

40-mile strip of forest

35 houses leveled in holocaust

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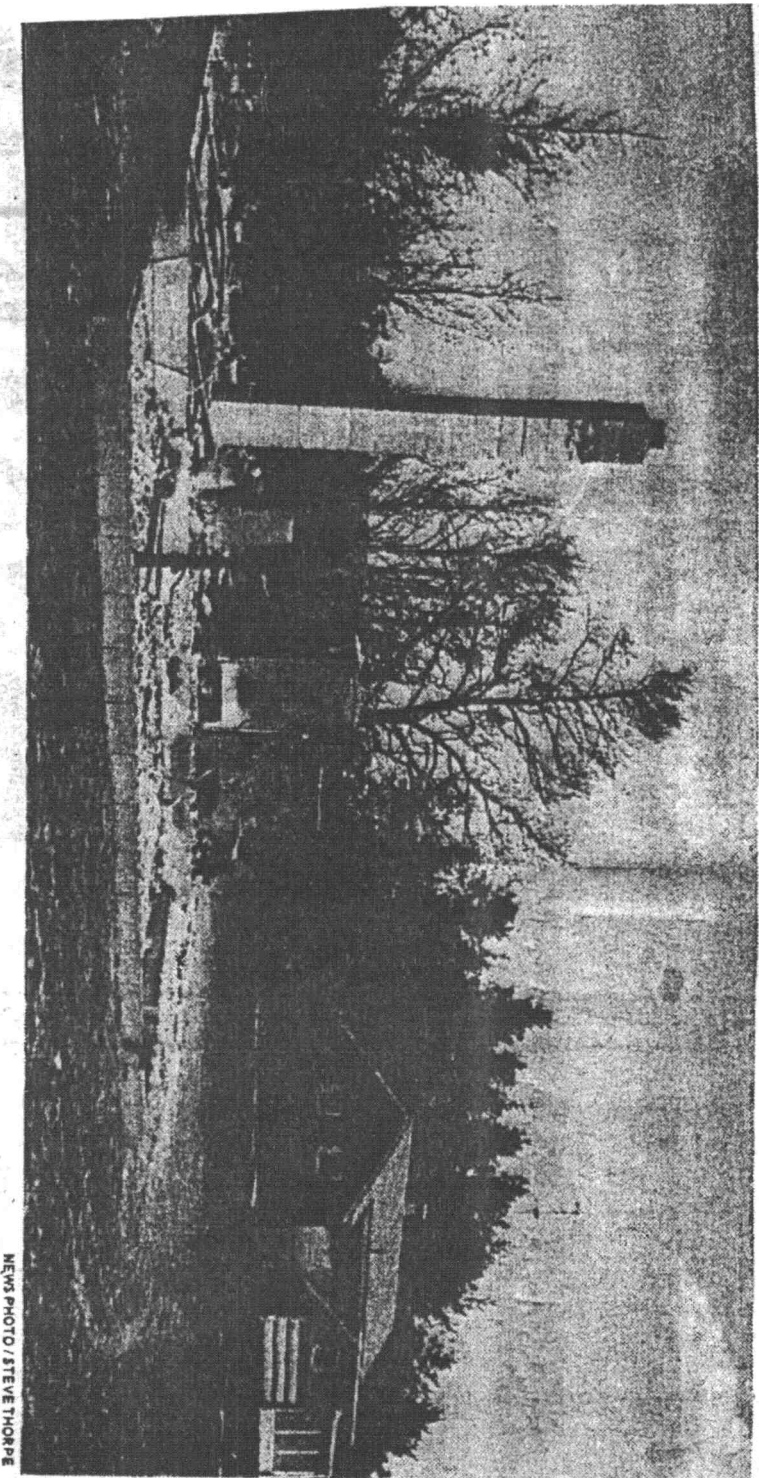
U.S. Forest Service firemen and volunteers finished plowing a barrier strip around 25,000 charred acres in Oscoda County last night, finally bringing under control one of the worst forest fires in many years in the midwestern and northeastern United States.

The wind-swept blaze burned nearly 40 square miles of jack pine forest, destroying 35 houses — including both permanent dwellings and summer cottages — near Mack Lake south of Mio. It killed one Forest Service employee and seriously burned another man.

Too soon to assess fire's effect on wildlife — 3A.

It may have destroyed the habitat of the rare Kirtland's warbler, which it was set to help.

LIABILITY FOR hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage to private property is still uncertain, even though the Forest Service set the fire deliberately as a "controlled burn" Monday morning. The foresters had intended to burn



NEWS PHOTO / STEVE THORPE

ne of homes which burned to ground in path of forest fire in Mack Lake area. More photos on 3A.

"20"

Mammoth fire ravages 40 square

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Only 200 acres of the Kirtland's warbler nesting grounds to destroy unwanted vegetation and to encourage jack pine growth, but unexpected winds caused the flames to jump M-33 and to rage out of control for two days.

Jack Curtis, an attorney in the Forest Service's regional office in Milwaukee, said the federal agency is not liable unless employe negligence can be proven. If the burn met the prescribed requirements as to weather, manpower and equipment, he said, then it could be determined that the fire was "an act of God," and residents would have to rely on their own legal action or their insurance companies to recoup their losses.

"We have to find out who was where and what happened," Curtis

said. "We hope to make that determination soon, but I can't put a time frame on it."

MEANWHILE, the Forest Service has set up a claims office in Mio and is urging citizens to file damage claims there.

The burned area is in the Huron National Forest, in the Au Sable River country about 40 miles east of Grayling in the northeastern Lower Peninsula.

The fire, whipping through the treetops at speeds of up to 20 miles an hour, charred an area about 10 miles long and up to five miles wide. Pinners of flame stretched as far as Oscoda County's eastern boundary and across the Ogemaw County line on the south.

William Erickson, deputy superin-

tendent of the Huron National Forest, site of the blaze, called it the "worst in many years" in the northeastern United States.

An estimated 1,000 people in and near the Mack Lake and South Branch communities left their homes as the flames approached. Most stayed with friends or relatives, and some were put up for the night in schools and lodge halls.

MOST OF THEM returned yesterday, if they had homes to return to.

Some areas were skipped by the racing flames. Some houses were reduced to smoking cinders, while others only 100 or 200 feet away were untouched.

"I never expected to see our house again," said Ruth Green of Mack Lake, who was forced to leave



NEWS PHOTO: STEVE THORPE

FRANK BALOWSKI: 'Is life of a fireman worth life of a kid?'

miles of forest

her husband, Henry, about 1 p.m. Monday. Her neighbors' houses burned to the ground. Hers was intact.

Barbara Rushing said she stayed until the flames were so near that "the sound was deafening — like a freight train."

Her husband, William, said the fire charred a snowmobile in his yard, melted a boat nearby, scorched his garage wall and "burned the flag right off my flagpole." But it didn't touch the Rushing home.

The fire destroyed the metal shed which served as the Mack Lake fire station, with a fire truck inside, along with the nearby homes of Fire Chief Joe Walker and Assistant Chief Donald Campbell.

Many of the residents expressed resentment about the fire being set

to help the rare blue-and-yellow warblers, which now number 422 by the last Audubon Society count.

"THAT'S WHAT'S left — a gazebo and a shed," said Theresa Campbell,

