

Wildfires The Impact on a Community

By Angela McLaughlin ~ THE JOURNAL

Wildfires are something people are eager to avoid, but they are an inevitable reality for many living in Southern California.

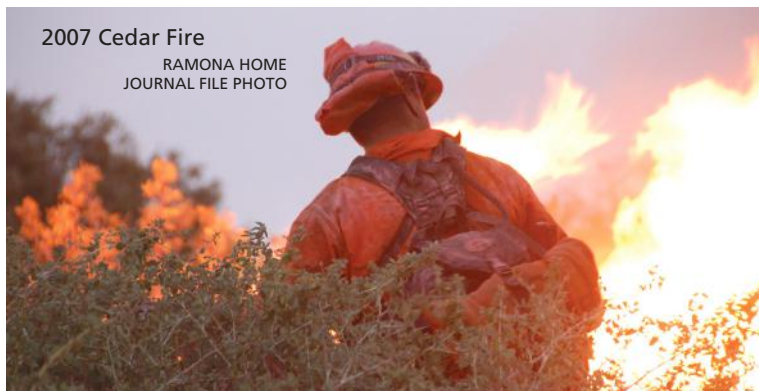
The fires of 2003 and 2007 were devastating for many families and businesses in Ramona, Julian and the surrounding areas. They are experiences that people have never forgotten and still regularly discuss to this day.

When a Fire Comes

Smoke rises in the distance, creeping over the foothills and edging closer and closer to town. At first, it might seem like nothing. Then, the Santa Ana winds pick up, causing the flames to travel faster. Soon, you're being told to evacuate, and everything becomes a blur. You scramble to decide what to take with you and which way to drive, praying the entire time that the fire doesn't reach your home.

Longtime Ramona resident Bonnie Apodaca remembers the 2007 Witch Creek fire well. At home in the outskirts of Ramona, she and her family were getting ready to sit down and watch a football game when they noticed smoke in the distance. Her husband, John, and son, Troy, drove out to see what was going on. Like many residents, they hoped the fire would just burn around them, as the Cedar fire had in 2003.

When they decided to evacuate, they packed up Troy and their daughter, Leanna, and all of their animals — a



2007 Cedar Fire
RAMONA HOME
JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

dog, two rabbits, hermit crabs, fish and parakeets. Hurriedly grabbing household items and paperwork, they did not have much time to pack their vehicles with belongings before leaving their rental home.

First evacuating to San Diego Country Estates and then moving toward Lakeside and El Cajon, they heard from their landlord that the home had been lost to the flames.

"It went up like a fire-cracker," Apodaca says.

After checking their family and all the animals into a motel, they tried to decide what to do next.

Where do you start when your home is gone and you don't have so much as a toothbrush or a coffee cup? Apodaca says that they could not have done it without the support of their friends, family and the community. It was traumatic and tragic, but Ramonans came together to help those who lost things in the fire.

Surviving After a Fire

While staying with friends and receiving generous donations from the community, the

Apodaca family was able to recover from their loss and bought a home in town where they could rebuild their lives.

She said one of the hardest parts was accepting the fact that the fire happened. It was overwhelming and took "a lot of help from family and friends — and faith."

Apodaca says she was fortunate. She did not have to worry about her kids or animals; they all made it out safely.

"When it comes to your life and your home, you find out that things are material," she says.

It does not mean that certain possessions they lost in the fire were not devastating to them, even though they were material items. Her husband, a carpenter, lost all of his tools, and they both lost meaningful antiques passed down from their parents.

"You're supposed to take the important papers, but you look around and want to take things that mean something to you," she says.

Growing up in Ramona, she recalls occasionally seeing smoke rise over the horizon

and packing up their belongings in case of an evacuation. You hope and think that maybe it won't happen to you, she says, but things are different when you are responsible for the care and safety of your family.

The emotional impact and lingering effects of surviving a fire — the fear, worry and anxiety that it will happen again — can be debilitating.

Apodaca says that even though she still sometimes gets agitated at the sight or smell of smoke, "You can't let it rule you or live in fear. You've got to move on and do your best and thank the Lord that you made it out alive." She has been able to overcome such haunting fears and go on to live her life while maintaining a positive outlook.

She also says that in the aftermath of a fire, many people will beat themselves up over forgetting to take a certain thing with them, or questioning why they took one thing and not another.

"Even though you're supposed to be logical, you can't be totally logical in that situation. It is a human being, only doing the best they can."

Preparing For the Next Fire

Fire preparation is a topic that those who live in Southern California must continually examine. Cal Fire recommends three main things when preparing for a fire: a defensible space of 100 feet around your home, an emergency supply kit and a family evacuation plan.

Recommended items for the kit include a supply of

non-perishable food and water for every family member; an extra set of clothing; credit cards or cash; a first aid kit; prescription medication; a flashlight; toilet paper; important documents; extra batteries; and a radio so you can follow how the fire is progressing. None of this means anything if it isn't prepared in advance and easily accessible in the case of an evacuation.

According to Cal Fire, planning your evacuation ahead of time is the best way to stay safe. Discuss beforehand where you will meet, who does what, and what routes you can take to get to safety. If possible, have an emergency contact outside of the area that each person knows to call in the case of separation. Additional information may be found at www.readyforwildfire.org.

The Ramona West End Fire Safe Council is another great resource for information. Their website — www.ramona-westendfiresafecouncil.org — includes a fire evacuation map and a Ramona Fire Go-To Guide.

After her experience in the 2007 fire, Apodaca advises people to be sure to have their paperwork packed and ready to go, and to have an escape route planned. She warns that sometimes the best plans go out the window, because until you go through it, you never know how you're going to react.

"All you can do is say your prayers and try to make the best plan." ■

Gold is Always Brighter *Continued from page 18*

expose this treasure knowing that we were first to lay eyes on it since the time it was placed there by the hand of God — and how beautiful the rosy luster appeared under the desert sun!

Over the following years, Smitty shared his knowledge, memories and companionship as he led us into that mysterious and arid land east of the coastal mountains. We explored the Anza-Borrego, Mojave, Yuha and Yuma deserts. We camped under the open desert sky, cooked over ironwood coals and exchanged tall tales around the campfire, often with only one another and the moody

wind to keep us company.

During those memorable times, we explored mud hills, the ancient shores of Lake Cahuilla, the Badlands and placer fields, the banks of the Colorado, Patton's abandoned World War II Army camps, fish traps, Indian mounds, railroads and ghost towns. We searched often for Pegleg's black gold and found none, but we came away knowing that the search was the true reward.

Smitty was always the optimist and ever the dreamer, continually searching for those fabulous lost mines and his golden treasure. A choice rock, a sun-colored bottle, a twisted root of ironwood or

a faint desert trail that might lead to that curious scar on a distant mountain — all were just as important to him as the most exquisite nugget of gold.

Each summer, when the desert was too hot for comfort, Smitty would pack his meager belongings and return to his hometown in Indiana, where he stayed with family members. Then each year in the fall, he would return to Ramona, and we would resume our exploration of the fascinating desert, searching out new trails and seeking new adventure.

It was in about 1972 that he stopped coming back to Ramona, probably due to his advancing age and physical

ailments that he never mentioned. From time to time, Smitty would write a brief note letting us know what he was doing at home, always saying how much he would like to be back exploring in the open spaces of the alluring desert.

I last saw Smitty in 1980, when two younger friends brought him to Ramona in his own Volkswagen van. We had a memorable visit, he stayed the night in his camper, and then we said goodbye. He visited some other old friends before returning to Indiana.

Death took our gentle friend in 1981. His earthly remains rest in Indiana, but as we return to the peace of

the old desert campsites, we sense his spirit is there. It is in the desert breeze, the quiet solitude and the distant train whistle. It is in the rugged beauty of the land he so loved.

In those moments, his words rang true and we could clearly see the reason for his bond to this lonely land. We realized the meaning of those words he expressed so long ago as we panned out our concentrates at home under the dim light of a rainy day, while yearning to be outside in the sun, exploring a remote desert wash.

Smitty would often remind us, "Gold is always brighter in the desert sun." ■