

Wildfires continue to blaze

CALIFORNIA FIRES

MALIBU, Calif. — Firefighters strengthened their hold Thursday on flames in coastal mountains and police searched for an arsonist who ignited the inferno that destroyed 200 homes and killed a film director.

Duncan Gibbins, 41, died Wednesday of burns suffered a day earlier, becoming the first person killed in the wildfires that began burning across Southern California nine days ago.

The British screenwriter and director, whose credits included "Fire With Fire" about a forbidden love affair and "Third Degree Burn," a detective film, had safely fled his rented cottage. But he but had headed back to rescue a cat, said Peter Alexander, who owns the house.

A man who had hopped into a vehicle to look for Gibbins and became engulfed in flames was in critical condition Thursday.

Damp sea air Thursday helped 5,000 firefighters battling the blaze around this community of mansions and ranches owned by Hollywood's rich and famous. Some firefighters napped amid their trucks; others battled hot spots in the hills.

Malibu was mostly calm, with virtually no wind to even stir the ashes among charred beams and twisted metal fixtures of obliterated homes. The forecast called for the rising humidity and quiet winds to last through Friday.

"We're finally getting a break," said Inspector Dan Ertel of the Los Angeles County Fire Department. But Ertel warned, "If the winds pick up, it's the same old thing."

The fire was 70 percent contained, Inspector Steve Knevelbaard said today. More than 900 fire engines and 18 aircraft were in use.

The flames had jumped Topanga Canyon on the eastern side of Malibu and threatened to move toward the densely populated Pacific Palisades section of Los Angeles, about 20 miles west of downtown. But on Thursday, helicopters and C-130 air tankers dumping water and fire retardant kept them from spreading.

The outbreak of wildfires in Southern California has destroyed more than 1,000 homes and burned 200,000 acres since Oct. 26. Several of the blazes have been blamed on arsonists.

The Malibu blaze has burned 200 homes and 18,500 acres since it first roared through this mile-wide, 27-mile-long coastal strip on Tuesday.

"They're sure that it was arson," Gov. Pete Wilson said. He refused to give details. A \$250,000 reward was posted for information leading to the capture and conviction of the arsonist or arsonists.

Aided by tamer wind, thousands of firefighters challenged walls of flame with water and fire retardant, thwarting an onslaught that has destroyed 200 canyon ranches and seaside mansions.



Californians try to recover from tragedy

MALIBU, Calif. — Alice Kavalgjan cried as she trudged through the ashes of her home. "This is it," she said, pointing to the clothes she was wearing. "I don't even have a sweater."

Kavalgjan was among thousands of residents chased from this celebrity enclave by an arson wildfire that roared out of the Santa Monica Mountains and burned 200 houses. One person was killed.

Some returned Thursday to see whether any of their past was still standing. Others waited at roadblocks hastily put up to allow fire or aircraft bombing runs over the remaining hot spots.

By Thursday, firefighters had contained 70 percent of the 18,500-acre wildfire, one of a series of blazes that have destroyed 1,000 homes, blackened 200,000 acres and injured nearly 200 people in Southern California

since Oct. 26. Several were blamed on arsonists.

The Malibu fire claimed actor Sean Penn's \$4 million Spanish-style mansion along with Ali McGraw's home, with its panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean.

"I'm grateful to be alive. I'm grateful to my friends who helped save my animals. And I'm grateful to all the firefighters for their extraordinary efforts in saving so many people's lives," the star of the 1970 hit movie "Love Story" said in a statement released through her publicist.

Many celebrity homes, including the 100 mansions in the exclusive Malibu Colony, were spared.

Mike Pierson, 33, returned to his wood-sided house to find it intact. His relief was subdued.

"My cousin's home is gone, my best friend's home is gone. Every person I grew up with, their home is

gone," Pierson said. "I look here and I can't even tell where people live."

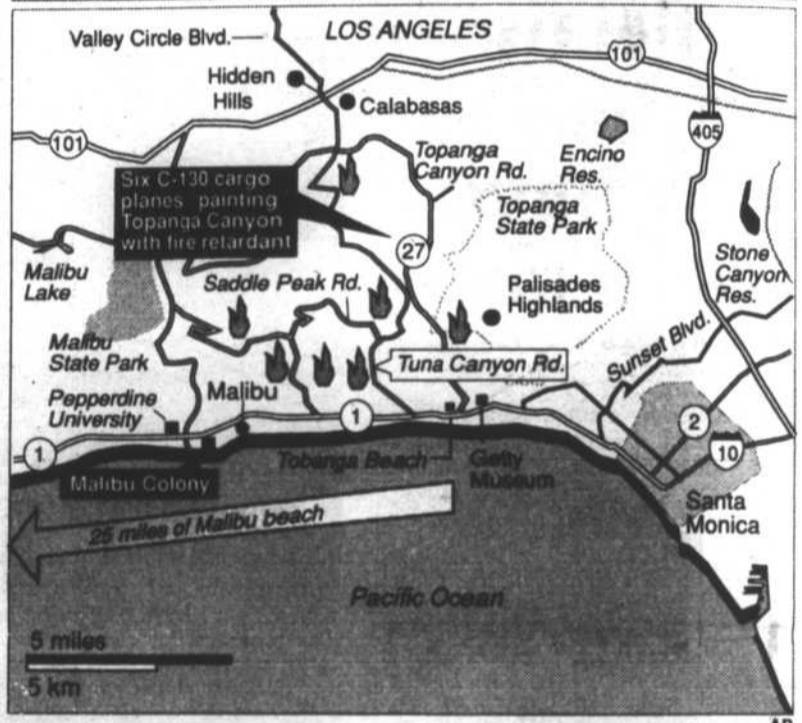
Chris Mitchell sat in her fully loaded car in the middle of a highway, unable to get home.

"Last night we rode our bikes up the highway so we know our house is all right," she said. "But we're tired of driving around and living out of our car."

Nelson Carpentier returned to his Las Flores Canyon lot to find his home destroyed and his restored 1970 Mercedes-Benz a burned out shell. Sitting next to the car were the remains of a 20-foot Wellcraft boat.

As family members dug spoons, metal tools, ceramic cups and pots out of the ash, Carpentier expressed anger at the arsonist who authorities said set the fire.

"It makes me sick," he said. "I did nothing to that guy and he destroyed everything I own."



Curriss

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Earlier during the two-hour open session, Curriss answered board members' questions of his past administrative positions at UNI and Murray State University in Kentucky.

AAUP censure

While at Murray State in 1974, Curriss was censured by the American Association of University Professors for his part in the firing of nine tenured faculty members.

Curriss said shortly after he was named president of the university, about 45 faculty members had come up for tenure review. Because of a pre-existing university board policy, all were reviewed, and about 20 were denied tenure, Curriss said.

The nine members had been at the university more than six years, which is the AAUP's tenure policy, he said. Some faculty members eventually took the issue to a federal court, but the board's decision was upheld, Curriss said.

An administration is censured for not upholding the academic freedom of faculty members, an AAUP spokesman said from Washington D.C.

The censure issue raised concern among some UNL faculty members Thursday.

Jane Conoley, president of the local AAUP chapter, said the censure issue was serious.

"The AAUP is gravely concerned about the censure that still exists," she said. "We'd like to hear him directly address this."

Similar to 1990

Robert Bergstrom, associate professor of English and former AAUP chapter president, said this situation raised the same questions as in the 1990 search when a finalist was censured. The search committee then said they had no knowledge of the allegations.

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—Conoley president of UNL chapter of AAUP

Robert Dickeson, president of the University of Northern Colorado, was censured by AAUP in 1983. At the time, faculty members were concerned about the possibility of naming a university president that had been censured.

Dickeson and three other finalists ultimately dropped out of the race after internal candidate Martin Massengale was declared a finalist.

Bergstrom said if the regents named Curriss to the president position it would send a negative message to faculty members.

Search committee

Regent Nancy O'Brien of Waterloo, who co-chaired the search committee, said she couldn't remember when the committee found out about the censure issue.

"I can't say we knew it throughout the search," she said.

Sally Wise, president of the UNL Academic Senate and a member of the search committee, would not say if the search committee knew about the censure.

Curriss said the board told him they knew about the censure, but it was not brought up in his initial interview with search committee members.

"There apparently was a considerable amount of discussion prior to interview by the board about the censure," he said.

Nine years after the censure issue, Curriss' contract was not renewed by

the Murray State Board. The split vote over the contract renewal was because of new members on the board and a new board chairman, Curriss said.

Candidate focus

Curriss said the focus of his candidacy for the NU position should not be centered around the censure issue or his Murray State contract.

"My interest is to focus on what I've done," he said.

During Curriss' proposal to the board, he said there were five initiatives he would like to implement if offered the presidency.

"I know it's somewhat premature to make these statements to you, but I think it might be helpful if you know what I would do," Curriss told the board.

Curriss' five initiatives are: ● Get to know the university, its people, heritage and strengths.

● To establish a strategic planning process for the university as a whole.

● Team building with chancellors and vice presidents of the university.

● Work with each chancellor to develop and sustain a higher level of excellence on each of four campuses.

● Get to know the state of Nebraska in all areas, including political leadership.

O'Brien

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National Merit Scholars and has attracted more than 300 honor students to UNO.

O'Brien said his daughters went through the same application process as other applicants without preferential treatment.

He also answered questions about a conflict involving the foreign language department at UNO. The department gave O'Brien a vote of no confidence two years ago.

Victor Santi, chair of the department, said in a phone interview that many foreign language professors had given one of their colleagues poor evaluations. The negative evaluations would have led to the professor's termination, he said.

O'Brien said the professor's response to the negative evaluations included accusations of sexual harassment. The faculty senate studied the evaluation procedures and concluded the department hadn't followed them correctly, he said.

The professor was allowed to remain on the faculty and be re-evaluated. O'Brien said his support of the senate's decision led to the no confidence vote.

While O'Brien said hard feelings probably still existed, Santi said the incident was resolved to the satisfaction of most department members.

Another controversy O'Brien was involved with at UNO involved

former men's basketball coach Art Tolis, who has filed a lawsuit against the university. Tolis was dismissed after his first season as head coach in 1987-1988 for hitting an athlete. O'Brien said.

Ed Cassiere, UNO's sports information director, said an agreement was reached between UNO and Tolis that accepted his resignation along with continuation of Tolis' salary until the end of his contract.

When UNO lagged on the payments, Tolis reported several National Collegiate Athletic Association violations that he allegedly observed while he was head coach, Cassiere said.

UNO hired an independent attorney to investigate the violations, who found that most had passed the statute of limitations, O'Brien said.

Only one violation was found to have occurred under O'Brien's chancellorship, he said. That involved an athlete who accepted money for car repairs from professional recruiters, O'Brien said.

The university reported the violation, O'Brien said, even though there was no conclusive proof. O'Brien said the NCAA would regard the incident as a secondary violation.

O'Brien has been a member of the NCAA President's Commission since April of 1988, one month after Tolis' initial termination. The commission advises colleges on NCAA regulations. O'Brien later became the commission's chairman in January of 1992.

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