

## **Escaping the Cedar Fire**

One of the reasons Jeannette and I moved from Southern California to the Northwest was because of the fires which frequently burned the surrounding communities near us. We experienced at least a half-dozen major fires while living in San Diego County that destroyed chaparral, forests, homes, and businesses and killed scores of people. Many of the fires occurred in the late Summer and Fall during the Santa Ana winds that drove the fires like a blow torch. The fires were frightening to watch and difficult to be near because of the smoke. Jeannette and our daughter, Michelle, were particularly sensitive to airborne particulates and often had to flee fires to avoid being overcome by smoke.

Several major conflagrations occurred within ten miles of our home in Santee, twenty miles to the northeast of San Diego. The rolling terrain east of San Diego is covered with a mix of grass, chaparral, and pine which turn brown and dry by May each year and are highly susceptible to fires. Fortunately, the winds don't generally become strong until the Fall, so fires aren't generally a problem until the Santa Ana winds begin to kick up in September and October.

The Santa Ana wind is named after a town of the same name south of Los Angeles where the winds seem to be the strongest. However, when the conditions are right, Santa Ana winds will generally blow throughout the Southern California region igniting and spreading fire rapidly downwind.

The wind generally blows from northeast to southwest from a high-pressure area over the high deserts of southeast California, Arizona, and Nevada toward low pressure over the Pacific Ocean. When fires burn during the Santa Anas smoke can be seen on satellite images streaming off the Coast of California for thousands of miles.

In the Fall of 2003 the Cedar fire was ignited 30 miles upwind from our home which forced us to flee for our lives. A news story in the San Diego Union describes the events which drove us from our home.

"In the fading sunlight of a breezy Saturday in late October, the desperation of a lost hunter sparked the largest wildfire in California history. From unremarkable

beginnings in the steep, roadless wilderness of the Cleveland National Forest, the Cedar fire roared across the county with amazing speed, blazing a 28-mile-long trail of destruction in its first 14 hours. Within nine hours, the Paradise fire was kindled near Valley Center. Together, they devoured a meandering wasteland larger than the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles. They killed at least 16 people. More than 2,400 homes collapsed into piles of rubble. Tens of thousands fled into hotels, gymnasiums and the homes of friends. More than 100,000 lost power and telephone service."

The details of the event that triggered the fire are especially chilling. Two hunters became separated in the forest west of Julian, California and one of them decided to shoot a flare into the gathering darkness to signal his partner of his whereabouts. The flare ignited a fire that grew explosively overnight and raced southwestward toward San Diego approaching within a mile of our home in Santee.

It's hard to imagine an outdoorsman who was so dumb as to ignite any type of fire in the forest which was already a tinderbox during Santa Ana conditions, even in desperation. I believe the two hunters were prosecuted for negligence and fined several million dollars for their actions.

On Sunday morning following the ignition of the Cedar fire, our family chose to pack our most cherished possessions -- pictures, albums, and pets -- and left our home behind. The main fire was directly upwind of our house and was spreading rapidly towards us. Of more immediate concern was the smoke and ash which was already enveloping our house.

We needed to escape somewhere away from the potential of being in the fire, but more urgently, to get out of the smoke. Where to go? And, where could we stay for up to a week or more?

We headed east on I-8 towards Phoenix with the plan to get upwind from the fire and smoke. However, we hadn't traveled twenty miles before we ran into flames crossing the road headed south. We slowed with the traffic and carefully edged around the fire. We continued to a Christian camp near Pine Valley and spent the night.

When we woke the next morning, we were informed the fire had changed direction during the night and was headed southeastward directly toward the camp. We would have to leave because the entire camp was being evacuated. So, we packed up again and headed north toward Julian, which we figured would be upwind of the fire and away from the smoke. However, as we approached Julian we ran into a roadblock. A fireman informed us we would be the last vehicle to pass his roadblock because the fire was now moving uphill toward the town. We were advised to continue through Julian and eastward down to the desert floor. The fire wasn't expected to continue downhill in that direction.

By this time, I realized this was going to be more than just a one or two-day inconvenience. We would need to locate a place for our family to live for up to a week. We only had the clothes on our backs, a few medications, and a cooler with some sandwiches.

Then it occurred to me. Now would be a good time to use our timeshare membership. We owned a timeshare in Palm Springs and could stay there for several days as needed. Everything is provided in a timeshare. We only needed to purchase some food and our entire family could hole-up and have a mini-vacation.

We checked into an available condo in Palm Springs and were even given a special discounted rate when we informed the front desk we had been run out of our home by the Cedar fire. We settled in, enjoyed the pool, and played board games for two days until the Santa Ana winds died and the smoke from the fire reversed direction and began to fill Palm Springs with smoke, reducing the visibility to less than a quarter of a mile.

Now, what should we do? Continue eastward into Nevada or Arizona to escape the smoke? This was where my training in meteorology helped. I looked at the weather maps and realized that the wind would continue from the west for the next week blowing the smoke eastward. So, it didn't make sense to continue eastward followed by the smoke. We needed to head west and get upwind of the fire once again.

Ahh, I know what we'll do, I thought. Let's head back to the Coast where we could use a second timeshare we owned in Carlsbad, California. We would again

be out of the smoke and closer to home where we could return more easily to clean up the mess after the fire was over, assuming our house was still there.

We packed up once again and headed west. Unfortunately, we had to drive through about fifty miles of smoke and ashes to once again get upwind. In places, the smoke was so dense we could barely see the road. And, because of Jeannette and Michelle's allergies to smoke they had to breathe through wet towels to filter out the particulates and gases. But, eventually, we made it. When we got to our timeshare 30 miles north of San Diego the air was clean and fresh, the sun was out, and the world was pure again.

We had another mini vacation for four days in our timeshare on the beach. My son-in-law, Victor, and I commuted to Santee for several days to clean up all the ash that had fallen on the roof and in the yard, so our family could return home. Our house had survived, but it took a lot of shoveling and washing to make it fit for our family.

Even if your home survives a fire, there is a lot of damage to your property. As I write this story I'm thinking of many of my friends in Redding, California who are going through a similar scenario. Several have lost their homes, some have lost friends, and almost everyone in Redding has been impacted by the smoke and ash.

Fires in California and along the entire West Coast seem to be occurring more frequently. Part of the reason may be climate change, but most of it is likely because more homes have been built in the forest and governmental policies have been instituted that restrict removal of undergrowth.

The West is a tinderbox almost every Fall. Some creative thinking is needed to help prevent and stop wildfires. The adage, "Only you can prevent wildfires." is not enough anymore.