

# Spectacular fire destroys Roaring Camp railway trestle

By MARJ VON B

A fire which may have been the work of an arsonist destroyed a 100-foot high wooden trestle on the Roaring Camp and Big Trees Narrow Gauge Railway in Felton late yesterday afternoon.

The fire broke out just after a narrow gauge train, bearing approximately 40 sight seers and F. Norman Clarke, president of the railroad corporation, had passed over the trestle.

Witnesses said that people on the train looked back to see the trestle, which spans a deep gorge over another lower trestle, burst into flames.

People on the train said they heard no explosion, but residents in the Mt. Hermon area across Graham Hill Road from the trestle reported they heard an explosion.

The intensity of the fire sent up a column

of smoke as if it were being drawn through a chimney, said one witness.

Forestry planes were overhead within 18 minutes after the blaze was reported and made two dumps of fire retardant into the gorge. A forestry helicopter made repeated water dumps.

The craft drew water from a large duck pond located in the heart of the Old Western Town, constructed alongside the narrow gauge railway, just across from Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park campgrounds.

Forestry sent in crews from as far away as Loma Prieta Fire station. And firemen from Felton, Scotts Valley and Soquel also responded.

The forest, powder dry from the lack of rain this past winter, was a veritable tinderbox and some of the trees near the trestle developed into flaming furnaces. It burned a hollow into the base of some of the

trunks.

The lower and top trestle burned with such intensity that the rails on top twisted pulling ties out of place for a distance of 50 feet on either side of the canyon.

It was estimated that as many as 5,000 persons watched the blaze from highway 9 and from the Felton Fair Shopping Center parking lot at the intersection of Mt. Hermon and Graham Hill Roads.

Many persons volunteered their help. One fireman said, "I've never seen anything like it, the way the citizens came to help."

Another said, "They came from taverns, from the town and from their homes with shovels and pick axes to help."

One saw a "long-haired and bearded guy jump out of his car and start stomping out a spot fire which had started across the road. He was wearing shorts and sandals, but that didn't stop him."

Residents in the heavily forested Mt. Hermon conference grounds, just across the roads, stood ready to evacuate their homes when suddenly the hot wind stopped blowing, lessening the danger.

"It was just eerie," said one woman. "I was standing outside my house with the hot wind blowing in my face and all of a sudden it just stopped."

Later the Rev. Bill Gwinn, director of the Mt. Hermon Christian Conference Grounds, told people at Roaring Camp that there were 2,000 persons gathered for a prayer meeting when the fire broke out.

Gwinn said he had led the congregation in a prayer asking the deity to stop the wind.

Firefighters remained on the scene throughout the night and the fire was contained to within five acres. Today firemen were still engaged in control and mop-up operations.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation. One fireman said it was believed the blaze started with an explosion of some sort of incendiary device in a tool shed near the base of the trestles.

"There are no timbers left from the shed at all and there should be. It was heavy construction, much the same as the construction of the trestles. It almost seems as though it had been blown up," the spokesman said.

The trestle, which cost three-quarters of a million dollars to build, about eight years ago, will be rebuilt, a spokesman at Roaring Camp said.

The destruction of the trestle left the train stranded on the top of Bear Mountain and its antique engine may have to be dismantled and brought down, a spokesman said.

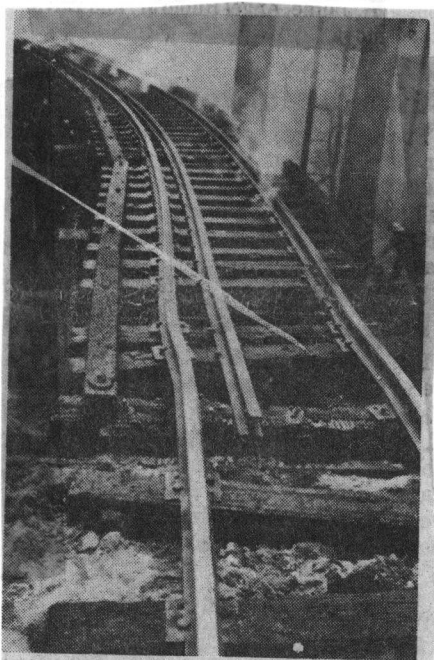
Work on the railroad, one of the few narrow gauge railways in existence, was begun in 1960, and railroad buffs came from all over to volunteer their help in construction.

One of the buildings at Roaring Camp is a restored station for the old narrow gauge railway of the South Pacific Railroad Co., which later sold out to Southern Pacific.

Trains used to come up the old narrow gauge railway, and make their stops at Felton.

Passengers would leave the train there and would be carried by horse and wagon across the old covered bridge, which still stands, into Felton.

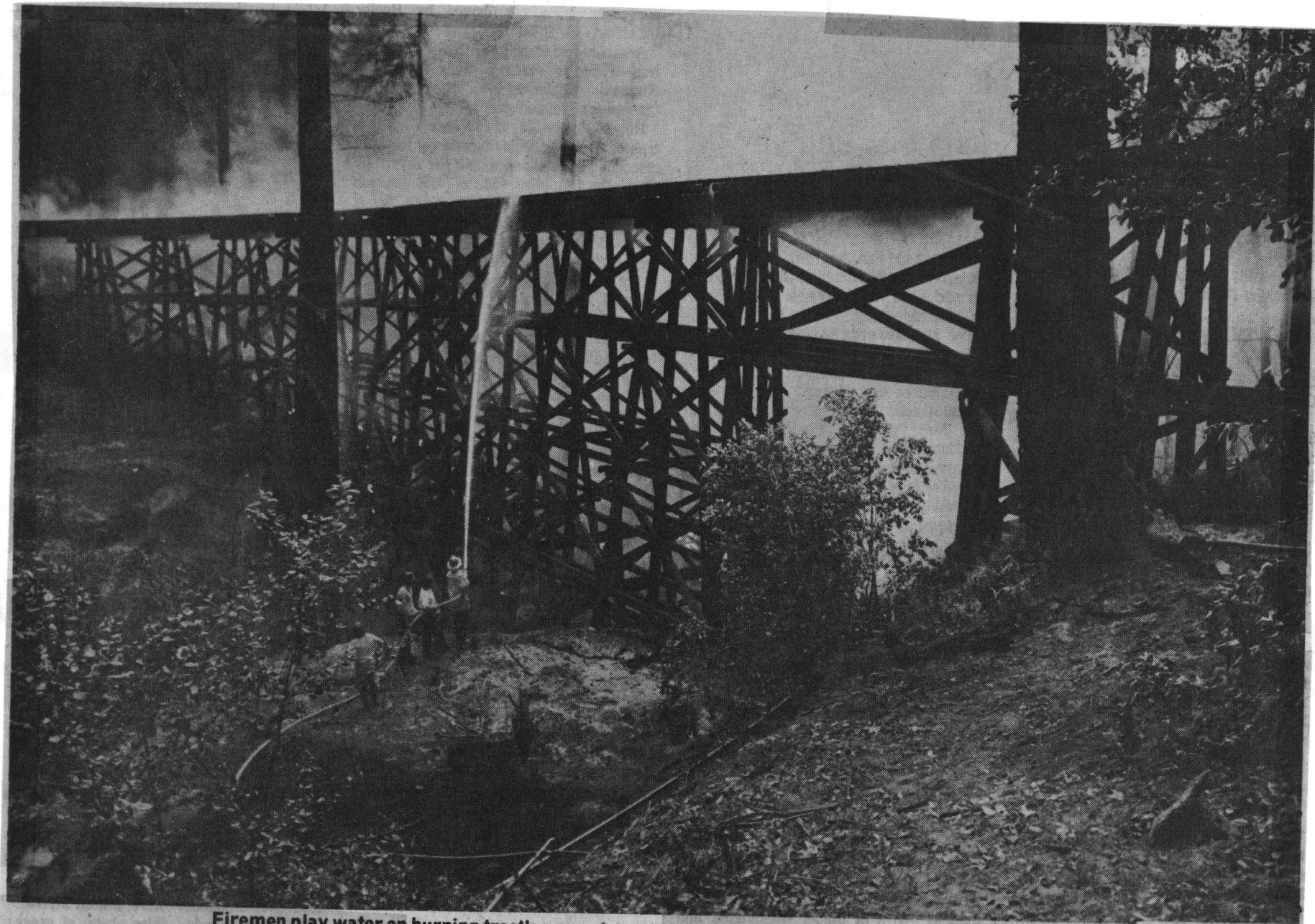
Despite yesterday's loss Clarke has reportedly said Roaring Camp is going to stay open this summer.



Heat warped rails on trestle

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE REGISTER  
PAJARONIAN  
6-28-76



**Firemen play water on burning trestle ; arsonist may have started blaze**

Staff photo by Bob Smith