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Devastating Fire Destroys the South T Pier

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It was described as the worst disaster to occur on the Morro Bay Harbor in the City's history. At approximately 6:15 A.M. on Thursday, December 1, 1988, a fire broke out on the South T Pier, which is located at the base of the Great American Fish Company restaurant. In the end, at least 14 fire engines, five fire departments, and nearly 70 firefighters from across the county battled the blaze that within five to ten minutes engulfed the entire pier.

It took the firefighters one hour and 40 minutes to extinguish the fire. One bystander videotaped the fire, showing how quickly the entire oil-soaked pier and its creosote pilings were engulfed in flames (see the [YouTube video](#)).

Tragically, two people died because of the fire. George Bailey Little III, a 69-year-old man who had been living aboard his sailboat for several months, died of smoke inhalation. And a 78-year-old woman, Naomi Griffith, died three days after being rescued and hospitalized. While volunteers quickly helped to push some boats away from the pier, 13 vessels – mostly commercial fishing boats – were destroyed, along with two vehicles. Several other boats were damaged.

But as bad as the fire was, it could have been much worse. Had conditions been different, it would have spread to the buildings on the embarcadero. The wind in Morro Bay usually comes from the Northwest, blowing onto shore. Fortunately, that day, the wind came from the opposite direction, taking the fire and smoke offshore.

Also, the tide was slowly going out, so the boats on fire drifted away from the pier and the embarcadero. The fire chief, Bernard Zerr, also credited the quick action of volunteers for helping to save lives and property.

After a lengthy investigation into the cause of the fire, it was determined a shore power extension cord on one of the live-a-board boats overheated and ignited the creosote pilings of the pier. Estimates of the final cost of the property damage caused by the fire exceeded \$1 million.

Lawsuits were filed against the City by the two victims' families and several boat owners totaling almost \$20 million. The lawsuits were eventually settled individually. The South T pier was rebuilt in 1993 at a cost of approximately \$2 million, which was funded with a loan from the California Department of Boating and Waterways. The loan was only recently paid in full.