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CALIFORNIA

A Fire Survey



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SERIES PREFACE

To the Last Smoke

WHEN I DETERMINED to write the fire history of America in recent times, I conceived the project in two voices. One was the narrative voice of a play-by-play announcer. *Between Two Fires: A Fire History of Contemporary America* would relate what happened, when, where, and to and by whom. Because of its scope it pivoted around ideas and institutions, and its major characters were fires and fire seasons. It viewed the American fire scene from the perspective of a surveillance satellite.

The other voice was that of a color commentator. I called it *To the Last Smoke*, and it would poke around in the pixels and polygons of particular practices, places, and persons. My original belief was that it would assume the form of an anthology of essays and would match the narrative play-by-play in bulk. But that didn't happen. Instead the essays proliferated and started to self-organize by regions.

I began with the major hearths of American fire, where a fire culture gave a distinctive hue to fire practices. That pointed to Florida, California, and the Northern Rockies, and to that oft-overlooked hearth around the Flint Hills of the Great Plains. I added the Southwest because that was the region I knew best. But there were stray essays that needed to be corralled into a volume, and there were all those relevant regions that needed at least token treatment. Some like the Lake States and Northeast no longer commanded the national scene as they once had, but their

stories were interesting and needed recording, or like the Pacific Northwest or central oak woodlands spoke to the evolution of fire's American century in a new way. I would include as many as possible into a grand suite of short books.

My original title now referred to that suite, not to a single volume, but I kept it because it seemed appropriate and because it resonated with my own relationship to fire. I began my career as a smokechaser on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon in 1967. That was the last year the National Park Service hewed to the 10 a.m. policy and we rookies were enjoined to stay with every fire until "the last smoke" was out. By the time the series appears, 50 years will have passed since that inaugural summer. I no longer fight fire; I long ago traded in my pulaski for a pencil. But I have continued to engage it with mind and heart, and this unique survey of regional pyrogeography is my way of staying with it to the end.

Funding for the project came from the U.S. Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and the Joint Fire Science Program. I'm grateful to them all for their support. And of course the University of Arizona Press deserves praise as well as thanks for seeing the resulting texts into print.

PREFACE TO VOLUME 2

IN THE SPRING AND SUMMER of 2011 I conducted two road tours of California, one south and one north. It was a rapid primer on California fire. I couldn't complete everything and returned briefly for a couple of events and interviews. In particular, I failed to traverse the far north, places like the Klamath Mountains and the Modoc. The omission was, initially, a matter of time, and later, of space. I had to hold the text under 60,000 words and could not find sufficient parts to delete to make room for what the north would require. Instead, I decided to add the Klamath to a later survey of the Pacific Northwest. But this traded ecology for institutions, a bioregion for a fire province. In plugging one gap it created another because what makes California's story significant is the way it has joined many biomes under a single administration. Places like the far-north Klamath have to bow to the imperatives of the South Coast. While I can *say* that in this study, I can't *show* it. I'll have to do that task by comparing institutional responses to shared biomes in my survey of the Pacific Northwest.

These regional reconnaissances were conceived as an exercise in fire journalism or, as I like to think of them, as history in real time—they are intended, after all, as color commentary. To them I have sought to bring context, particularly a sense of the fire scene as a historical construct. Since these are not academic pieces, I have not tried to impose the same standard of documentation I would for a scholarly text. Rather, I cite sources where I have quoted passages or stated a perhaps counterintuitive

fact, identify and thank those people who hosted or otherwise assisted my efforts, and point out perhaps an especially useful work. A note on sources handles the general references. I know only too keenly the number of places left unvisited and the words unsaid. But we write to genres, as the saying goes, and the virtue of the short, essay-driven collection is also its vice.

In the years between writing my text and seeing it into publication California has recovered economically and stabilized politically, yet a punishing drought has kept the landscape abuzz with fires and primed a fire organization for a potential tsunami of flame. California still dominates the national media and America's unsettled fire scene.