



Part 8 of the Historical Snapshots Installments

Drought years and Big Fires on the Hoosier National Forest

This year's drought has people referring to historical levels. Soils are currently at historic drought levels and our temperatures in the last few months have broken records. It often pays to look back at what similar drought years have meant for fire in southern Indiana.

Past fires have been reported that advanced at a 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 had thousands of acres damaged by fire each year with homes and barns regularly consumed. Occasionally a life was lost and many were injured in fire fighting. 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.

Fires were under control for awhile in southern Indiana and then in 1952, people in southern Indiana were reminded again of just how serious wildland fire can be. That year, like 2010, was exceptionally dry.

Dutch Ridge Fire

W.D. Griffen, from the Hoosier National Forest and State foresters appealed to people to avoid outside burning and smoking while traveling through rural areas. Camping was banned on the Hoosier until further notice. Clinton Carroll, Lawrence County Fire Warden, warned a fire under present conditions could wipe out some of the smaller communities in Lawrence County.

Fire fighters were on alert around the clock for new fires. In mid-October, two families were left homeless in Lawrence County when grass fires had spread to their homes.

Then Paul Sowders carried a bucket of hot ashes out from his wood stove and dumped them near a broom sedge field near Bartlettsville at 1:15 p.m. on Sunday, October 26, 1952. The fire danger was said to have been "past the extreme stage," with 6 percent humidity – a reading more likely to be found in desert areas. No rain was in sight. When Sowders dumped those ashes, the flames spread northward. The local Bedford newspaper touted the story in one inch headlines – "Dutch Ridge Swept by Fire".

Approximately 40 men fought the fire for nearly eight hours before bringing it initially under control at 9:00 p.m. Sunday. By Monday afternoon the fire had broken out again. With high winds the flames spread so rapidly that fire fighters could only stand by helplessly. The fire jumped roads and consumed houses in northeastern Lawrence and southeastern Monroe Counties.

By October 27th the fire reportedly had swept over 300 acres of land. Giffen reported the fire was within a half mile of the Dutch Ridge oil wells. The man who owned the wells called Chester Sipes, who farmed nearby and asked him to try to save the wells. Sipes disked a fire line of mineral soil around the oil wells with his farm tractor to prevent the fire reaching them and saved the oil wells.

Company A, 138th National Guard Tank Battalion in Bedford was called out Monday evening to help fight the fire. As darkness approached and the temperatures cooled, foresters, National Guardsmen, farmers, volunteers, and high school boys went to work to bring the fire under control. On the road north of Heltonville, droves of pickup trucks, loaded high with furniture and personal belongings crept through the thick smoke as people evacuated the fire area. The night sky was said to be bright red overhead. Furniture that had fallen from the fleeing trucks was reported along the road.

A newspaper reporter, determined to get a picture for the story drove through the flames to the Dutch Ridge Fire Tower. He explained he tried to climb the tower but the winds were so strong that they nearly blew him from the narrow steel ladder. After struggling as high as the third platform, he gave up and descended. He described the scene around the fire as resembling the battle area of a war, with trucks and jeeps feeling their way through the area, women and children carrying their belongings hurrying along the roads on foot while their vehicles, laden with more belongings crept along with them.

Rudolph Grabow, Hoosier National Forest Supervisor, said between 200-300 volunteers fought the fire at different times. Twelve boys from Bedford High School and 37 from Heltonville High School were excused from class to help on the fire. Twenty-five volunteer fire fighters were nearly trapped while battling the blaze Monday night. The group was surrounded by fire and it was closing in on them when they ran through the smoke and fire to safety. Some were described as "pretty badly singed" but none were hospitalized.

At dawn on Tuesday morning, October 28, Grabow said about 3,000 acres of National Forest had burned and another 1,000 acres of private land. He advised at that time that numerous other fires were still burning within the area but all were confined. He estimated the fire line around the 4,000-acre fire to be 16-20 miles long. Grabow said about 15-20 percent of the fire had burned in young pine plantations where it "crowned", spreading through the tops of the trees, rather than on the ground as Indiana forest fires normally spread.

The homes of the Howard Fleetwood and Walter (Bogue) Harris families were lost, and several barns and outbuildings were consumed by the fire. One report said James Christenberry also lost his home. Livestock was also lost but there were no human casualties.

Just to the south of the Dutch Ridge Fire, Clinton Carroll directed efforts on a 1,200 acre fire near Leesville. This fire burned four days before Carroll reported the firefighters were finally able to hold their lines. He said at one point in the fire, flames were jumping nearly a half mile from one tree to another. The blaze jumped highways, and the 40 foot wide Back Creek. On the same day the Dutch Ridge Fire

wrecked havoc in Lawrence and Monroe Counties, another fire in Perry County on National Forest lands consumed over 1,000 acres.

In the early days of November, scattered rain showers and cooling temperatures ended the 1952 fire season.

In recent interviews with three men who helped fight the Dutch Ridge Fire, all said they would not want to see a fire like this one again but that it could certainly happen. In fact, they were concerned that future fires would be worse. In the 1950's there were more roads and fire lanes that were kept open in the forest. One man pointed out that today people have trees and shrubs up around their homes. Back in the 1950's everybody kept their yards clear of vegetation, that probably protected most of the houses from burning.

Georgia Fire

After 1952, there weren't any extreme fires until November 10, 1964. In 1964, southwestern Lawrence County had been in 'near drought conditions' for several months with October being one of the driest months on record. Strong gusty winds prevailed. The Georgia Fire Tower, west of Mitchell, discovered the fire at 2:18 p.m. Tower woman Clarisse Carroll (shown to right) immediately called the Huron volunteer fire fighters, local neighbors, and the Orange County Fire Warden. She also called Carpenters Body Works, the local bus assembly line in Mitchell, and asked if they had volunteers to send. Martin County was also soon asked to send assistance but before they arrived, those volunteers were re-routed to a fire at Trinity Springs. All area fire departments were already busy with six other fires.



By 4:00 p.m. the fire, estimated at 80 acres, 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 fire fighters access. Later law enforcement action was taken against that landowner. The crews were called off to help with a fire near Tunnelton.

At 7:40 the next morning, with winds gusting to 35 miles per hour, Carroll reported the fire was again out of control. Volunteers returned to the fire and a dozer was called in. G.T. Donceel remembers, "We didn't have enough equipment and no communications and here come five different fire departments and the fire was so big, this one (department) hit here, and another hit there."

Carroll remembered watching the fire from her tower, with a phone in one hand and the radio in the other. Later, she was forced to abandon her tower, "feeling like a smoked herring." She stayed 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 stayed behind to help protect the tower.

At the time the only equipment agencies had for fire-fighting was jeeps and hand tools. They had to rent trailers and dozers from construction companies. The dozers were effective and the fire should have been stopped that first day. However, Donceel remembers, "the dozer got (hung) up on a stump with

only 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 and they got confused and backfired off that. Nobody instructed them to do it, they just did it.” Donceel explained the road was outside the fireline and the fire took off again. He said in those days, with no good communications or hierarchy of command that kind of thing happened often. To add to the melee of crews, the National Guard unit out of Bedford was sent to help as well as 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 weather front moved through the area as fire-fighters 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 highway. A fire truck from the Crane Naval Weapons Depot patrolled the highway as well to ensure the fire didn’t jump the road and endanger homes to the north.

On the fourth day, the fire was considered controlled, but men were left to patrol until rains came two days later. A landmark home belonging to the late Murial Tincher, unoccupied at the time, 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 2,500 acres were burned. The cause of the fire was listed as “unknown”.

While large fires are not common in southern Indiana, they’ve happened in the past and with the current drought conditions, could happen again. It takes all of us working together to make sure in conditions like these wild fires don’t happen. As we’ve seen from history, during periods of drought, they are hard to stop once they get started!



Tankers and Trucks loaded with water-filled milk cans supply pumpers with water to fight the 1952 Dutch Ridge Fire.



Local Hoosier NF Fire Wardens in 1950.



Fire Warden explains fire tools to a neighbor.