CITY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT OF ANIMAL REGULATION
111 EAST FIRST STREET

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"Citizens were running wildly and screaming, and fire was everywhere."

Such was the laconic report of George W. Mason. He should know. He was there.

The day, Friday, September 25, 1970 had dawned bright, hot and windy. Mason, District Supervisor of the West Valley Animal Shelter in Chatsworth, was scheduled to make one of his weekly helicopter flights to Angeles National Forest, 35 miles away, to relocate 14 small wild animals, trapped that week in the City of Los Angeles. The scheduled flight was part of a wildlife conservation program conducted by the Los Angeles City Department of Animal Regulation.

At 10:00 a.m. Mason received word from the City's Bureau of Transportation that the flight was cancelled.

"Too windy," said Helicopter Pilot Ray Schutte.

Acrid, gusty Santa Ana winds had been stirring. Called by some, "the devil winds," they blew in from desert wastelands, and carried the kiss of a blowtorch. They were part of every September in Southern California.

Grounded, Mason changed his plans. He telephoned Ernie Jensen, District Supervisor of the East Valley Animal Shelter in nearby North Hollywood.

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"Come on over. Let's talk budget," he said. Requisition deadlines for their joint San Fernando Valley Shelter operations (part of the Los Angeles City Department of Animal Regulation) were rapidly approaching.

The time was 1:20 p.m. when Jensen arrived.

The two men sat down and began developing work program statistics as base data for budgetary needs. Outside the office window, clusters of tumbleweed and swirling pockets of loose top soil raced toward the foothills a mile away.

Inside the new $500,000 Shelter, it was pleasant. Mason's office intercom squawkbox, normally rattling with city-wide trouble calls, momentarily was quiet.

The two supervisors were scarcely aware of the amplifier when it jumped into action. A voice, flat and impersonal, came through with a service message, not involving animal regulation. Something about a fire. Small blazes were always cropping up this time of the year.

At that moment, Mason's telephone rang. He answered. He looked at Jensen.

"Trouble," he said, "in Bee Canyon."

Bee Canyon is located three miles north of Granada Hills (population 59,000) in the northwest corner of Los Angeles, proper.

"Not much information," Mason added. "But we better have a look."

Jensen agreed, and left immediately. Mason alerted his Shelter personnel and followed four minutes later. Destination: A hastily established Fire Command Post on Granada Hills' perimeter.

It was evident to Mason, once in the streets, that the fire seed which had taken root in Bee Canyon, already was blossoming.

He overtook Jensen a half mile from the Command Post. They decided Jensen should proceed to the CP and that Mason should return to the Shelter and marshal the Animal Regulation forces.

An umbrella of smoke began to spread in the sky. Mason could see it and smell it. He would soon feel it. He had no way of knowing at the time, but the infant flames were to grow and explode into a fury of incredible destruction.

Enroute to the Shelter, he had a taste of what was to come. His after-action report read:

"I stopped to assist at a horse ranch that was surrounded by fire."

In a postscript to this note, he said:

"Upon leaving this location, it was obvious that this was no longer a brush fire, but a major disaster."

Returning to his car, Mason radioed Jensen at the Command Post and Robert W. Phillips, Executive Officer of the Department of Animal Regulation at the downtown Los Angeles Administrative Office.

Mason's message was urgent.

"Fire situation deteriorating fast. All available assistance needed."

Six Animal Collection Vehicles from the East and West Valley Shelters began rolling towards the swelling inferno. More were to follow from the Ann Street, Eleventh Avenue, Harbor and West Los Angeles District Animal Shelters.

The time was 6:00 p.m.

Now, the soot-laden skies were streaked with flame. The Valley horizon lay obscured in a thunderhead of smoke. Fire-fighters beat valiantly at the power of the holocaust, but it came on, roaring its defiance.

Dante's mastery was on all sides. The flames ravished the tinder dry chaparral with explosive sweeps of instant cremation.

Among the twenty Animal Control Officers now probing the front were Officers William DeYbarrondo and Richard Felosky in Animal Collection Unit Number Two.

A corral, surrounded by a wire fence, loomed out of the smoke. DeYbarrondo halted the vehicle, and the two men jumped out. Trapped in the corral were six goats. Flames blocked the only exit to the enclosure. Quickly, the Animal Control Officers cut a hole in the rear of the fence and herded the animals to temporary safety.

"Temporary" was the word, for the flames were merciless, and the small-animal collection vehicle was not designed for mature goats. As if in answer to the dilemma, a citizen appeared, seemingly from nowhere, in a more spacious vehicle.

"Put 'em in here," he shouted.

The three men guided the distressed animals into the citizen's luxurious trailer-camper.

A hundred horses, bordering on panic, not too far distant, whinnied fitfully as the river of fire rolled relentlessly in their direction. Two ACO's vainly tried to badger the horses into flight away from the peril. They were about to abandon their efforts when fate again intervened with the arrival of a group of teenagers. They

volunteered assistance, a scene which was repeated throughout the fire areas time after time.

"They might be called 'long hairs'," said one ACO, "but they were great. With their help, we moved the horses a half mile away."

Night fell. A flaming dawn was to follow. Time and events merged in a montage of nightmare. Cries of panic, fright and death sounded in the throats of cattle, sheep, horses, dogs, goats, cats and poultry. The wildlife probably cried, too, but they were far away and the fire was loud.

Hard by, the flames licked at a kennel, housing 70 dogs. Frantic owners of the pets arrived singly and in family groups. With ACO assistance, the dogs were rescued before the kennel collapsed in its doomed corner of hell.

Cattle bellowed. Owners, neighbors, ACOs, prodded and pushed the cows, bulls and heifers into vans, trucks, trailers, anything mobile, not on fire.

Horses were everywhere. Loose horses. Trapped horses. The watchword was panic. Watch for panic. Avoid panic at all cost. Members of Equestrian Trails, Inc. (Southern California horse group) moved efficiently and quickly, slapping masking tape, with hastily written local addresses, on the shoulders of the frightened stallions, mares and colts.

Sheep at one location---a flock of two hundred--destroyed in a minute in the terror of the firestorm. Mary had a little lamb....

Burros. The docile, dumb, imperturbable burros. Load 'em up. Get 'em out. They were the cool heads of the lot.

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Goats. "I figure my goat was a hero," said George Keuterickx of Santa Susanna Knolls. Five structures burned nearby, but not Keuterickx's home. "My goat had eaten all the brush around the house," Keuterickx said proudly.

Chickens cackled and clucked in abortive flights. Their wings a mockery of airlift--a betrayal in crisis. They ran and flapped in raucous terror. Ever try to catch a chicken on a clear day? Try it with fire at your elbow and wind in your hair.

Cats. They were swifter than the fire. Most of them. Fast, and sharp with an age-old instinct for survival. The showers of sparks plagued the slower animals, but the showers couldn't catch the house-pets of Egypt.

The ACOs corralled and caught and loaded. They were lucky and unlucky. Fire rolled the dice.

Like casualties from a war front, the animals were transported to the West Valley Animal Shelter. The small domestic pets were lodged inside to await a happy reunion with their masters at the end of the heartbreak. Live stock was led to graze in the one-acre "Disaster Pasture" behind the Shelter.

Robert I. Rush, General Manager of the Los Angeles City Department of Animal Regulation, judiciously had insisted that the fenced-in pasture, with grass, fodder and automatic watering devices be a part of the new Shelter, dedicated in August. In less than two months, his judgment was vindicated.

The intercom in Mason's office snapped and crackled with fire static, sharp orders, pleas for help. Trouble, agony and anguish poured from the squawkbox.

Telephones rang incessantly.

"Do you have a small dog answering to the name of Buffy?"

"Do you happen to have a medium-size goose that walks sort of lopsided?"

"My stable's gone, but I still have twenty tons of hay. Need any?"

"This is Mr. Frank Smith calling from Kansas. I got a thousand head of horses somewhere in your neck-of-the-woods. Do you know anything about 'em?"

In the front office, the public counter was swamped with persons inquiring about lost animals. Among the stream of visitors was Councilman Robert M. Wilkinson, who represented the ravaged Chatsworth-Granada Hills area. He had come to compliment the ACOs.

Mason counted his menagerie, the animals plucked from the furnace. Safe at the Shelter were 28 horses (more than 250 had been saved in the field), 7 bovines, 4 burros, 12 goats, 3 sheep, 18 chickens, geese and ducks, 3 rabbits, 1 guinea pig, 10 cats and 40 dogs.

The box score wasn't all there. Hundreds of animals had been led to safe retreats in the fire area. Others had to be destroyed by ACOs because they were too badly burned for survival.

Mason and his ACOs returned to the front where the fire kept burning like it would never stop.

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