

**SOUVENIR EDITION**

**50c**

*The* **DEADWOOD  
FOREST FIRE**



**BLACK HILLS HOLOCAUST of 1959**

# September 8th, 1959!

Violent as a wartime battle, flames lit up the Black Hills, smoke billowed over Deadwood, South Dakota. For the historic city of Deadwood this was the fifth big conflagration since 1876, when early settlers and prospectors named the town, Deadwood, for the fire blackened woods.

Burning paper in an incinerator was the cause of the disastrous forest fire Monday, September 8, 1959. An elderly resident of Hillcrest Manor had taken a basket of papers to the incinerator about one P. M. At this moment the wind blowing strongly picked up the flaming paper and carried it to a tinder dry area of grass. The fire going in a northerly direction suddenly changed and carried the flames up a slope. When the fire reached the top of the slope it again headed north and eastward toward Mt. Roosevelt, easterly toward Pine Crest Park then toward Whitewood Peak and south across U. S. 14A along the Two Bit Gulch area. In all rising temperatures, low humidity and shifting winds which were all predicted for the Black Hills this September 8 proved a definite threat of fire. For weeks the U. S. Forest Service had stressed caution in the all tinder dry Black Hills of South Dakota.

Within five minutes the blaze had skimmed up the wooded hillside and within 45 minutes it had burned its way through the forest to the opposite end of the city of Deadwood. By four P. M. the fire had surrounded the historic city on three sides and escape from the flames was only by means of the highway leading through Pluma to Lead.

When the first alarm was sounded that evacuation might be necessary, residents were then routed through lower main street toward Sturgis easterly about twelve miles. This escape route was soon cut off at five P. M. when the flames jumped the highway in that area. The residents were then ordered to leave by highway 385 leading to the southern hills—Custer, Hill City and Hot Springs. This escape route was cut off at about six P. M. when the flames following the ridge along the Lead-Deadwood highway crossed U. S. 385. The last avenue of escape was highway 85 leading to Spearfish.

Hundreds of families had packed their cars with what belongings they could and headed to the neighboring towns. Before three P. M. after the first alarm was sounded all schools were dismissed and parents requested to locate their families. Business men had closed their shops to assist in fighting the fire. By four P. M. evacuation had begun at St.

Josephs Hospital. Patients were either dismissed or transferred to the Homestake Hospital in Lead.

By 5:30 P. M. Deadwood took on a look of a battle line as heavy equipment, bulldozers, water tanks and trucks sped through the city to combat the raging fire. Deadwood Gulch was thick with black smoke which hung close to the ground. All fire fighting units from every surrounding town including the Homestake Mine Employees, Forest Service and Ellsworth Air Base converged on Deadwood which at this time was certain to be engulfed in flames. That same evening fire fighters from the Custer Indian Reservation in Wyoming arrived on the scene followed by Crow and Cheyenne Indians from Billings, Montana and Sioux Indians from the reservations in South Dakota.

The fighters weary, tired and blackened from the ordeal of fighting a forest fire were brought into Deadwood on shifts and fed in front of the Franklin Hotel. The street front and lobby of the hotel took on an air of a battle front chow line. Citizens from all walks of life pitched in and assisted in the feeding of the firefighters. Men able to fight the fire were on the fire line while wives, school girls, professional men including pastors of the churches could be seen on various shifts of the feeding line.

For many hours after the first alarm was sounded the city of Lead, home of the Homestake Gold Mine was considering evacuation. By midnight this September 8th the residents of Lead were told they would be able to remain.

By midnight this September 8th it was estimated that over three thousand fire fighters were on duty fighting the forest fire which had consumed over 4000 acres of what was once glorious beauty—the Black Hills of South Dakota.

At five-thirty Wednesday morning several helicopters and smoke jumpers from Missoula, Montana stood by to fly over and jump into the hot spots and combat the flames and burning timber. The helicopters were placed into service to view the hot spots and radio those areas to the ground forces. A converted B 24 bomber was brought in for a water drop. The plane working out of the Spearfish airport sprayed the area with a bentonite and water mixture thus aiding in the mopping up operation. By Thursday morning most of the residents of Deadwood had returned to their homes thanking the Almighty for sparing their homes and loved ones.

# Fire Danger 95 . . . Temperature 96 . . . Wind 13 Miles Per Hour . . . 42 Days And No Rain . . . . .

Monday, September 8, 1959 was just another day in the Black Hills, the sun was shining brightly, tourists were rushing around trying to visit all the attractions before nightfall with plans to attend the evening performance of the Trial of Jack McCall at the Old Towne Hall in Deadwood. I was driving into Deadwood from Spearfish and as I approached the Frawley Ranch, halfway between Spearfish and Deadwood I noticed heavy smoke billowing from Deadwood. Upon my arrival in Deadwood I was informed that a forest fire was burning out of control near the Maitland area, in the vicinity of the county home. The fire had started at 1:10 P. M. and the fire danger was 95, temperature 96, wind at 13 miles per hour and it had been 42 days since the last rainfall amounting to .01 inch. The fire was discovered one minute after it had started and was fought by three men using shovels. Within three minutes the fire had a stronghold on the forest. I tuned my radio to KDSJ in Deadwood and emergency messages were being broadcast for all available help to combat what appeared to be a forest fire and with fire threats to the historic city of Deadwood. Traffic was rerouted through Deadwood to make room for firefighting equipment. The radio announcers were then informing persons in the line of fire to evacuate their homes. In these few short minutes the fire had taken hold of the Black Hills and smoke and fire filled the air. At 2:15 P. M. the fire had burned an area one and one-half miles wide and three miles long. Realizing that my residence was in that line of fire I immediately drove to my home and packed a few items of clothing. In a few minutes I was taking a look at what could have been the last of my home as flames were about 100 yards away.

As I drove down main street a message was broadcast that help was needed to evacuate St. Josephs Hospital. The evacuation was very orderly under the supervision of Sister Asumptia, administrator of the hospital.

At 4:30 P. M. I drove a group of folks to Spearfish who had left their homes fleeing from the fire. As I proceeded out of Deadwood on highway 85 toward Spearfish, the fire had already jumped this highway. The firefighters permitted me to pass through even though flames were still clinging to the once beautiful pines. I went to the Frawley Ranch and left my few possessions and returned to Deadwood. It was then time for me to report for work at KDSJ for an evening shift on the air. While driving to Deadwood and listening for fire bulletins from the station, the station went off the air. At this time the fire had moved across highway 14A into Boulder Canyon near the radio transmitter. At this area the fire had burned our transmission lines from studio to transmitter. This immediately cut the main source of information off. It was only a short time and KDSJ was back on the air, due to the rapid work of our chief engineer. It was then time for me to report for work and as I sat down in front of the microphone I looked out of the studio windows and flames had spread to three sides of the town. Flames had engulfed the area around the studio. Smoke was heavy and hanging low over Deadwood and the town had taken on a battle front atmosphere. We continued to broadcast as radio was the only source of passing information. While giving fire bulletins we were surrounded by fire—fire to the north, east and south. Smoke filled the broadcasting room. Telephones rang, townsfolk who left earlier in the day at the first alarm were trying to locate some of their family. Long distance telephone calls were coming in from all over the country. Radio and TV stations wanting the latest bulletins on the fire—relatives of Deadwood folks inquiring as to their safety.

The telephone company limited the incoming calls and shortly after no incoming nor outgoing calls were accepted.

Only through the exhaustive efforts of the fire fighters which, included local and surrounding fire departments miners, ranchers, business men, city and county workers and forest service crews and a helicopter was Deadwood saved. During the first day and night there were over 1300 fire fighters on the line combatting the flames.

The morning hour was 5 A. M. when I decided to leave the air. KDSJ had remained on the air almost 24 hours, seventeen hours which were spent broadcasting fire bulletins.

At this time I set out to survey the damage. I headed west towards Lead and the entire hillside had been burned and the post plant on Highway 85 was flaming furiously with the thought of an explosion in the oil tanks. Proceeding around the belt—the road which makes a half circle joining Lead and Deadwood I surveyed the area of the origin of the fire. The entire hillside had charred remains of the once beautiful pines. The road to Mt. Roosevelt was closed to traffic due to the firefighting equipment needed in that area. It was on the Mt. Roosevelt road that several homes were burned to the ground. Proceeding north towards Spearfish and Sturgis, flames were still visible in the distance.

A tourist camp on the Spearfish highway was burned to the ground and to my right overlooking the Sturgis road, two homes had been consumed along with the post plant ablaze. Looking towards the surrounding hills small flames giving the sight of small campfires surrounded the gulch.

The Franklin Hotel was headquarters for all fire operations. It was here that the firefighters were dispatched to "Hot" spots.

The time was 6:30 A. M. September 9 I then headed for home up the smokie hill and there was my home spared from the carelessness of matches. The flames had leveled the trees to the rear, a distance of 100 yards.

The fire was finally controlled by 10 A. M. the second day but only after it had burned nearly 5000 acres causing \$1,558,00 damages to improvements and natural resources.

Forest service tanker planes spraying slurry, a fire retardant mixture of bentonite and water in cooperation with ground units kept the fire from making another run the following day.

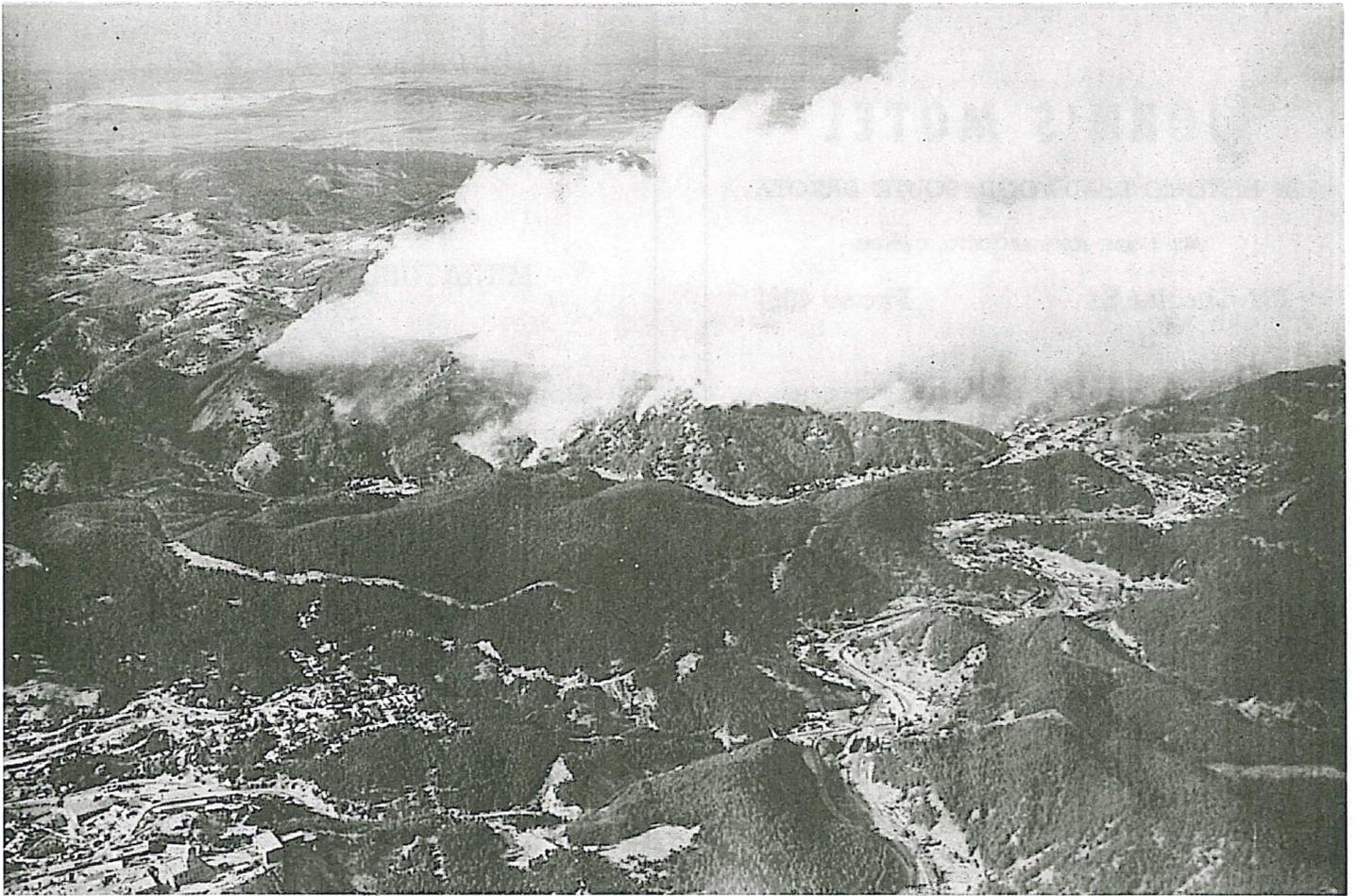
The fire was mopped up on September 19th considered out on September 23rd. The total cost of suppressing the fire exceeded \$300,000.

Thanking the Almighty for having spared our city my thoughts turned to those who had lost their homes and all possessions. In closing we should all pay closer attention to Smokie the Bear.

The Editor

## STATISTICS

Commercial Forest Burned .....	2930 Acres
Non Commercial Forest Burned .....	1571 Acres
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>4501 Acres</b>
Board Feet of Timber Destroyed .....	28,911,000
<b>VALUES</b>	
Total Timber Damage .....	\$ 98,295.00
Watershed Damage .....	508,130.00
Recreation Damage .....	45,010.00
Wildlife Damage .....	1,950.00
Improvements Damage .....	905,000.00
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>\$1,558,385.00</b>





In 2010, the Deadwood Historic Preservation Commission funded the limited reprinting of this publication. The distribution of this new printing was in conjunction with the eighth annual Deadwood Historic Preservation Symposium held May 14-16, 2010

