the type used by Plymouth in 1961. Hauling 100 gallons of water, hoses, equipment, and 3 crewmen must have been quite a chore for this old girl.

The truck, crewed by John Colburn, Joe Meyers and Ray Miller provided much needed water to the hand crews working the Drytown-New Chicago area.

To the south, the fire was closing in on Amador City. A pumper was ordered from a neighboring county while the blaze was fought with garden hoses and water from the Mine House swimming pool. As the fire swept up Stringbean Alley all the homes along the way were destroyed with the exception of the Picollo residence. Moving on it consumed the mill at the Wabash Mine. For a time, it looked like the entirety of Amador City would go up in flames, but those fighting the blaze managed to save all the businesses and homes.

To the south the fight was on to save Sutter Creek.



Sutter Creek's fire alarm bell in its 1961 location next to the auditorium.

Early Sunday morning many residents joined the fight utilizing garden hoses and hand pumps to prevent embers from spreading the fire to the city proper. Residents, including students from the high school patrolled the city extinguishing embers which would have otherwise spread the flames to the city proper. As the fire moved forward it burnt into fences on the northern and eastern edges of town but the flames were stopped short of destroying any buildings.

The wind then changed and the fire burned towards Volcano and again back toward Drytown. By Monday the fire moved into the vicinity of Daffodil Hill taking down everything in its path. On Tuesday, as the blaze moved along the ridge towards Volcano, bulldozers and hand crews arrived on the scene. A 24-hour battle at this location managed to put down the flames and kept the fire from reaching Volcano.



Mount Zion fire crew - one of the many who responded to the 1961 conflagrations.

In the end, the fire burned a swath across Amador County that was 15 miles long and 3 ½ miles wide. An estimated total of 35,950 acres were burned.



CalFire Map - Rancheria Fire

The final estimates for agricultural losses (not including houses or timber) were set at \$1,283,400. The 163.2 miles of fences that were

burned totaled a loss of \$861,700. Compared to property damage, the human toll was limited. There were no deaths and only four injuries. One Calaveras volunteer was hospitalized for burns with the other three firefighters sustaining minor injuries.

Starting in 1967, local Boy Scout troops in conjunction with the Bureau of Land Management began a reforestation program. Two thousand trees were planted in 1967 and another 3,000 in 1977 by the local scouts and Scoutmaster Rollie Matson.

This brief account of the fire is but a sample of the personal stories held by citizens which experienced this disaster.

Acknowledgements:

Amador Ledger - September 7 and 14 1961, March 2, 1977, July 10, 1987

Teresa Guidi, Amador County Archives

C.D. Christiansen

Butch Martin

Jon Colburn

Sutter Creek Fire Department Dinner Dance
with Darin Sexton & Highway 49

SEPT. 2, 2023 • 5:30 -- 10 PM

Doors open: 5:30
Dinner: 6:30 Tri-tip and Spaghetti
Dancing: 7:30-10:00
Adults: \$40, Under Age 12: \$15

Tickets at SutterCreekFoundation.org or at The Fire Station



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Rotary
Passport to Amador



Sutter Creek
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SCCBF's current renovation project is the Historic Sutter Creek Grammar School which is rich in Gold Rush history. This beautiful building is California's second oldest two-story brick schoolhouse. There are four rooms within the

Historic Grammar School that can be rented.



Contact the City of Sutter Creek for information on rates and availability - (209) 267-5647 ext. 230 or email info@cityofsuttercreek.org / [website - cityofsuttercreek.org](http://website-cityofsuttercreek.org)

The Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation (SCCBF) is dedicated to the restoration, preservation, and development of the community's historic assets both now and for future generations. (nonprofit 501(c)3 – Tax ID #87-1825043)

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