

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Bandon Fire	Incident Date & Time: 09/26/1936
Incident Location: Bandon, Oregon	Incident Size: 118,000 acres (estimated)
Types of resources involved: Entire community	# of Fatalities/injuries: 10 fatalities (some estimates are higher)
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: ➤ Civilian mass casualty event	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>As the long and dry summer of 1936 drew to a close, the first rains of autumn passed through the Oregon coast in the middle of September. With these rains the local framers, ranchers, and loggers began, as they did every year after the first “wetting” rain, to burn a summers worth of harvested fields, logging slash, and new fields for future farms. Unfortunately, these rains had been spotty in coverage and there was no follow up moisture to fully wet the wildlands.</p> <p>The town of Bandon, Oregon was established by newspaperman George Bennett, who had emigrated from Ireland in 1873. In an attempt to bring a touch of home with him and his family, they introduced an ornamental shrub (<i>Ulex europaeus</i>). It is known variously as gorse, Irish furze, or Irish hedge; and it soon became a common sight in the new town. While the hearty plant was welcomed into the town for its soil holding properties, it was not native and its interaction with wildfire, a seldom seen occurrence in Ireland, was largely unknown at the time.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>Sunrise in Brandon on September 26 brought light smoke and ash from the burning which had been slowly and harmlessly taking place for several days back in the hills east of town. There was no feeling of uneasiness that hot morning in the seacoast town as the temperatures climbed into the 70’s with a relative humidity reading of 8%.</p> <p>The Brandon Fire Department made two late morning runs to the high school building near the edge of town where grass and brush had leapt into flames. Around noon Fire Chief Woomer received word that the city’s main waterline was in danger. The fire, which was burning in the slash outside of town and had been slowly creeping toward town, began to increase in intensity. Knowing that he must save his waterline, the Chief moved out along the line a short distance outside city limits. An afternoon of hard work yielded little results, and the fire continued to creep towards the edge of town.</p> <p>Suddenly on the southeast end of town, in the residential district, flames shot up. So sudden was this blast of fire rising to a great height, roaring and crackling, for a moment folks thought a home had exploded. The firemen rushed to stop the flames and found the source of the intense fire was the gorse vegetation amongst the homes. Hydrant and hose were coupled in an instant, but the water seemed to have absolutely no effects on the clumps of oily gorse. They had never faced a fire so hot and blistering as those clumps of gorse.</p> <p>Later a resident told a Coos Bay reporter <i>"That Irish hedge was the worst thing, When the fire hit it right across from my house, the flames shot up high into the air. It was just as though there had been gasoline poured on the fire. And water was just no good against it -- wouldn't touch it! The stuff seemed just full of oil."</i></p> <p>Sometime between 20:00 and 21:00 Chief Woomer hurried to the town’s theater. The show was stopped for a moment while the Chief asked all able body men present to report and help fight the fire. There was no panic; women, children, and it is said, a number of the men remained to see how the movie would come out.</p> <p>As fire companies from Myrtle Point, Chiquita, and Marchfield were rushing to help the stricken town. The Bandon Fire Department began making a last stand to keep the fire from getting down into the business section. Five hours later the city, and its tentacles of gorse, was a smoking ruin.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>Western Oregon was undergoing a long duration drought as witnessed by the massive Tillamook Burns of 1933 and 1939 which bracketed this Bandon Fire event.</p> <p>Unregulated burning throughout the Oregon coast during the onset of an “Indian Summer” led to multiple human-caused starts in what amounted to summer conditions.</p>	

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The town was home to a solid covering of a non-native species with an unknown resistance to wildland fire. An early example of highly flammable vegetation fueling a wildfire as it moves into an interface and urban setting.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

The separation between “fire” season and “burning” season is rarely ever a clean, quick, single storm transition.

The volunteer firemen worked hard but were losing ground for the entire day. In these situations, order early and order often until you have a handle on your fire.

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

This is a historical example that wildfire conflagrations can visit any geographic area, even coastal temperate forests. It is easy to under-estimate the lush forests of western Oregon regarding fire behavior potential. These forests have a notable history of supporting multiple year periods with massive long-duration forest fires going back to the period of 1845-1868; then again during the 1930s including this event; and in more recent times from 1987 to 2020.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://www.oregonlive.com/history/2017/09/fire-is-the-story-of-oregon-ba.html>

This summary page was proudly provided by:
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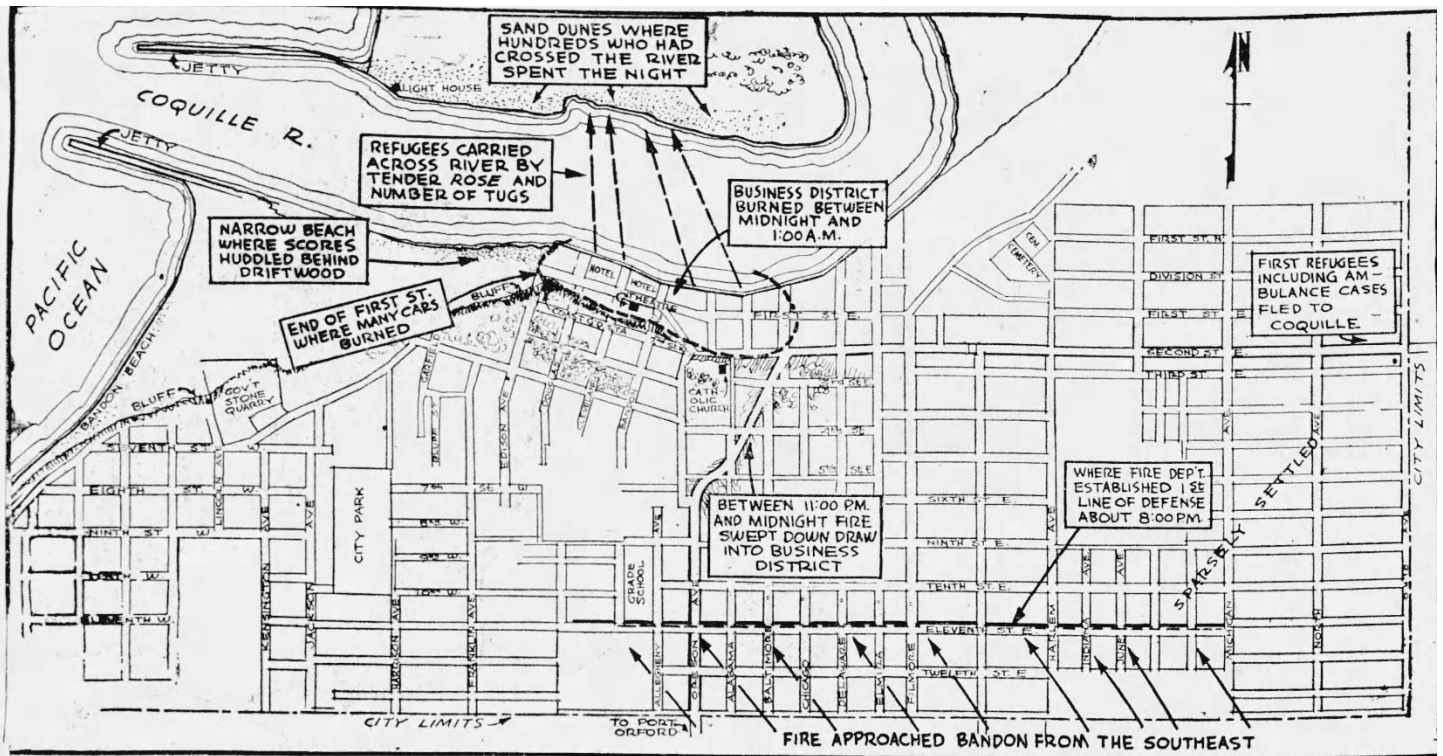
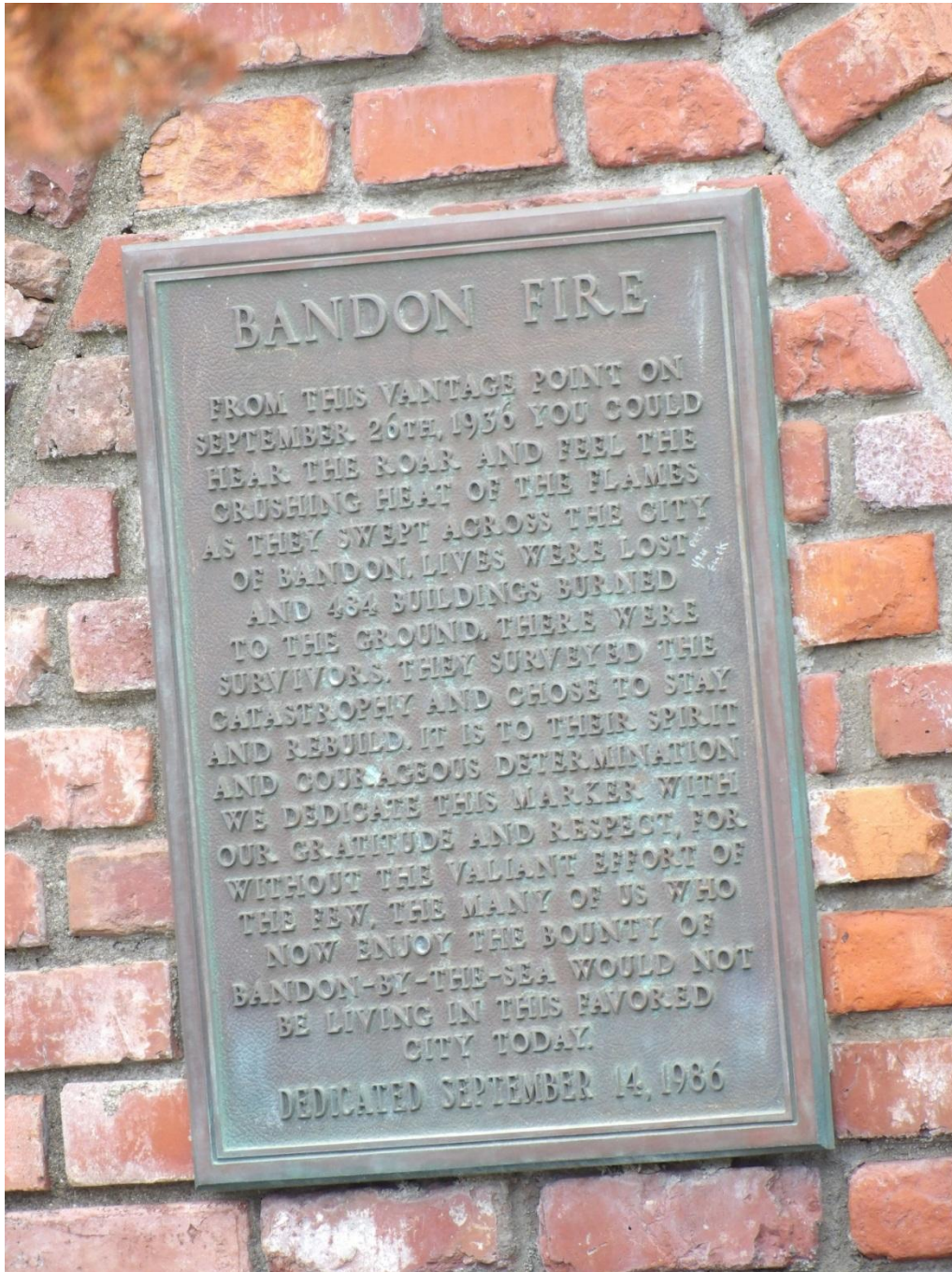


Diagram from the *Sunday Oregonian*, October 4, 1936, Page 70

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Memorial plaque affixed to the town bakery's chimney, one of the few remnants of the inferno.

Where Lies the Blame

From the disastrous fires which have swept through the Oregon coast region during the past week, resulting in the known deaths of nine people and the complete destruction of the town of Bandon, there are several lessons to be learned. But the obvious one is the folly of permitting the burning of slashings until the fall rains have definitely set in, of permitting logging operations during periods of extreme dryness and low humidity and of allowing hunters in the woods when fire conditions are threatening.

There are suspicions, backed by some evidence, that part of the blazes along the coast were of incendiary origin.

It has been definitely established to the satisfaction of forestry officials, however, that the tragic Bandon fire and most of the others in that area started as slashing fires around logging camps and in field clearings and were swept out of control by unheralded winds from unexpected directions. They are just as much the result of negligence and carelessness as the blazes started by careless campers and hunters and less excusable, for the loggers and settlers in these areas are fully cognizant of the menace which lurks in any fire.

But every year after the first fall rains, which scarcely dampen the tinder-like woods, loggers and settlers are permitted to burn slashings and stumps. Hunters are given almost free entry into powder-dry timbered regions. Not a year goes by but what at least one serious fire results from such carelessness.

The responsibility is not all that of the loggers, settlers, hunters and campers. A good share of it lies with those charged with the duty of protecting the forests—those who preach and write about the menace of the fire demon and then unloose it upon the forests by lax regulation and timid enforcement.

With them lies most of the blame.

Bandon Population Dazed as Homes, Livelihoods Wiped Out by Flames

Shocked, blackened, grimy, and weary, hundreds of Bandon families parked along the highway leading to Coquille, their passenger cars, trucks, and trailers, heavily-laden with salvage household items, thrust into every available corner of their conveyances, in order that some material necessities and comfort might be held for the hour when they might revisit the blackened embers of their homes in the well-known resort city.

Frantic cries of inquiry were hurled at each passing car. "Has it reached the bakery yet?" "Did old man Ryder find his nephew?" "Do you think the mills will escape the flames?" "Has anybody got a cigarette?" Faced with complete ruin and loss of home in many instances, the refugees were possessed of a complacent frame of mind.

"Most of us had plenty of time to gather our stuff," said one grizzled young father, speaking to us from his covered-wagon style automobile. "I buried a lot of silverware and tools in my front yard. I'll dig 'em up again in a couple of days." Baby-beds, davenport, bridge-lamps, bedding, big or small, might be seen strapped or tied to the tops and sides of departing cars. Behind them, the fiery glow of the waste streets of Bandon—ahead, only the prospect of enforced encampment along the highway, or with friends, until dawn, when it was hoped that the remains would have cooled sufficiently for attempts at rebuilding. State police, deputy sheriffs, vigilantes, volunteers, all kept traffic moving freely out of the danger zone. Curiosity-seekers were barred from an area two miles from the city limits of the stricken city. Flares of burning snags, thunder of toppling trees, whistling of flames through un-

derbrush and thicket, however, to even this remote area. Fearful lest the wall of flames might encircle their impromptu grounds, many fleeing families left for the vicinity of Coquille, after two a.m.

Transients from Portland, loaded into eight Greyhound chartered busses, were held at Coquille, because of closure of the Coast highway south. The men, bound for firefighting duty at Gold Beach, were being fed in Coquille restaurants. This city appeared a veritable mecca in the early hours of Sunday morning, as half-clothed children, startled-eyed mothers, and soot-stained fathers milled about in the several eating places.

The contingent of 300 men was destined for fire fighting duty at Gold Beach, where a thousand acre burn is rapidly destroying stands of first growth timber. G. E. North, Coquille businessman, was arranging for tugs and barge to transport the men across the Coquille river, where attempts at diverting the sky-high flames would be attempted.

Fred H. MacGougan, manager of the West Coast Telephone company, with a crew of emergency trouble-shooters, had established a base telephone outlet at Azalea Gardens, a short distance north of Bandon. Plans reestablishment of the toll service to the south, and installation of a temporary city switchboard in Bandon, were thought possible by early morning. A nearly total loss of telephone facilities in the city, were reported by Mr. MacGougan. Additional state police for patrol and rehabilitation duty, were summoned from Medford by State Officer Eric Tucker, of Marshfield. A warning was issued also, that motorists would not be permitted into the burned region until all doubts as to public safety were ascertained.