

## Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

<b>Incident Name:</b> Kings Canyon Fire Sometimes referred to as the Clear Creek Fire	<b>Incident Date &amp; Time:</b> 09/28/1926 late in the afternoon or evening
<b>Incident Location:</b> Clear Creek Canyon, Toiyabe National Forest west of Carson City, Nevada	<b>Incident Size:</b> 8,000 acres
<b>Type of resources involved:</b> U.S. Forest Service firefighter, civilians, prison guards and inmates	<b># of Fatalities/injuries:</b> 5 fatalities
<b>Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:</b> ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment	
<b>Conditions leading up to the event:</b>	
The Kings Canyon Fire took place on the east side of the Sierra Nevada mountains near Carson City, Nevada in the fall of 1926. At the time of the fire there was increased fire activity throughout the east and west sides of the Sierras.	
<b>Brief description of the event:</b>	
<p>At 04:00 on September 28, the Kings Canyon Fire started on the Jack Smith Ranch at the base of Clear Creek Canyon. The fire first burned upslope in the Clear Creek drainage pushed by terrain and upslope winds. When the fire got near the top of Clear Creek drainage it became established in the top of Kings Canyon Creek just to the north. In the early afternoon of the same day, the wind began to run downslope, which is common for winds on the eastside of the Sierras. This wind shift pushed the fire down the Kings Canyon drainage towards Carson City throughout the afternoon.</p> <p>While the fire was being pushed downslope that afternoon, a group of five firefighters comprised of a prison guard, two inmates, a railroad worker, and a Forest Service fire patrolman were attempting to contain the upper perimeter of the fire in the Kings Canyon drainage. As these downslope winds abated later in the day, the fire began to run back upslope in the Kings Canyon drainage. This upslope run trapped these five firefighters on the road to Glenbrook (near the present day Highway 50).</p> <p>When the fire ran up canyon, the five firefighters dashed up the hill as the flames pushed up from below. They attempted to take refuge in a rock rim above the road but were trapped on the road. Three of the men perished on the spot, the other two men also suffered intensive burns, were hospitalized, and died later.</p> <p>Those who gave their lives were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ George Brown - inmate</li> <li>➤ J.E. Mitchell - inmate</li> <li>➤ Ross E. Morres - Virginia &amp; Truckee Railroad section worker</li> <li>➤ Arthur Sunday – Toiyabe National Forest fire patrolman</li> <li>➤ Bryant Whitmore - prison guard</li> </ul> <p>This being 1926, there was not an investigation as there would be today to get this fire’s history. Below are some excerpts from the local newspaper recounting the event:</p> <p><i>“The fire spread so rapidly that it was but a short time before the entire mountainside was a seething mass of flames. The high wind carried the fire toward Carson and hundreds of men were called out to fight the fire. Art Sunday, fire patrolman and Bryant Whitmore, a prison guard, were caught in the fire on Kings Canyon Road, where they were endeavoring to check its spread, and have but little chance of recovery.”</i></p> <p><i>“Killed outright in the fire were V&amp;T section worker Ross E. Morres and inmates George Brown and J.E. Mitchell”.</i></p> <p><i>“Both Brown and Mitchell would have been paroled shortly for good behavior. They volunteered to give assistance at the fire and went into the mountains unguarded”.</i></p> <p><i>“Morres had been employed by the railroad for many years and was a Native American who left a widow and several children”.</i></p> <p><i>“According to a statement by James Scrugham, the Nevada Governor at the time, Bryant Whitmore had reached safety when he turned to assist Arthur Sunday who was still entrapped.”</i></p>	

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### Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

The east side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range is noted for strong downslope winds during the day (often referred to as Zepher winds in the Lake Tahoe area) which will most often overpower the effects of terrain and create strong downslope runs throughout the daylight and evenings hours.

When these downslope winds abate in the late evening and at night, fires will often make very strong upslope/up canyon runs well into and completely through the night depending on the size of the canyons involved.

### Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Seek out local knowledge when in new locations; knowing the local fire behavior patterns is essential to firefighter safety and operational success.

This area, sometimes referred to as the Sierra Front, has a long dangerous history as a result of these strong downslope daytime winds. They are often followed major upslope runs when the winds abate at night. For more information on the unique wind/fire interaction found on the eastside of the Sierras, a review of newspaper articles related to the Acorn Fire in 1987; Cottonwood Fire in 1994; Chrystal Peak Fire in 1994; Tamarack Fire in 2021; and Dixie Fire in 2021(as it came into the community of Janesville) can be quite informative. Most of these fires don't have investigations, but the newspaper accounts can give an experienced firefighter a clear picture of this fire behavior anomaly.

### Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The Kings Canyon Fire was not historically significant nor did it have a notable impact on the wildland fire service. However, it is one of the many multi-fatality fires during this Historical Era that have been forgotten to history. If this fire had occurred today, it would have been considered a major tragedy prompting an extensive investigation process and most likely a number of directed safety action items.

### Links to more information on this incident:

Newspaper article:

- Nevada State Journal ~ October 1, 1926

The 1990 Eagle Fire case study provides a training source regarding this fire behavior:

- <https://www.btuttraining.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EagleFire.pdf>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw19zzEAhKc>

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June 2024

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Memorial at the Carson Valley vista point alongside Highway 50 between Carson City and Lake Tahoe

Nevada State Journal, Oct 1, 1926

# Condition of Forest Fire Victims Serious

## Arthur Sunday, Seriously Burned, Chews Tobacco As He Battles With Death

Their bodies covered with wounds cut deep by the flames which swept the mountains near Carson City this week and for a time threatened Nevada's capital, Bryant Whitmore, a prison guard, and Arthur Sunday, a forest patrol, are lying in St. Mary's hospital where they are making a fight for their lives with the odds all against them.

### Condition Serious

Their condition last night was serious. Whitmore was semi-delirious and appeared to be suffering intensely, and Sunday, while resting easily and able to take a keen interest in all that went on about him, is still not out of danger. Dr. Donald McLean, who is attending them, was hopeful last night of their ultimate recovery but he added that their condition was still critical.

In a sheet-shrouded room in the hospital, the two men are receiving every possible aid in their fight against the burns caused by flames which have already taken three lives. Nurses are with them every minute of the day and night and the latest treatment medical science has devised for burns is being used.

Their hands are bandaged and soaked with a healing preparation and covered with oiled sacks. Their legs, the most seriously burned portions of their bodies, in addition to the blankets which covered them, are enclosed in a specially-built chamber in which electric lights of high candlepower burn continuously. In the cloth enclosure which covers their legs a heat of 160 degrees is maintained constantly. But the men do not feel this artificial warmth which beats down upon them.

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Sunday, a large, well-built man, 65 years of age, his gray hair singed by the fire and his gray whiskers protruding through the many burns on his face, was able to talk last night to a reporter from The Journal.

### Sunday Cheerful

He was cheerful and confident of his recovery. But he did not think he had a chance when the flames encircled him Tuesday. "God, I thought I was a goner," he said.

Sunday and Whitmore were near the "double barrel" section of the Kings Canyon road when the fire crept upon them unawares Tuesday. Near them were George Brown, J. E. Mitchell and Ralph Morse, whose bodies were found Wednesday.

The two men were working on the side of the hill with the fire above and at the side of them when, suddenly, the wind brought a sheet of flame to their rear.

They started to run up the hill. But the going was terribly hard and they had progressed but a few yards when Sunday gave up.

"I couldn't go any further," he said. The young feller (Whitmore) grabbed hold of me and tried to pull me along. But I couldn't make it. God, I thought I was a goner. I told him to go ahead. 'Go on up,' I shouted at him. 'You can't help me.'"

The flames were lapping at the clothing of the men when Whitmore, unable to help his heavy companion on the slopes of the steep mountain side, struggled on ahead. Sunday slumped on the ground as the fire reached his clothing but he continued to fight, crawling on his hands and knees

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in a vain attempt to evade the flames.

#### Starts for Road

In a moment the flames had swept over him and on up the hill toward Whitmore. With his clothing ablaze, his eyes blinded by the smoke and fire, Sunday then started back to the road. His trousers were practically burned off but the clothing on the upper part of his body was still a meager protection. His shoes protected his feet and through the burning brush, glowing embers and red-hot ashes, he fought his way back down the hill to the road.

Reaching the road, Sunday quickly located the two barrels of water, fed by a spring which flows from the mountains to the roadside, and there he extinguished the fire which still was eating away his clothing.

"I sat down in one of the tubs," he said. "But it wasn't big enough. Then I laid down in the mud and water from the overflow of the barrels.

"I felt pretty good then."

#### Rescue Comes

Then kindly hands came to his rescue and he was removed to Carson where first-aid treatment was given him.

Meanwhile, Whitmore struggled on up the side of the mountain with the flames at his heels. Soon, he, too, was overcome and the fire dragged him down. Later he was found by members of a searching party and the two men were brought to Reno and placed in the hospital.

"How many chews of tobacco did you have today, Art?" his physician asked him.

"Three," Sunday said.

Then he grinned as he shifted a huge cud to the other side of his mouth.

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#### GRANTED PARDONS

CARSON CITY, Sept. 30.—When the bodies of George Brown and J. E. Mitchell are committed to their final rest in Carson cemetery tomorrow they will carry with them to their graves a certificate of worldly absolution in the form of a pardon document duly signed and bearing the Great Seal of Nevada. The documents were made out today and dated one day in advance of the day when both men perished in the fire that menaced Carson City on Tuesday.

This posthumous honor was thought only just, in view of the heroism of the men, prisoners at the state prison, in voluntarily periling and sacrificing their lives for the safety of the community.

Floral offerings will also signalize the gratitude of the people and citizens prominent in civic and official life will serve as pallbearers.

Brown, 41, was a native of Illinois, a teamster by occupation. He has a mother living in Illinois. Mitchell, 48, was born in Kansas and was a miner. He was a resident of Searchlight, Nevada, for 14 years.

If I were either of these men  
Who now lay side by side—  
And, serving to the uttermost,  
Had suffered much—and died;  
And I could have one last request  
Be granted by your State—  
Quite humbly, I'd beg of Thee,  
"Be just—and wipe the slate."  
—Federal 23319.



# STATE CAPITAL IS THREATENED WHEN FIRE SWEEPS HILLS

Three missing men are believed dead, two are in St. Mary's hospital suffering from perhaps fatal burns, and a dozen others received minor burns as the result of a forest and brush fire near Carson City yesterday which last night swept up the hills near the Kings Canyon grade after destroying two ranches and taking a heavy toll in timber and property.

Arthur "Art" Sunday, fire patrol for Lake Tahoe resorts, and Bryant Whitmore, a prison guard, were caught in a fire trap shortly before noon yesterday. Both men are alive, but little hope is held for Sunday, whose entire body was seared.

## SMITH TO HEAD TICKET IN N. Y.

### Democrats Again Give Nomination to Governor

SYRACUSE, N. Y., Sept. 28.—(AP)

—Alfred B. Smith of New York was unanimously and enthusiastically nominated for a fourth term as governor by the New York state democratic convention here today.

His associates on the state ticket all were nominated by acclamation. Edwin Corning of Albany was nominated for lieutenant governor and Robert F. Wagner, New York, for United States senator.

The mention of Governor Smith's name was always a signal for demonstrations throughout the session. He was alluded to repeatedly as "the next president of the United States."

Indication of his hope for political advancement was seen in his successful insistence against pronounced opposition that the party platform contain a plank declaring for American adherence to the world court. The text of the plank furnished the only real fight in the resolutions committee. As finally accepted, the plank was a compromise between the two divergent views. It follows:

"As the senate of the United States by its action voted that this nation adhere to the world court, with provisions intended to safeguard our national sovereignty, we trust that, if these reservations are accepted, our participation will promote the elimination of future wars and the solution of all international disputes."

A liberalization of the Volstead act was urged by the platform and hope was expressed that the electors of the state would vote "yes" on the referendum at the fall election to determine the will of the voters on a memorial to congress to amend the Volstead law by permitting each state to determine for itself what constitutes "intoxicating liquor."

NEW YORK, Sept. 28.—(AP)—Ogden L. Mills of New York City, vigorous opponent during the past

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## WESTERN PACIFIC SUES N-C-O LINES

SAN FRANCISCO, Sept. 28.—(AP)

—The Western Pacific Railroad company today filed a damage action for \$504,689 in the United States district court against the Nevada, California and Oregon Railroad company, a Nevada corporation, alleging breach of contract.

The complaint said that an agreement entered into on March 24, 1917, for the exchange of passengers and freight, was canceled by the Nevada company in October 1922 and that the Nevada company also failed to turn over certain amounts to the Western Pacific under the agreement.

George Brown of Churchill county and J. E. Mitchell of Clark county, state prisoners of a contingent of two truckloads who volunteered to fight the flames, have been missing since noon yesterday.

An Indian working with a V. & T. train crew also is missing.

### Believed Dead

It is believed that time will record that these three men sacrificed their lives in the flames.

The sea of flames surged northward down on the Muldoon ranch on the outskirts of Carson City early yesterday afternoon, destroying the ranch house and outbuildings; the Ed Walsh premises to the east were destroyed in the sweep of the fire, and the Feltie haystack and outbuildings were ashes in a few moments.

Most of the Muldoon goods were saved but those in the Walsh home were consumed, while livestock from both ranches fled in terror before the onrush of fire. These places are about a mile west of the state capital on King street.

The flames started at 4 o'clock yesterday morning in Clear creek canyon near the Jack Smith ranch about six miles from the capital. The first alarm was given at 6 o'clock and when fire fighters from the Truckee River Power company, under the direction of Norman Brown reached the scene, they found the fire raging in the canyon to the west of the Smith property with the wind blowing at a terrific rate.

### Barn Destroyed

After fire had been extinguished four times on the Smith barn, the flames at last were successful and the hay-filled structure was razed in a few minutes.

Harry Sweetland, one of the crew, escaped from the flames by leaping from the barn roof. He was uninjured.

A sudden change in the wind drove the fire around Big C hill and plenty of fuel was found in the dry sagebrush and small timber.

It was near here that August Pedrolli was burned about the face and rendered unconscious. He was carried by a passing motorist to Glenbrook for treatment.

After the destruction of the Muldoon and Walsh ranches, the blaze jumped the highway, worked down, and began to follow the bed of the Clear creek canyon and with one wing turned toward the Fradsham ranch south of Carson City and the other flank resting on the road to Lake Tahoe.

When within a mile of the city, the wind veered from northeast to due east and was kept on the south side of King street.

### Heroic Deeds

Heroic tales were told of the early events.

Sunday and Whitmore, working together, were caught in a bend of the road at the "Two Barrels." They had separated from the main party and scaled the steep hill in the inside of the turn.

Sunday fell but Whitmore got away.

He returned to rescue Sunday and, after picking him up, fell exhausted.

F. N. Dondero ran back for Whitmore and got him up but later was overcome by smoke. He crawled under a rock ledge and saved his life. Physicians ordered him to bed on account of his smoke-filled lungs.

### Sunday Badly Burned

Sunday's sides, flanks, hands and feet were literally roasted and his face seared, but he managed to walk