

1-1-2004

Comment: The California Fires

Andre Wakefield
Pitzer College

Recommended Citation

Wakefield, Andre. "Comment: The California Fires." *Technology and Culture* 45.1 (January 2004): 247-249.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Pitzer Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pitzer Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

COMMENT

The California Fires

ANDRE WAKEFIELD

Southern California is a state of amnesia. After moving here less than two years ago, I have trouble remembering what happened last week, yesterday, or even over breakfast. At first it bothered me—I thought it might be the sun, the swimming pools, Hollywood, Disneyland, the smog. Then I forgot about it. Sometimes I console myself with Montaigne, who long ago confessed just how bad his own memory was, while pointing out that memory and intellect are entirely different things. I bring up Montaigne not to vindicate myself, but to complicate the picture. Contrary to what the rest of the country seems to think, southern California isn't stupid; it's just forgetful. And if the place nourishes a culture of forgetting, if it discourages rumination on the recent past, there are good reasons.

About a month ago, a wall of fire descended on our town. I found this disconcerting. After all, as one local developer put it, "Claremont is a college town, a tree-lined town, a small town that has been planned with real intelligence. It feels the way Southern California is supposed to feel." But in the early morning hours of 26 October, Claremont—now more inferno than paradise—didn't feel like southern California is supposed to feel. A midnight gloom had descended and ash was raining down from the foothills. To the north of town, huge flames consumed the dry chaparral, racing toward cul-de-sacs and palm trees. Coyotes, rodents, and deer ran across suburban lawns, while a few determined homeowners trained garden hoses at trees and roofs. The fire, now creating its own wind, propelled large embers down wind-tunnel streets. These landed in eaves and trees and shrubs, igniting some houses and sparing others.

Dr. Wakefield teaches history at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. He is completing the first English edition of G. W. Leibniz's *Protogaea*, with Claudine Cohen, and working on a manuscript, *The Merchants of Knowledge*, which explores science and state administration in eighteenth-century Central Europe. He thanks Rudi Volti for his comments on this piece.

©2004 by the Society for the History of Technology. All rights reserved.
0040-165X/04/4501-0010\$8.00

Most of this I learned from my neighbors. We were in Palm Springs, watching everything on the local all-fire-all-the-time television station. After two fire seasons here, I have only just started to appreciate the sophistication of California's disaster industry. Growing up in Minneapolis, I used to marvel at idle rows of city plows and eager drivers, all lying in wait for that first blizzard. Similarly, in southern California the media bides its time with car chases and convenience store robberies until something epic happens. Like most locals, I mostly watched the fires on television. It was mesmerizing. Breathless reporters shadowed firefighters from the violent blazes around San Diego to the burning homes in Palmer Canyon to raging forest fires near Lake Arrowhead. For added effect, Governor-Elect Schwarzenegger proclaimed, "I play heroes in my movies, but you guys are true heroes."

The local media also likes to trot out experts from local universities during disaster time, even if it ignores them in the off-season. Richard Minnich, for example, a fire ecologist from the University of California, Riverside, seemed ubiquitous on the commentary circuit. For about two decades now, Minnich and others have argued that the traditional techniques and strategies of fire suppression in southern California have been largely self-defeating. Once upon a time, before the forty-niners followed their fortunes westward, southern California's foothills burned with great regularity. Even by the end of the nineteenth century, parts of the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains northeast of Los Angeles were still burning virtually every summer, sometimes for months at a stretch. Chaparral, the scrub vegetation of evergreen shrubs that fueled these blazes, regenerates itself through fire. As chaparral ages, more and more dead wood accumulates, setting the stage for brushfires. Brushfires, in turn, create the conditions for chaparral to reproduce itself; it can stump-sprout after burns, and its seeds sometimes need fire to germinate. Older regimes of fire management allowed the chaparral to burn, so that the hillsides of southern California blazed with regularity in a relatively predictable cycle of fire and renewal.

Before the twentieth century, fires went mostly unchecked in the mountains around Los Angeles, smoldering in the hills during much of the summer before being fanned to life by the Santa Ana winds of autumn. It was none other than Gifford Pinchot who, around 1900, finally lobbied for professional fire rangers. These new fire troops proved enormously effective at extinguishing small blazes in the hills and mountains. Ironically, though, successful fire fighting created the conditions for disaster, as systematic suppression of smaller fires caused enormous amounts of dead chaparral to accumulate in the foothills. In 1919 and 1924, the San Gabriel Mountains witnessed their first high-intensity fires, ushering in a more violent cycle of fire suppression and occasional cataclysmic conflagration. The fires of 2003, the worst in memory, demonstrated just how dangerous that model has become.

Since 1900, the comparatively crude methods of Pinchot's fire rangers have been continually honed and improved. Today's firefighters constantly monitor the flammable California hills for signs of trouble, extinguishing small fires as soon as they are detected. Firefighters are rewarded with escalating risks, as the increasing volume of dead chaparral in the hills creates the potential for truly nightmarish scenarios. For though firefighters have become adept at extinguishing small fires, they are virtually powerless to halt the raging conflagrations that result from years of successful suppression.

COMMENT

As development—especially the development of luxury homes—pushes into the foothills, the demands for meticulous fire suppression continue to escalate. “Located up a quiet road in the hills of Claremont, the timeless homes of Stone Canyon Preserve are designed in the classic styles indigenous to the area—Spanish Colonial, Mission, Santa Barbara” proclaims the web site for Centex Homes. The styles may be indigenous and the road quiet, but there's nothing timeless about a luxury house in a brushfire. Already, experts are warning that the next fire season could be worse. The mountain forests around Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear, weakened by years of drought, have been devastated by bark-beetle infestations. Dead stands of trees are everywhere. Many homeowners cannot afford to remove dead trees from their properties, and the State of California lacks the fiscal wherewithal to do the job itself. Future fires in the decimated forests of the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains could make the chaparral fires of 2003 seem tame by comparison.

Still, all signs suggest that the local real estate market will bounce back when those annoying reminders of the recent fires—the smell of burned vegetation, flocks of crows picking charred carrion off the hills, the scorched remains of cars and houses—get cleaned up. I have all the confidence in the world. When I woke up this morning there was snow on the mountains, the sun was shining, and the sprinklers were purring. Up the road, I hear they're building some fabulous homes, nestled in the chaparral, with great views of the mountains. What a perfect place to raise a family.