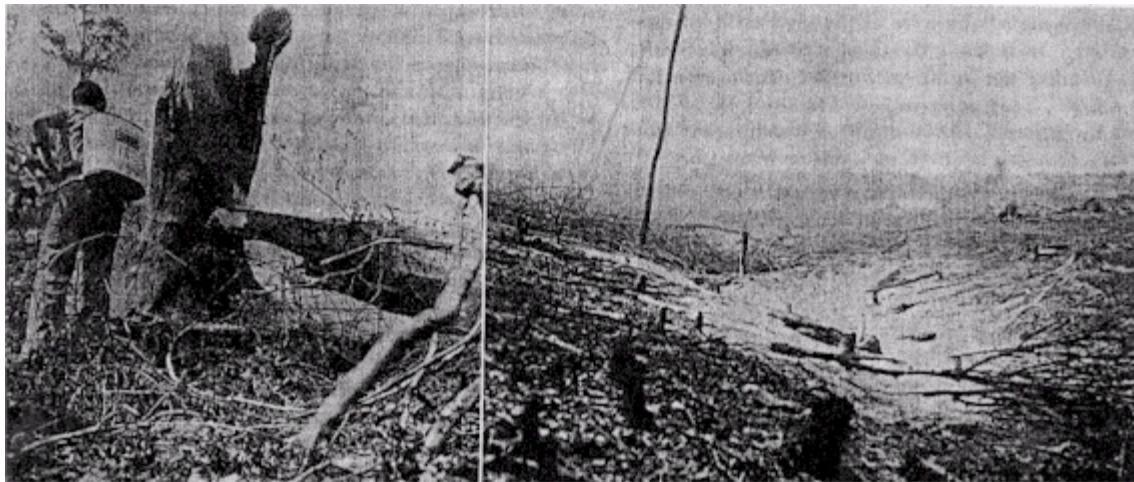


## Fire Garners Fear and Respect

Several particularly bad fire years in Indiana helped get the public's attention relative to the dangers of fire. Fires were reported that had advanced at a measured rate of 300 feet per minute and threatened schools, homes, and farms. Other fires were so hot they actually carried through the crowns of hardwood trees. Through the 1930's and 40s, Indiana continued to lose thousands of acres to fire each year with homes and barns consumed. Occasionally a life was lost and many were injured in fire fighting.



*The pictures above show a fire warden "mopping up" after a blaze was brought under control and a 125-acre forest of ideal game cover after it was destroyed by fire.*

In 1936 Indiana recorded 986 forest fires on over 24,000 acres, half of which were attributed to burning of fencerows and brush. The damage to timber alone from these fires was estimated at \$305,000. The fire losses paved the way for an aggressive educational campaign on the dangers of forest fires, emphasizing the loss of wildlife and forestland, and the importance of prevention measures.

### Profile of a Fire – the Georgia Fire, November 10, 1964

The Georgia Tower discovered the fire at 2:18 p.m. This area of southwestern Lawrence County had been in 'near drought conditions' for several months with October being one of the driest months on record. There had been no rain for 13 days, and strong gusty winds prevailed. The cause of the fire was listed as "unknown".

Tower-woman Clarisse Carroll immediately called the Huron volunteer fire fighters, local neighbors, and the Orange County Warden. She also called a local bus assembly line, Carpenters Body Works, and asked if they had volunteers to send. Martin County was also soon asked to send assistance but before they arrived, were re-routed to a fire at Trinity Springs. All other area fire departments were already busy with six going fires.

By 4:00 p.m. the fire appeared to be under control with the exception of a portion of the fire that had burned on to private land where owners refused to allow access to fire

fighters. Later law enforcement action was taken against this person. The fire was then estimated at 80 acres. The crews were called off to help with a fire near Tunnelton.

The next morning, with winds gusting to 35 miles per hour, Clarisse reported the fire was again out of control at 7:40 a.m. In her report to Fire Headquarters at Morgan-Monroe, Clarisse said "Yesterday's fire is going to be all over the place." Volunteers returned to the fire and Bill Onceel, Sergeant White, and two conservation officers arrived at the fire and ordered a dozer.

G.T. Onceel remembers the Georgia Fire well. "We didn't have enough equipment and no communications and here come five different fire departments and the fire was so big, this one hit here, and another hit there, and there was no communication. Besides that they don't listen to you," Onceel laments. He explained each fire department worked as an independent entity and no one was in charge.

Clarisse Carroll remembers watching the fire from her tower, with a phone in one hand and a radio in the other. Later, she was forced to abandon her tower, "feeling like a smoked herring," staying on as long as possible in order to aid firefighters with her superior view of the terrain and fire behavior. It was the first time in 17 years that she had abandoned her tower, but visibility was reduced to zero and the tower was thought to be in danger as well as several nearby homes, including her own. Conservation Officer Paul Sanders, on hand for the entire incident, stayed behind at the tower site hosing down the ground under the tower to spare the structure.

At that time the only equipment IDNR had for fire fighting were jeeps and hand tools. They had to rent trailers from construction companies to move in dozers. The dozers were effective and the fire should have been stopped that first day. However, Onceel remembers, "the dozer got up on a stump and we only had a quarter mile to go. So the fire broke through and then one of the fire departments found a road that ran into a house so they backfired off that. Nobody instructed them to do it, they just did it." Onceel notes, the fire "just went all over... and the next morning when we got up it was all over the place." He said in those days, with no good communications or hierarchy of command that kind of thing happened constantly. To add to the large number of crews, the National Guard unit out of Bedford was sent to help along with a military airplane; Carpenter Body Works sent men; six C.B. radio clubs sent men; and Mitchell High School sent crews of boys to help. The Lawrence County Sheriff's department cooperated by controlling traffic.

A front moved through the area as firefighters struggled to bring the fire under control. The humidity dropped and wind directions changed. Several breakouts seemed to stem from quiet areas of the fire. U.S. Highway 50 soon was in direct line of the fire and traffic became so thick with sight-seers that it was closed to all but authorized vehicles. Bulldozers worked the southern side of the road throwing up a tall dirt ridge to help keep the fire from jumping the road. A fire truck from the Crane Naval Weapons Depot patrolled the highway as well to ensure the fire didn't jump the highway and endanger homes to the north.

On the fourth day, seven additional incendiary fires were reported in the immediate area. The arsonist was actually seen setting fires by a volunteer in the Georgia Tower who watched a car stop seven times along the road in the burned out area while a man got out and proceeded into the woods to set fires. The tower volunteer called law enforcement immediately and a car chase resulted down back roads. Roadblocks were

also set up but the arsonist eluded capture. Only one of these sets took off and required calling in additional help to control. There was some suspicion that this arsonist also started the original fire since the point of origin was in a remote location away from any homes.

Late that day, the fire was considered controlled, but men were left to patrol until rains came two days later. Governor Matthew Welsh, issued a proclamation prohibiting any outdoor burning as crews worked frantically to control the Georgia fire.

An unoccupied landmark home belonging to the late Muriel Tincher was lost. Another small home, belonging to Vaud Dorsett, was reported destroyed and Dorsett was feared lost until he was found in town. An estimated 2,494 acres were burned. The Georgia Fire directly cost the State a total of \$13,135 in hiring seven bulldozers, meals and other firefighter expenses.

### Other Indiana Wildfires of Note

Another fire remembered by locals was in the spring of 1964 south of English. G.T. Donceel recalls it started along the rail lines and was strung out 25-30 miles. Donceel said he knows Richard McNabb was on that fire with his Youth Correction Crew. (McNabb worked out of the Clark Forest and his crew was available to fight any fire within a 50-mile radius.) In those days fire fighters had no fire shelters or protective equipment. At one point the crew was almost trapped and had to scramble up a rock embankment to escape the fire.

In the fall drought of 1956, a 3,749-acre fire swept across the Jasper-Pulaski Game Preserve doing severe damage to the wildlife, and cover. That same year several hundred acres burned at Tippecanoe State Park.

The largest wildfire in Indiana in the last century may have been the Dutch Ridge blaze in 1952, which burned over 4,000 acres in Lawrence and Monroe Counties.