

The Elements:  
Fire

By

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THE ELEMENTS:  
FIRE

Scene: 1

Introduction

MUSIC: CAL LEGACY UPDATED THEME

NARRATOR:

Great writing about California's natural world is compelling and concrete, encouraging us to be personally in touch with the elements of our environment.

Earth, wind, fire, and water, timeless elements of California's natural world.

Hear now--Fire!

SOUND: FIRE SOUNDS SWELL THEN EVENTUALLY FADE OUT

MUSIC: FOLLOWS THE LEVELS OF THE FIRE EFFECTS AND EVENTUALLY REPLACES IT

NARRATOR:

Centuries before Europeans came to California, the people who lived here used fire to manage their environment. Controlled burns improved the health of grasslands, which benefitted not only the humans who dwelt here but the animals who depended on natural forage. Here's Professor John Farnsworth from the Environmental Studies Institute of Santa Clara University:

FARNSWORTH:

Indigenous Californians had a completely different relationship with fire than we do. Where our primary impulse is to suppress wildfire, or at least prevent it, they used it to manage the landscape. The Yurok people of Northern California actually established burning schedules in the various biomes where they hunted and foraged. For example, they burned under tanbark oaks every three years in order to suppress brush and promote the annual plants on which elk and deer preferred to browse.

NARRATOR:

An early pioneer of California travel writing was Englishman James M. Hutchings, an unsuccessful forty-niner turned writer and promoter. In 1860 he published Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity in California, which includes this description of one of these burns.

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## HUTCHINGS:

In the fall season, when the wild oats and dead bushes are perfectly dry, the Indians sometimes set large portions of the surface of the mountains on fire; and when the breeze is fresh, and the night is dark, and the lurid flames leap, and curl, and sway, now to this side and now to that, the spectacle presented is magnificent beyond the power of language to express.

MUSIC: BRIDGE TO NARRATOR

SOUND: FIRE SOUNDS MIXED INTO FOLLOWING DIALOGUE

SCENE: 2

Communion

MUSIC: BRIEF INTERLUDE

## NARRATOR:

In California, fire may seem like a symbol of the Apocalypse, and when fire rages out of control, it costs us dearly. But fire's life affirming light and heat give us comfort and communion, too.

SOUND: FIRE SOUNDS MIXED INTO FOLLOWING DIALOGUE THEN FADE

MUSIC: CONTINUES THROUGHOUT THE READINGS, CONTRIBUTING TO A FEELING OF PEACE AND SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

## CHASE:

Higher still, and near the crest, I came into a region of magnificent yellowpines and redwoods. It was sundown, and the view was a remarkable one.

## NARRATOR:

In the early days of the 20th century, J. Smeaton Chase visited the Central Coast on horseback. In his 1911 travel book Pacific Coast Trails, he captures the spiritual beauty of a Pacific Coast sunset.

## CHASE:

The sun shone level, and with a strange bronze hue, through a translucent veil of fog. Below the fog the surface of the ocean was clear, and was flooded with gorgeous purple by the sunset. On the high crest where I stood, a clear, warm glory bathed the golden slopes of grass and lighted the noble trees as if for some great pageant. There was a solemnity in the splendor, an unearthly quality in the whole scene; that kept me spellbound and bareheaded until, fatefully, imperceptibly, the sun had set.

MUSIC: CHANGE OF MOOD TO CONTEMPLATIVE, MORE QUIET

(CONTINUED)

SOUND, ENDS WITH COYOTE HOWL VERY QUIET:

## NARRATOR:

Mary Austin published her best known work, the collection of essays called *The Land of Little Rain*, in 1903. It's an exploration of desert country east of the Sierra Nevada, but it's also a contemplative consideration of the place of human beings in our sun-warmed and star-lighted world.

## AUSTIN:

In that country which begins at the foot of the east slope of the Sierras and spreads out by less and less lofty hill ranges toward the Great Basin, it is possible to live with great zest, to have red blood and delicate joys, to pass and repass about one's daily performance an area that would make an Atlantic seaboard State, and that with no peril, and, according to our way of thought, no particular difficulty. At any rate, it was not people who went into the desert merely to write it up who invented the fabled Hassayampa, of whose waters, if any drink, they can no more see fact as naked fact, but all radiant with the color of romance. I, who must have drunk of it in my twice seven years' wanderings, am assured that it is worth while.

For all the toll the desert takes of a man it gives compensations, deep breaths, deep sleep, and the communion of the stars. It comes upon one with new force in the pauses of the night that the Chaldeans were a desert-bred people. It is hard to escape the sense of mastery as the stars move in the wide clear heavens to risings and settings unobscured. They look large and near and palpitant; as if they moved on some stately service not needful to declare. Wheeling to their stations in the sky, they make the poor world-fret of no account. Of no account you who lie out there watching, nor the lean coyote that stands off in the scrub from you and howls and howls.

## NARRATOR:

Again, John Farnsworth

## FARNSWORTH:

In 1874, Joaquin Miller, one of California's most colorful authors, wrote about about a devastating fire he'd witnessed on Mount Shasta, one where he claims to have seen a bear on fire. He blames the fire on neglect of the forest, which during his boyhood had still been maintained by the native populace, who according to Miller use to burn the underbrush back every spring.

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NARRATOR:

Next time you watch the stars, enjoy a sunset, imagine the searing heat of a blazing brushfire, remember the "compensations" we gather from light and heat and color. Examine your own experience of outdoor California to appreciate better what's at stake here.

For the California Legacy Project at Santa Clara University, I'm Terry Beers

CREDITS:

Fire is a production of the California Legacy Project at Santa Clara University, [californialegacy.org](http://californialegacy.org), and featured Kevin Hearle, Dan Maloney, and Jessica Teeter.

Music and post-production by Bernhard Drax at [draxtor.com](http://draxtor.com).