

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Capitan Gap Fire	Incident Date & Time: 05/09/1950
Incident Location: Capitan Gap in the Capitan Mountains, Smokey Bear Ranger District, Lincoln National Forest, New Mexico	Incident Size: 17,000 acres
Types of resources involved: U.S. Forest Service personnel, New Mexico Department of Game & Fish personnel, U.S. Army personnel, Taos Pueblos Snowballs Crew, Mescalero Red Hats Crew	# of Fatalities/injuries: Unknown number of injuries due to a burnover (New Mexico Game & Fish and Fort Bliss Army personnel)
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ Fire made a notable impact within the wildland fire service 	
How the Smokey Bear Program Came to be:	
<p>Fire Prevention Week is observed in the United States each year during the week of October 9th in commemoration of the Great Chicago Fire, which started on October 8, 1871, and caused devastating damage. The fire killed approximately 300 people, destroyed 3.3 square miles of the city including over 17,000 structures, and left more than 100,000 residents homeless.</p> <p>While the Great Chicago Fire is the best-known blaze to start during this fiery two-day stretch, it was not the biggest. That distinction goes to the Peshtigo Fire, the deadliest forest fire in American history. The fire, which also occurred on October 8, roared through Northeast Wisconsin, burning down 16 towns, killing an estimated 1500 to 2000 people, and scorching well over a million acres before it ended.</p> <p>In 1920, President Woodrow Wilson issued the first National Fire Prevention Day proclamation. According to the National Archives and Records Administration's Library Information Center, Fire Prevention Week is the longest running public health and safety observance on record. The President of the United States has signed a proclamation proclaiming a national observance during that week every year since 1925.</p> <p>The origins of America's longest-running public service announcement campaign (Smokey Bear) date back to the early 1940s, amid World War II. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and the US entered World War II. The following spring, Japanese submarines surfaced near the coast of Santa Barbara, California, and fired shells which exploded in an oil field, close to the Los Padres National Forest. The Japanese also dropped incendiary bombs carried by balloons on the west coast, but they did not produce any significant wildfires.</p> <p>Americans were shocked the war had come to the American mainland and fear grew more attacks would bring a disastrous loss of life and destruction of property. Focus on fire prevention continued to escalate during World War II. In 1942, Congress approved legislation that made the destruction of our forests comparable to sabotaging the war effort. The Wartime Advertising Council began a campaign with posters and slogans ("<i>Forest Fires Aid the Enemy</i>" and "<i>Our Carelessness, Their Secret Weapon</i>") to reduce forest fires.</p> <p>The Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention Program (CFFP) encouraged people to prevent accidental fires and help with the war effort. Walt Disney's motion picture "Bambi" was produced in 1944, and Disney authorized the CFFP Program to use his creation on a poster. The Bambi poster was a success and proved using an animal as a fire prevention symbol would work. Bambi could not be used in sequent campaigns because it was only on loan for one year from Walt Disney studios. The U.S. Forest Service needed to find an animal that would belong exclusively to the CFFP Program. It was decided that the nation's fire prevention symbol should be a bear.</p> <p>Created in 1944, the Smokey Bear Wildfire Prevention campaign commissioned artist Albert Staehle to paint the first poster of Smokey Bear. Later depictions by artist Rudolph Wendelin are still used today.</p>	



1937: Uncle Sam Prevention Poster



1939: Adolf Hitler and Emperor Hirohito



1943: Bambi Prevention Poster



1944: 1st Smokey Bear Prevention Poster

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Finding Smokey Bear:

On May 4, 1950 the Los Tablos Fire started when a cook stove overheated at the Whitcamp Sawmill in the Capitan Mountains of New Mexico. On May 6 less than a mile north of the Los Tablos Fire the Capitan Gap Fire was reported. There were persistent typical spring weather conditions, the typical wind pattern funnels hot dry winds from the Tularosa Basin and Sonoran Desert from the southwest through the gap significantly increasing general wind speeds and significantly reduces relative humidity compared to surrounding areas. The Capitan Gap is a canyon, oriented north to south through the 20 mile long Capitan Mountain Range which runs west to east in southern New Mexico.

The Los Tablos Fire was reported by several ranchers and a fire lookout. United States Forest Service (USFS) and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDG&F) sent personnel to the scene. A maintenance employee was the first to arrive on scene. The first crew to arrive discovered a major fire being swept along by strong winds.

On May 5, "Speed" Simmons, a NMDG&F Crew Boss arrived with crew of military, NMDG&F, and USFS personnel. They initially spotted a bear cub and were told to leave the bear cub alone because the mother would come back. Word of the fire situation spread rapidly, and more crews were called to help. Forest rangers, Army soldiers, Native American crews, and civilian volunteers worked together to gain control of the raging fire.

On May 6, NMDG&F Crew Boss Simons and his crew responded to the new start, named the Capitan Gap Fire. The fires merged and continued growing rapidly. The tired crews were powerless to stop the new fire which exploded in all directions in early afternoon. This fire was reported as human caused however it could have been caused by spotting from the Los Tablos Fire.

Monday afternoon May 8, the fire received 70 mph winds and experienced extreme fire behavior. Speed Simmons, Earnest and Roy Purcella, Joe Phillips and 19 soldiers were in a compromised position and had to seek shelter in a rockslide. Roy Morgan led a crew of men ahead of the leaping flames to safety on top of the mountain. Sam Servis, from the USFS in Alamogordo, also saved his crew in a rockslide. The fire burned around and over the firefighters, they were marooned for three and a half hours. There were no fatalities, but later crew members expressed the opinion that they knew *"just how a slice of toast feels."* They suffered blistered feet and faces but no serious injuries and the crews immediately continued fire suppression efforts.

The Taos Snowballs arrived at camp earlier that afternoon and were briefed for the night shift. When returning to camp that evening the day crews passed the Taos Snowballs heading out night shift and told them about a badly burned bear cub in the fire area. Several crews had again seen the bear cub wandering through the fire area that day.

On May 9, Gary Chapman, a 20-year-old, first year USFS firefighter found the cub clinging to a burned snag. He retrieved the cub. The cub had severely burned feet, singe back and legs. He and his crew returned to the camp at the end of shift with the cub. During their trip to camp the crew fed the cub some of their leftover lunch candy making him sick.



Fire scenes from the Capitan Gap Fire

Ross Flatley, a local rancher involved in the suppression effort, took the cub home for the night. The candy did not sit well with the cub, and he cried all night because of a stomachache letting no one sleep. Ray Bell, a Game Warden with NMDG&F, was a pilot and flying to report on fire behavior and perimeter growth. Unfortunately, there was a lack of radios available and so only a few people could hear the reports. He would land at a local airport and provide updates to fire personnel. Ray Bell grabbed a vehicle the next morning in camp and went to the Flatley Ranch and picked up the cub.

Many folks, including Ray Bell, thought the cub would not survive because of the severe burns it had sustained. Bell realized the bear cub needed medical attention. Being from Santa Fe, he knew a veterinarian named Dr. Erwin and flew him to Santa Fe for treatment. Because of his duties on the fire, it was a quick trip. To reduce suspicion that he only made a flight for the bear cub, he told his supervisors that *"he needed to retrieve extra radios for fire personnel"* (which he also did). Bell called the cub "Hot Foot Teddy."

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Word got out about the cub and Patt Meara, a reporter for the Santa Fe New Mexican newspaper took photos of the cub at the vet clinic and ran a story the following day titled *"Teddy with a Hot Foot."* After treatment and when fire activity calmed down, Ray Bell took the cub home to continue with its recovery.

His wife Ruth and daughter Judy continued nursing the cub back to health. The bear cub continued to refuse any food. Ruth Bell finally came up with a concoction of honey, milk, and baby food that Hot Foot Teddy would eat. The Bell family cared for the cub for two months with the new food formula and the cub continued to recover and started gaining weight.



1944: Dr. Erwin treating Smokey



1944: Judy Bell caring for Smokey

The news about the little bear spread swiftly throughout New Mexico. Soon the United Press and Associated Press picked up the story and broadcast it nationwide. Many people inquired about the little bear's progress. The State Game Warden wrote an official letter to the Chief of the Forest Service, offering to present the cub to the agency with the understanding that the small bear would be dedicated to a publicity program for fire prevention and wildlife conservation. The cub was renamed "Smokey" after the Albert Staehle poster from 1944. The Capitan Gap Fire had produced the "living mascot" for the program that captured the attention of Americans for generations and continues to this day.

The go-ahead was given to send the bear cub to Washington, D.C. Once there, he found a home at the National Zoo and became the living symbol of Smokey Bear. Smokey died in 1976 and was returned to Capitan, New Mexico, where he is buried at the Smokey Bear State Historical Park.



1944: Smokey preparing to travel to DC



1944: Smokey and Ray Bell arriving in DC

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Notable events after Smokey Bear became the symbol of fire prevention:

By 1952, Smokey Bear began to attract commercial interest. An Act of Congress passed which removed Smokey from the public domain and placed him under the control of the Secretary of Agriculture. As one of the world's most recognizable characters, Smokey's image is protected by U.S. federal law and is administered by the USDA Forest Service, the National Association of State Foresters, and the Ad Council. Smokey Bear is protected by Federal law (PL 82-359, as amended by PL 92-318).

In 1952, Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins wrote the popular anthem that would launch a continuous and ongoing debate to this day about Smokey's name. To maintain the rhythm of the song they added "the" between "Smokey" and "Bear." Due to the popularity of the song, Smokey Bear has been called "Smokey the Bear" by many fans, but his name never changed. His name is Smokey Bear.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Smokey Bear Ranger District of the Lincoln National Forest utilized three six-man suppression crews. The three crews were combined in 1976 to form one of the Hotshot Crews developed to respond to wildfires around the country. The Washington Office approved the use of the name "Smokey Bear Hotshots" to honor the small bear found in the Capitan Mountains in 1950.

Smokey received millions of visitors and so many letters addressed to him (more than 13,000 a week) that in 1964 the United States Postal Service gave him his own private zip code. Smokey Bear has one of the two personalized zip codes...20252. The other customized zip code is for the President of the United States.

A stamp honoring Smokey Bear was issued August 13, 1984, in Capitan, New Mexico. The First Day of Issue ceremony was held at the Capitan Municipal School. The stamp was designed by Rudolph Wendelin of Arlington, Virginia.

Smokey's impact on pop culture has been enormous. Smokey is an American icon according to the Ad Council. In 2022, his famous catchphrase, "Only YOU can prevent wildfires" is recognized by an astonishing 96 percent of U.S. adults.

Smokey Bear became and has remained a legend. Even though he is negatively presented by some who blame his wildfire prevention message as detrimental to the current state of fuel loading across the country. Smokey reduced the occurrence of wildfire caused by the public. Today it has increased again with records showing that human caused starts represent most ignitions at 77%.



Smokey Postage Stamp

Links to more information about Smokey Bear:

This summary was written by content gathered from multiple articles and interviewing knowledgeable people about Smokey Bear, and his ongoing legacy. Numerous articles have been written and stories told about what really happened and who really found Smokey Bear on that day in 1950. Mary Lavin, curator of the Smokey Bear Historical Museum in Capitan New Mexico, has devoted her life to the story and history of Smokey Bear. She has read every newspaper or magazine article written and heard numerous stories and sifted through the rumors and fog of the Smokey Bear saga.

Official Website: <https://smokeybear.com/>

Capitan New Mexico Story: <https://www.villageofcapitan.org/community/page/true-story-smokey-bear>

Taos Snowballs Article: https://www.taosnews.com/opinion/columns/smokey-bear-owes-his-fame-to-the-taos-pueblo-firefighters-who-saved-him/article_42338de0-66d0-11ed-a785-ef6a456d0b85.htm

Historical Videos:

- Smokey Story told by Ray Bell's Son and Granddaughter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3Aw1u8C7jk&t=174s>
- Smokey Story told by Hopalong Cassidy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OY_ZavXVC84
- Smokey Short Story: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/7cKCBWDHuHw>
- Smokey Bear Film (Silent): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAu2yQQEYWo>
- Smokey Bear Film – Part 2 (Silent): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmQ_iWvapdk

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