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Grand Canyon History Tidbit by Kim Besom

### **Past fire management at Grand Canyon**

The lightning-caused Dragon Fire started on the North Rim this past week. At this time the fire is being managed, rather than extinguished, for various resource objectives that include reducing hazardous fuels and promoting forest regeneration. This type of fire management, of allowing fires to burn, while being monitored, to promote a healthy forest in an ecosystem adapted to the periodic occurrence of fires, hasn't always been the policy at Grand Canyon. So, a tidbit about past **fire management** at Grand Canyon.

In the past, fire management usually meant extinguishing all fires as quickly as possible. The *Forest Fire Control Plan and Special Fire Position Instructions for Grand Canyon National Park* from 1941, states that:

*“Fire constitutes a great menace to the forests of Grand Canyon National Park. It not only threatens human life and property, but also mars the beauty of the scenery, for the enjoyment of which the park was established.”*

The stated policy for fires was *“To reach and combat every fire that starts in the park, or threatens the park, with such speed, skill, strength and equipment, as to confine it to the minimum of acreage burned and damage caused.”*

*“When a forest fire is discovered or reported, an emergency exists. Immediate action is demanded and control and patrol measures must be continuously applied without interruption until the fire is out. The best effort is expected of all employees.”*



#01008: FIGHTING A FOREST FIRE NEAR SHOSHONE POINT, MAY 1947

Another stated plan policy was “*To make the fire control organization of Grand Canyon National Park the best trained and most efficient group in the southwest because of the high scenic and recreational values involved.*”

How? “*Early detection of forest fires is all-important and to facilitate this service two primary and two secondary fire towers have been constructed in this park. This lookout system is supplemented by Forest Service fire towers on the adjacent Kaibab National Forest. There are supplementary lookout points equipped with alidades at Desert View Watchtower and at Yavapai Observation Station.*

*The towers and lookout points are located as follows:*

*South Rim*

|                                    |                                      |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Hopi Tower</i>                  | <i>Primary</i>                       |
| <i>Signal Hill Tower</i>           | <i>Secondary</i>                     |
| <i>Grand View Tower</i>            | <i>US Forest Service (Secondary)</i> |
| <i>Desert View</i>                 | <i>Supplementary</i>                 |
| <i>Yavapai Observation Station</i> | <i>Supplementary</i>                 |

*North Rim*

|                        |                |
|------------------------|----------------|
| <i>North Rim Tower</i> | <i>Primary</i> |
|------------------------|----------------|

*Kanabownits Tower*  
*Dry Park Tower*

*Secondary*  
*US Forest Service (Secondary)''*



# 09330: SIGNAL HILL FIIRE TOWER, WITH TELEPHONE LINE TO THE TOWER,  
SEPTEMBER 1937



#03930: BRIGHT ANGEL POINT FIRE TOWER AFTER BEING MOVED 12 MILES NORTH, CIRCA 1933

*All towers are to be occupied continuously during periods of high fire hazards. A system of tree towers has been established with the towers located at strategic points throughout the area to aid fire suppression crews to locate going fires. They are also used to detect fire by patrols during times of high fire danger.*



# 09130: FIRE LOOKOUT IN PONDEROSA TREE, NORTH RIM, AUGUST 1934

*Aircraft detection will be used in cooperation with the US Forest Service in detecting forest fires after severe lightning storms pass over the area.”*

The August 1946 edition of *Arizona Fire Fiter* magazine talks about some of the latest firefighting equipment available at the park:

“Organized in 1928, the Park’s fire department members have battled many a forest fire in stride, but perhaps the largest fire they’ve been called upon to fight was in 1933, when the beautiful

*Grand Canyon Lodge burned on the North Rim, at an estimated loss of nearly \$300,000. Of course, they have various timber blazes to stop, caused by both lightning and man. But their highly trained force using the newest type equipment and methods has kept Uncle Sam's fire timber losses to a minimum at the Canyon.*

*Bought in 1928, the group's dependable Studebaker 500-gal. Barton pumper is equipped with 650 feet of 2 ½-inch hose, 400 feet of 1 ½-inch and 200 feet of 'redline'. It also carries 100 feet of garden hose and an extra 100 gallons of water.*

*Kept handy in the fire station at all times is forest-fire equipment, enough to supply 250 men. Snowshoes, cross-cut saws, and items suitable for all types of weather are always available.*

*An International ½-ton truck is loaded, ready for instant use, with enough equipment for eight men, with portable water packs also kept filled, enough for 20 additional workers."*



#09777: NORTH RIM FIRE ENGINE AND EQUIPMENT SHED WITH FIRE TOOLS, JULY 1937



# 07999: THE SOUTH RIM FIRE TRUCK, 1930

The 1943 Superintendent Annual Report talks about the bad fire season they experienced that year, including another fire on the Dragon:

*“The ranger service had one of the worst fire seasons within the remembrance of old timers. A total of fourteen forest fires occurred, the worst of which was one of 186 acres on Crescent Ridge, North Rim; another on the Dragon covered 310 acres which burned for three weeks before it could be brought wholly under control. The latter fire was the worst recorded in the park; great difficulty was experienced in reaching this fire, and all food and water had to be carried on the backs of firefighters through a tangle of brush. The trip took a minimum of two hours between the base camp and the fire line. Windy afternoons often carried the fire across well made firebreaks.”*