

# MAJOR FIRES THAT HAVE BURNED in the OCCIDENTAL AREA

Fires are driven by hot, dry winds that are funneled through our hilly terrain. These dangerous winds return time and again. As the physical form of our hills is fixed, fires sometimes burn the same area more than once.

## NATIVE AMERICAN ERA, 8000 BCE to 1836

Native Americans purposely burned most of Northern California every one to five years until Vallejo prohibited the practice in 1836. Throughout California 5 to 13 million acres were burned each year. In 1818 Captain Golovnin of the Russian Navy observed an Indian fire racing across grassland towards the Russian River. Lightning-initiated fires are estimated to have occurred once every 50 years.

## 1900 OCCIDENTAL FIRE, Sept. 20

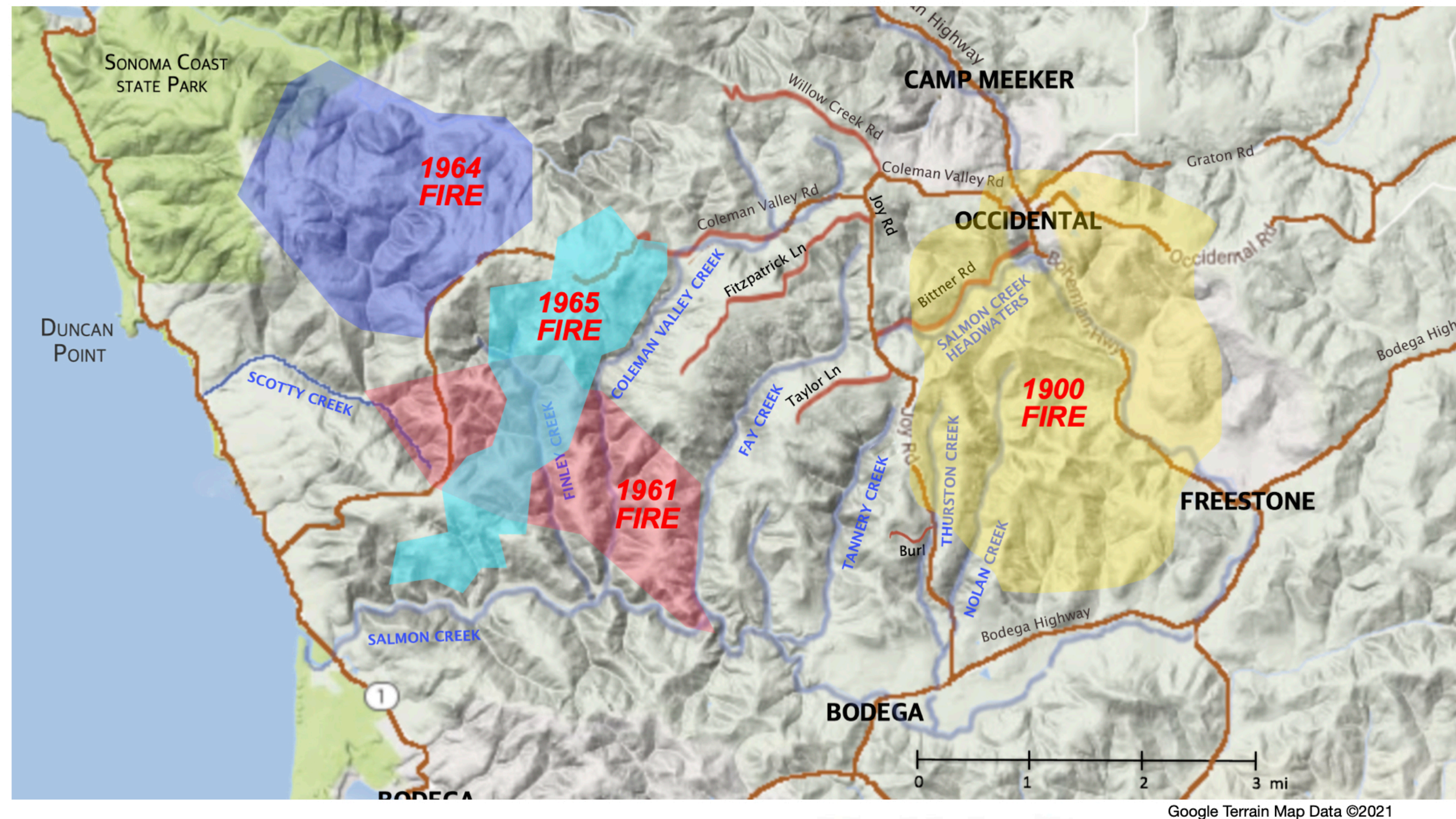
Began on Franceschi Ranch on Coleman Valley Road when fall burning of vineyard waste ignited a fir tree root and the wind came up. The fire then jumped the road, burned through Joy woods, all around Occidental, south along both sides of Bohemian highway, continued to the west side of Freestone and into pasturelands behind Bodega, hitting over 30 ranches, dairies and a winery. Alert townspeople set back fires that saved town of Occidental. Firefighters also saved Brown's Canyon Trestle. Although not burned down, the town of Freestone became so hot from the fire that it had to be abandoned. The outline of the fire was inferred by combining 1900 map naming land owners with contemporary newspaper accounts of which residents were most affected.

### Weather:

humidity: unknown  
temperature: unknown  
winds: north east

Collated by Noel Bouck and Diane Masura  
with map by Bob Fink for the Salmon Creek  
Watershed Council

October, 2021 CE



## 1961 ROBERTSON FIRE Sept. 3

Began on Marshall Hendron Ranch off Hwy 1 six miles north of Bodega Bay and burned southwest jumping Coleman Valley Road, reaching along western slopes of Fay Creek, and along Tannery, and Coleman Creeks down almost to Salmon Creek. Burned 2208 acres. One of twelve fires burning that day in the north bay.\*

### Weather:

humidity near 0  
temperature in high 90's  
winds to 80 mph from north east

## 1964 WILLOW CREEK FIRE, Sept.

This fire began south of Willow Creek Road, ran along the valley north of Coleman Valley Road, along Wright Hill Road, and reached the east end of Furlong Gulch, burning 2603 acres. That September there were 94 wildfires in the North Bay within 2 weeks, including the Hanley Fire in Santa Rosa.\*

### Weather during that September:

Humidity down to 15%  
Temperature up to 100's  
Winds peaking at 50 mph

## 1965 THE COLEMAN VALLEY FIRE, also called PG&E #7, Sept. 17

Began south west of Occidental, continued along the western slopes of Fay Creek and along the ridge between Coleman Valley and Fay Creeks, moving southwest almost to Salmon Creek to burn about 2000 acres. One of twelve simultaneous fires in the county, one of 94 fires in the North Bay within 2 weeks.\*

### Weather:

humidity 15%  
temperature in high 90's  
winds to 78-100 mph from north east

\* Data: Cal Fire Fire Perimeters by Emily Zentner and Chris Hagan

## What creates dangerous winds

The Diablo winds that were forecast for Northern California usually come in the fall, but their behavior is hard to predict because mountains, valleys and even cloud formations can alter their speed and direction.

