

From first to worst, superlatives abound in describing historical and contemporary events. Journalists, public officials, town boosters, and others so many times feel compelled to claim something special about something. But what do they base their claim on and how do they, or we, know what's true?

Take for instance the claim that a fire is the worst in the history of a community or state. Is there a handy-dandy list of all major fires in Nevada's history? The answer is no. A comprehensive list has never been created and is long overdue.

The claim for "worst fire" generally stems from personal or collective experience, i.e. it's the worst fire in memory. That claim on a statewide basis is contingent on the claimant being aware of all the other major fires in the course of his or her lifetime.



What makes a fire the worst? Is it because of acreage consumed, damage to property, cost to suppress it, loss of human life, or all of these elements in combination?

There have been many large conflagrations in Nevada history including the July 2004 Waterfall Fire in the Carson City area. Public officials have declared, "this is the worst fire Carson City has ever experienced" and emphasized no fire in the state's history has been "so close to so many homes and people." A newspaper editorial called the Waterfall Fire "the worst wildfire in Carson's history."

In researching fires in and around Carson City since the town's founding in 1858, one could legitimately argue that the Waterfall Fire (8,799 acres) has cost more to control and the property loss is greater than any other fire in the past. Carson City never had great fires like Virginia City, Reno, and Goldfield, which burned most of those towns to the ground.

On the other hand, the Carson City fire of Sept. 28-29, 1926 burned west from the mouth of Clear Creek Canyon to Spooner Summit, some five miles, and east again back down Kings Canyon to the edge of city. Fire fighters fought valiantly to prevent the fire from engulfing the nation's smallest state capital. The ranchers in the fire's path lost virtually everything. Today most of those ranches have been replaced by residential subdivisions and custom homes. Five firefighters in 1926, including two prison inmates and a correctional officer, lost their lives to the fickle flames. A marker in the eastbound lane of U.S. Highway 50 below Spooner Summit pays homage to these fallen men. Based on the loss of life and amount of acreage involved, the 1926 fire may be considered the worst fire in Carson City's history.

So where does the Waterfall Fire rank in the history of fires in Nevada? When it comes to the loss of human life, the MGM Hotel and Casino fire (November 21, 1980) in Las Vegas was Nevada's worst. The death toll was 87 with three persons dying after the fire, and 679 people were injured. According to the Clark County Fire Department, the MGM fire "was the second largest life-loss hotel fire in U.S. history." The Virginia City fire of October 26, 1875 probably resulted in the greatest property loss in Nevada history. Most of the downtown core in what was then Nevada's largest city, perhaps 30,000 residents in the metro area, was destroyed in the blaze. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people were displaced. Insurance companies estimated the total losses at \$10,000,000!

In 2003 dollars this is a loss of \$105,151,060—a major calamity. Three fatalities were reported in the massive fire. The densely populated Comstock, including neighboring Gold Hill, with its many frame houses and other buildings, was fortunate to have avoided even greater loss of life and property.

According to newspaper reports, the great Reno fire of March 2, 1879 destroyed 50 acres of businesses and homes in the town's north end. Six lives were lost.

Reno's Mizpah Hotel fire of October 31, 2006 cost twelve lives, the deadliest in the town's history.

The Goldfield fire of July 6, 1923, which may have started with an explosion of an illegal liquor still, burned some thirty blocks in the declining mining town. One hundred and fifty families were left homeless. The estimated property loss was \$500,000. In 2003 dollars, this is \$5,257,553. Two persons died in the fire. Only 15 years earlier, Goldfield had been Nevada's largest community.

Carson City's Waterfall Fire devastated thousands of acres of forested areas but there have been much larger forest fires in Nevada history. Perhaps the Waterfall Fire's distinction is that it will prove to be the costliest to suppress in the state's history, more than \$9,200,000 because of its mixed urban/wildland character.

Superlative claims are easy to make but not necessarily easy to prove or defend. There is nothing wrong in deferring a question if you don't know the answer, or referring the question to someone who might.

Photograph of plane dropping fire retardant on "C" Hill in Carson City, ca 1964-1966, courtesy of the Nevada State Library and Archives. The view is toward the north/northeast. Neither the legislative building nor the Ormsby House had been constructed at the time of this photo.

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