This Year

The Bell System is Putting More Than
Two Billion Dollars in New Facilities

We are doing this because we are confident that growing America will need, buy, and use more telephone service tomorrow than today.

We are doing it to improve our service further and make the telephone even more convenient. This we are sure will stimulate more use.

These 1958 expenditures are higher than the average in the post-war years—and close to the highest in any year.

A stimulus to the economy of the whole country

Our goal, as I have said, is to serve you better than ever. In addition, the way this money flows out to other businesses stimulates the economy of the whole country.

Wherever there are new telephone buildings going up, or jobs of maintenance, there is work for local builders, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, painters and many others.

Our spending means business too for thousands of other companies and workers in those companies. Last year the Bell System through Western Electric, its manufacturing and purchasing unit, bought from 33,000 firms throughout the country. Nearly nine out of ten of these are small businesses, each with fewer than 500 employees. This year again we expect to buy about a billion dollars worth of goods and services from other industries.

To go ahead with our 1958 construction, we in the Bell System have raised nearly a billion dollars of new capital in the last six months. Obviously, investors will continue to entrust their savings to us only if they can expect reasonable earnings on the money they risk.

Good service at reasonable profit keeps the road to progress open

So telephone progress—and the advantage to all that comes from our pushing ahead—begins with our faith that Americans want good and improving service at prices which allow a fair profit.

This is the way of life which in our country hasstimulated invention, nourished enterprise, created jobs, raised living standards, and built our national strength. As long as we live by this principle, the future of the telephone is almost limitless in new possibilities for service to you.

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Southerners who set the Woods on Fire

By ED KERR

Drawings by Bernard Perlin

The South has 80 per cent of the nation’s forest fires—many of them set by cold-blooded arsonists. A report on why they do it, what kind of people they are, and how their costly antics might be stopped.

Most people in Jeff Davis county in southern Mississippi were in church that Sunday morning in March. Not everybody though—not the fifteen men who were planning to burn a forest before sunset.

The arsonists gathered at one man’s home, consumed several rounds of beer and liquor, and mulled things over. At about 1:30 p.m., well-primed, they set out in nine cars and traveled the county roads, throwing matches and cigarettes and roman candles until all their ammunition was gone. One man brazenly stepped out of the car and set a fire in full view of a company forester.

“We’re going to burn Gaylord up!” he announced. He meant the Gaylord Container Corporation, Division of Crown Zellerbach.

On this afternoon spree these men set a hundred fires and burned a thousand acres of forest lands.

Outrageous, yes—but not unusual in the South, where more than 80 per cent of the nation’s forest fires occur each year. In the eleven states which are classed as Southern by the U. S. Forest Service, 102,710 forest fires occurred in 1956. Heavy rains kept fires down in 1957, but if 1958 continues the promise of its early months, fire danger will be at a peak again. Over one weekend in early February, for example, more than 200 forest fires—most of them called incendiary by state forestry officials—burned over 8,000 acres of Louisiana woodland, while in Mississippi foresters tried vainly to stop a hundred fires that consumed nearly 4,000 acres during that Friday night alone.

Woods burning is a felony in these states—in Mississippi it is subject to a maximum of two years in prison and a fine of $1,000. But arson is hard to prove when it’s impossible to produce witnesses, and many Southern courts are reluctant to send a man to the penitentiary for burning trees. The question of why this kind of lawlessness persists has to be answered before any frontal attack on it can succeed. But, like alcoholism, incendiary woods burning seems to have scores of causes, not one. Many of them are peculiarly Southern.

If carelessness were the major factor, the South would merely share the problems of other wooded regions; but it is not. A total of 35 per cent of Southern forest fires in 1956 were caused by deliberate woods burners. In some states of the Deep South, like Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida, the percentage of arson fires runs as high as 50 per cent. Firebugs are actually responsible for a good 80 per cent of the forest acreage loss because they burn on purpose—when the ground is dry and the wind high.
These losses are tragic in an economically poor region which is making a strong bid to become the timber capital of the world. More than one-fourth of the nation's forest acreage is in the South and more than half of the South's land is forest. If fires and other menaces to the forest can be controlled, the wood-using industries of the South may become a $15-billion-a-year business by 1975—a very healthy adjunct to other industrialization efforts. But in spite of the $23 million spent annually by state and federal governments and private industry to prevent and suppress forest fires, the Southern states from Texas to North Carolina are losing an average of six million acres of wood a year, six times the average loss by fire in the other thirty-seven states.

"WHITTLE HIM DOWN TO SIZE"

WHY do Southerners set fire to their forests? Any forester of the region can list a dozen motives, varying often by locality. One group of foresters tabulated the reasons for this behavior in the Deep South and came up with more than a hundred. As one state forester put it, "The list runs the whole gamut of human emotions." The motives crisscross, but a half-dozen or more stand out.

Spite against the big landowner is one of the major reasons and is at the root of many excuses advanced by the woods burners themselves. The ne'er-do-well of the Southern backwoods is just plain angry because someone has enough money to buy a large tract of land in his county. Most of all he resents the outsider and the Northerner—like Crown Zellerbach—and wants to "whittle him down to size."

In many communities, particularly near the Gulf Coast, this practice of "burning the big man" has become more or less a pastime. Take Dixie and Taylor counties of Florida, for instance, the poor man's last frontier. Industry has pushed relentlessly through Florida from the West and North, and the tourist business has pushed gradually from the South up the west coast of Florida. The two forces have almost met but not quite. The "not quite" area is Dixie and Taylor counties, located in the Big Bend of the state and split by the Steinhatchee River.

Here, "fire strolling" means idling through the woods on a lazy day and casually setting fires. Two men confessed that they started off one day with twelve boxes of kitchen matches. When they completed their walk, they recalled:

"I don't believe we had any box left!"

In Taylor and Dixie counties the coastal plain starts its twenty-five mile leveling off to the Gulf. A settler living on the last high ground can spend the morning setting fires in the lowlands and sit down on his own front porch to watch the afternoon blazes. After all, who else has a chance to be a Nero any day he chooses?

Woods arsonists aren't fussy about whom they burn, just so it's a big landowner. Many fires have occurred in national forests, like the 1953 conflagration which consumed 5,000 acres of the DeSoto National Forest in Mississippi. One windy day, it seems, four men who were "all likkered up" started out at noon a few miles north of Brooklyn and actually set a thousand fires over a distance of forty miles before they were caught. The damage was more than $50,000.

Even an old company can arouse the spiteful urge to burn trees. In Mississippi's Pearl River county, the Crosby Company has been the major timber industry since 1916 and almost everybody in the town of Picayune depends upon the company for his weekly pay check. Yet arson became such a threat in 1953 that the company was forced to deliver an ultimatum: either the fires would have to stop or they would discontinue their reforestation program. The ultimatum came in March of that year, immediately after a group of woods burners on horseback and in autos set fires which scorched 20,000 acres over a single weekend. Finally, the aroused citizenry saw to it that fire occurrence in the area abated to some degree. How? By making it known that they wanted no more fires. It is surprising how forest fires can be stopped in a community when public opinion is strong against the arsonist. But this happens all too seldom.

In the Moseley Hall area of Florida's Madison county, arsonists confessed to setting six miles of fires on company lands because of a grudge against the company. They used what is known as a "woods jugger" for transportation—a stripped down, early model car with the top cut off. From this contraption, the burner can throw torches easily to either side of the road the way a news carrier throws his papers.

A personal grudge against the landowner, of course, can flare up at the slightest provocation. Maybe the company won't give a man a job. Maybe he got the job but was fired for some reason. He might be mad at one of the company's employees, any employee, it doesn't really matter.

Two women in Florida recently spent all
afternoon setting fires on lands belonging to a paper company because the company wouldn’t give a job to the son of one of the women.

“They won’t give my boy something to do,” she told her partner, “so I’ll give them something to do!”

Hatred of “timber stand improvement” methods accounts for a large portion of the South’s deliberate fires during the past ten years. This is the practice of deadening low-grade, cull hardwood trees among the pines so that the pines can flourish. Residents who are fond of squirrel hunting contend that foresters are killing off hollow trees used as dens by their game and depriving them of acorns and hickory nuts. To retaliate, they set fire to the company’s woods, not caring whether they are destroying more mast themselves.

In Louisiana’s Livingston parish, for instance, hardwood deadening has been a sore spot for years and has helped make the parish one of the most infamous forest arson hotbeds in the nation. The situation got out of hand in the spring of 1955 when the woods burners defiantly posted this notice in conspicuous places:

You've got the money,
We've got the time,
You deaden the hardwoods
And we'll burn the pine.

Forest fires sprang up in a chain reaction and spread out of control. In twenty-six days, more than 900 fires were started and 8,000 acres of forest lands were scorched by organized arsonists. Although Livingston parish’s only hope for economic salvation is forestry and its timber is known as the fastest growing in the nation, the bitter small minority was intent on wiping out the forests in one month if possible.

On one fire, arsonists held off the Louisiana Forestry Commission fire-fighters at gunpoint. Later, Chief Investigator V. E. Smith was engaged in a gunfight at the Verdun crossroads—the first time I know of when a forestry investigator was fired upon by an arsonist.

Smith got a tip on some arsonists in the area and was hiding out in the woods near the crossroads when two men appeared on the scene in broad daylight setting fires. They were armed with rifles. When Smith commanded them to halt, they started shooting and retreated through the woods to a deserted farmhouse where they jumped into their truck and left.

Although Smith’s pistol was no match for their rifles (his new pistol has a much longer barrel), the arsonists of lower Livingston parish that day got a firsthand look at the Louisiana Forestry Commission’s new “get tough” policy on arson fires.

OUTSMARTING THE FIRE-FIGHTERS

A NO THER common motive may be a kind of sardonic mockery of authority. The forestry files are full of cases involving arsonists who “wanted to see the fire-fighters work harder.” This is perhaps the oldest excuse for setting fires on record.

Towerman Ben Smith of Bienville parish in Louisiana likes to tell of the time during the 1920s when his area was suffering a particularly bad rash of forest fires. They were springing up mostly in one section and he couldn’t understand it because all the settlers there were his old friends. One day he asked one of them about the situation.

“Say, Ned, what y'all settin’ all those fires for over there? You’re about to work me to death. I can’t even come down from the tower at night any more!”

The settler said, “Why Ben, we're just helpin’ you out. We figured you needed the money.”

Smith assured him that his salary was the same, no matter how long he worked each day, to which the man exclaimed:
"Oh hell, we thought you was workin' by the hour!"

Some arsonists, less friendly in their intentions, go to even more trouble to outsmart forestry investigators. Picking a good, windy day, they will rig up a contraption with a magnifying glass aimed at a row of matches. Taking the sun into account, they "set it" to go off at a certain time. When the fire starts and draws the fire crews into that vicinity, the arsonists go to work in another section of the county.

So widespread is the problem in particular areas that even local officers of the law or employees of the company may be guilty. One arsonist was a police juror (county commissioner) in Louisiana and several have held similar positions in their communities. Many investigations have led to the conviction of employees of wood-using industries who gain their very livelihood from the forests, yet still set fire to timberlands "just for the hell of it," as they say.

One case involved an employee of a naval stores industry in DeQuincy, Louisiana. The forest ranger, hiding off the road, caught the man in the act of throwing "slow matches" from his stump truck en route to his job at the plant. Two employees of a paper company in Bogalusa, Louisiana, were caught setting fire to the very timber they were paid to manage.

W H I L E most of the arsonists are spite-driven, hundreds of them burn each year for economic gain. In this category, those who give the foresters continual headaches are open-range cattlemen and sheepmen who have been lords of the land for some fifty years in the Gulf Coast states. After the virgin timber was cut out in these areas and the companies moved their offices away, veritable dynasties were built up by cattlemen and sheepmen, although they didn't own a single acre of the cutover lands. Through the years, grazing rights on thousands of acres of stump-marked cutovers were "acquired" by an unwritten code and many nesters became wealthy. It was no wonder. They grazed the cattle yearlong on the free range, poor as it might be, and every cent of income from calves was profit. Every year they added more acreage to their empire and every year they burned the stubble off at springtime "to green up the grass."

The fact that they often burned up tree seed and seedlings trying to become established was of no concern to them.

Naturally, when the forest landowner returned after World War II during the rebirth of forestry in the South, a war between foresters and stockmen was inevitable. Foresters started planting trees and the stockmen balked. The result? Since World War II, the area seventy-five miles square encompassing southwest and central Louisiana has experienced more fires each year than any other similar area in the United States. As recently as this February, arsonists were hired by grazers to "green up the grass" in forests of the Edgewood Land and Logging Company in Beauregard parish. (This was the charge made by G. Lock Paret, chairman of the Louisiana Forestry Commission, who is also manager of Edgewood.)

It was in the open-range cattle country of the Deep South that the "slow match" was born. Consisting of a piece of sash cord or plowline with matches tied around the center, this ingenious device accomplishes two purposes for the arsonist: it assures him of a fire because all the matches light at one time; and it enables him to be far away from the scene when fire starts. The arsonist simply lights both ends of the rope, ties an old spark plug around it to give it heft, and slings the slow match far off the road into the brush. Any self-respecting woodsman is armed with twenty or thirty of these gadgets when he sets out "to get a burn."

Another favorite of the woods burning set is an ordinary cigarette with matches tied around it or stuck into it head first. The cigarette "slow match" operates on the same principle as the one made of sash cord; that is, the cigarette is lit and thrown into the woods. When it burns down far enough, the matches will ignite and set the woods on fire.

Pecan and pine knot pickers also set brush fires in order to get at the pecans and knots more easily. And Chief Investigator Joe Schuck of the Florida Forest Service has trouble each year with people "grunting" for fishing worms. They put a wooden stake into the ground and then rub a brick or stick over the post, causing a vibration which brings the worms to the surface. This practice wouldn't be unlawful in itself, but the "grunters" burn off the area first to make it easier to see the worms.

Even worse, though, are the unethical timber buyers who burn off a tract of land belonging to an unsuspecting small landowner, and then buy the damaged timber for a much lower price. Ordinary pulpwood cutters have been known to set fires near their homes, with the hope they'll get a job cutting the salvageable pulpwood the following week.
Juvenile delinquency is by no means confined to the cities, as foresters can testify. The only difference, they find, is that in the cities the "mixed-up kids" break windows, terrorize schoolmates, steal automobiles, and loot stores. In the country, they set forest fires. Although the population of rural communities is on the decline, juvenile delinquency in hundreds of forest areas in the South has jumped. In Louisiana and Florida, for example, almost 50 per cent of the known woods arson cases involve juveniles.

State Forester James E. Mixon of Louisiana points out that nearly all fires set by juveniles are just acts of vandalism—without known reason. In one case, a youth was caught who had set an almost continuous circle of fires around a valuable forest. Asked why he didn't finish the circle, the youth replied, "I ran out of matches." The same youth was sent to the penitentiary soon afterward for stealing a car.

A little more ambitious was another youth in Louisiana who set forest fires near a farmer's house. When the farmer and his family left the house to fight the fires, the youth slipped into the house and stole sixty dollars in cash.

In a West Florida county juveniles who set forty-five fires on timberlands owned by a large paper company also dynamited bridges over which fire-fighting equipment had to travel. All three youths apprehended were from good homes and some of their parents were leaders in their community.

CR UZY PEOPLE AND CRIMINALS

S TRANGELY enough, pyromania is not a major cause of forest arson, although it is one factor. Pyromaniacs have been caught in the woods and certainly most arsonists must suffer from pyromania to some degree, but this form of insanity can't be blamed for the South's fire problem. As a rule, when pyromaniacs have been found, they have been dealt with successfully. Take Sweet Emory Lolley, for instance, who was a confirmed woods burner most of his life in an upper Florida county and most certainly a pyromaniac. He was finally caught several years ago and, although he was set free, Sweet Emory has never caused any trouble since his arrest. The shock of arrest actually has cured some pyromaniacs, state foresters have found.

One who was never cured was an old backwoods woman for whom the smell of pine smoke held all the joys of life. Foresters relate that, when she was on her deathbed, she asked her boys to go out and "sot 'em on fire so I can see the woods burnin' jes' once more 'fore I die!"

Most of the arsonist breed are ne'er-do-wells of the community, who sooner or later are caught committing other crimes—hogs stealers, timber thieves, bootleggers, and lifetime loafers. State Forester Mixon describes them as "the have-nots who never had, never will have, and don't want anyone else to have."

One loafer in southeast Louisiana was caught by Agent B. F. Hyde after a two-week investigation of a series of forest fires in the area. The agent asked the man, who was in his middle twenties, why he always happened to set the fires in that locality early in the morning and late in the afternoon.

"Well," he said, "that's when I go over to my mama's house to eat my meals."

Noticing his wife and children out on the porch, Hyde asked him where they ate.

"Oh, they go over to her folks' to eat."

In Florida in March 1957, when fire setters who were caught in Taylor county claimed they actually didn't intend the woods to burn, the investigator believed them. They were in the process of stealing a railroad, rail by rail, and they accidentally set fire to the woods with their blowtorch. By that time, they had already loaded more than a mile of track onto trucks like pulpwood.

An acquaintance of long standing to courts in Florida's Okaloosa county was Willie "Lumpy" Kilcrease, who operated a "fair to middlin'" bootleg whiskey business on Panther Creek. He set fires now and then to run 'timber crews away when they approached too close to his still. When finally caught for arson, he admitted owning and operating a whiskey still, possessing a whiskey still, possessing liquor without paying the tax, hunting without a license, shooting turkeys out of season, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor child.

TRAPS FOR FIREBUGS

M OST Southern citizens are beginning to realize that the cost of forest arson—whatever the cause—is more than the industrial South can bear. And at last something is being done about it.

In 1956, the Southern Forest Fire Prevention Conference brought 1,200 leading citizens to New Orleans to stir up action. Follow-up meetings have been held in every state. There is evidence that the courts are handling woods
burning cases with more dispatch than before and that other enforcement measures have been sharpened, especially in the Deep South.

Foresters still believe in education as the mainstay of their general fire prevention program, but education fails with the hard core of lawbreakers to whom fire-setting has become a way of life. The deliberate arsonists are probably less than one per cent of the rural people. While some of them may be susceptible to persuasion by such means of enlightenment as fairs, exhibits, personal contacts, and newspaper articles, there will still be the diehard criminals. For them law enforcement is the only present solution. State foresters know that catching a woods burner is one of the most difficult detective chores imaginable, but they also know it can be done.

Incredible as it may seem, the first forestry agent in Louisiana to catch a man in the act of setting fires with a slow match performed that deed as recently as 1955. Horace Bienvenu had noticed during months of prowling in the southwest Louisiana cut-over region that arsonists had already burned a strip clean along a two-mile stretch on the south side of the road. They had worked the south side, naturally, because the wind had been out of the north for some time and they had to throw their matches from the road. Bienvenu knew they would hit the north side as soon as the wind changed. On St. Valentine's day it changed, and Bienvenu "staked out" off the road to wait for them. Sure enough, they came, and he caught them with slow match in hand.

Since then, no woods burner can be sure that there is no one behind the next tree watching.

But though detection and enforcement may reduce the problem, they do not solve the human puzzle which makes woods burning seem a disease peculiar to the South. Twenty years ago, John P. Shea of the U.S. Forest Service made the only psychological study that we have of woods burning in a typical Southern forest area.

"We found out," he said, "that six out of eight of the basic needs or urges of the people studied were practically at the level of frustration. We have here a setup, psychologically speaking, ready-made for numerous acts of aggression." He pointed out that this condition was aggravated by the fact that setting fire to the woods is an old agrarian custom—as much as raising cotton or dipping snuff. The sight and sound and odor of burning woods provide excitement for a people "who dwell in an environment of low stimulation and who crave excitement."

Mr. Shea's report was never followed up. It should be. To understand and to cope with the antic behavior of the lawless one per cent would involve answering some as yet unstudied questions. For example:

(1) Is there any justice in their rebellion against the big companies and the outsiders? Can their grievances—real or fancied—be cured? (At least, they could be discussed publicly.)

(2) Are state governments trying to create adequate opportunities—in the way of schooling, jobs, and recreation—for these people who have probably been "left behind" in the struggle for living? (They aren't necessarily poor—unless it is possible for fifteen men who can afford nine cars for an afternoon spree to be called poor.)

(3) Is it true that legal punishment is the only answer, that these lawless people belong to the minority of Southerners that W. J. Cash—perhaps the most perceptive observer of his own people in this century—believed to be the "least reconstructible" characters ever developed? "Violence, intolerance . . . an inclination to act from feeling rather than from thought, an exaggerated individualism and a too narrow concept of social responsibility"—these were some of the failings which Cash found still lingering in the South of 1940. Perhaps the woods burners in the South today are the very dregs of that drained society.

If the community—and its courts—expect these bad actors to reform on their own, or just dwindle away, law and order in the South will be a long time coming. And prosperity too.

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