

Summer 2011

Jesusita Horror Story

by Laurie Guitteau

Are you a fan of horror stories, the scari-er, the better? Well, we have some summer reading for you. Don't be misled by the title, *Jesusita Fire Burnover*. This is a report that details six harrowing incidents that occurred during the 20-minute holocaust that consumed a large swath of Mission Canyon on May 6, 2009. You can read the entire report at wildfirelessons.net/documents/Jesusita_Entrapment_Report.pdf.

This document not only details what happened, it offers recommendations that could have an impact on how similar fires are fought in the future, an impact that has strong implications for homeowners like us who live in the wildland-urban interface.

Anyone who criticized the firefighters for not saving more homes needs to read this report. Throughout the day on May 6, numerous strike teams were assigned to structure protection and spent the day preparing the structures, removing combustible items away from structures, cleaning out gutters, putting foil on vent openings. With no warning, all hell broke loose, and it was a living hell. One hundred foot flames, downed power lines, winds whipping the fire in all

directions—directions that changed constantly—smoke from the burning homes and vegetation obliterating visibility on the few, narrow escape routes and making it difficult, if not impossible, to breathe, embers blowing and igniting structures way ahead of the fire, a hydrant with no water. These are the conditions the firefighters endured. As you read, we are sure you'll agree that it is a miracle no one died.

Fire Fights

After spending the day performing structure protection at 1495 Tunnel (the report erroneously states the address as Spyglass), four firefighters were seriously injured when the crews of two engines were trapped as the fire suddenly made extreme advances toward the Spyglass Ridge Road area about 4 p.m. Two firefighters took refuge in the house, which began to burn. At the same time, the other crew members tried to escape, but their engine was blocked by a wall of fire. Fortunately they finally made it out through a break in the flames, but the two trapped firemen were forced from the house when the glass door of the room they were sheltering in shattered. Surrounded by flames and smoke, they stum-

bled to their engine for shelter, barely making it. They radioed for help, and, miraculously, their strike team leader arrived in time to save their lives. Later, all three men were flown from Cottage Hospital to Grossman Burn Center with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd degree burns. Two of the other crew were treated for smoke inhalation.

Winds gusted between 40–60 miles per hour at the top of Holly Road when an LA County crew, unfamiliar with the terrain, and assigned to structure protection, requested more engines because of the large number of unprotected structures and the increasing wind. Suddenly, extreme fire behavior resulted in multiple fronts, and they discovered that the hydrant system had lost water. Civilians who had refused to evacuate added to their worries. Overrun by fire, five firefighters and five civilians took refuge at 2910 Holly Road. Two firefighters, forced from another home that could not withstand the flames, took refuge at 2921 for about 20 minutes, finally making their way to 2910 to join the others when 2921 began to burn. Another was forced from 2850 as the glass gave way. These eight firefighters and five civil-

Jesusita Horror (cont. p.2)



This home offered the Jesusita Fire considerable fuel in its wooden deck, nearby trees, and unfortunate location at the juncture of a couple of ridgelines. It was destroyed in the fire, and almost took the lives of two firefighters.

PHOTO: Santa Barbara County Fire Department



The property this home sits on got so hot that the propane tank and its safety valve parted company, but enclosed eaves, good defensible space, and a fire-resistant roof helped the house survive Jesusita, not to mention the work of firefighters on-site.

PHOTO: Santa Barbara County Fire Department

Jesusita Horror (cont. from p.1)

ians took refuge for an additional 20 minutes at 2910, bringing in breathing gear as a precaution when the windows cracked from the firestorm outside. Three others took refuge in 2911 as their escape route was blocked. Anyone who visited the upper reaches of Holly Road after the fire marveled that any homes survived. Few did. The wonder is that only one firefighter was hurt and all firefighters and civilians survived. There were moments when none of them thought they would.

Two other harrowing incidents occurred at 1165 E and G Tunnel Road. This is a long, narrow, bumpy road where many of the homes had failed past defensible space inspections. Ventura and Santa Paula firefighters were near the top prepping structures when the firestorm hit. One crew applied foam to their engine to protect it as the fire threatened, and then took refuge briefly at 1165 E, using their breathing apparatus. The firefighters at 1165 G took refuge in their vehicle and used their breathing apparatus and fire shelters until they could move to a safer location. Both homes closest to this house, 1165 A and 1255 Tunnel, were destroyed.

Los Angeles County Fire personnel were assigned structure protection on Palomino Road and prepared the structures and their hoses at 1121 and 1125. Two additional engines arrived with their crews just as the firestorm arrived. One of these engines was able to turn around, but the other could not, and the engine stalled. Trapped, the crew was trying to protect its engine while the other firefighters attempted to assist with their hoses. Overcome by the fire, everyone took refuge at 1125 until the storm passed, then continued fighting the fire and finally were able to restart the engine. The engine had stalled because a burning ember went into the front air intake, burning the air filter, which caused the motor to stall. Need another reason to evacuate early? Despite the efforts of the firefighters, 1125 was destroyed. Fortunately, the firefighters suffered only one injury among them.

Another L.A. County Strike Team was assigned to protect upper Mission Canyon Road, with one engine was assigned to 1433, just above the Botanic Garden. The house was deemed defensible even though the escape route was a narrow, private road. By 3:40 p.m., the conditions had deteriorated much faster and more seriously than anticipated, and the firefighters were forced to take refuge in the house twice to escape the intense heat and smoke, which reduced visibility. One firefighter had to be treated for heat exhaustion and smoke inhalation. The house was saved.

The Real Story

The *Burnover Report* only concerns incidents where firefighters were injured or fire-fighting equipment was damaged or destroyed. If we interviewed each of the firefighters who fought this blaze, we could fill a book with terrifying tales.

The folks who did not evacuate early confirm the horror. On my road, we have three neighbors who barely made it out. One older man, who had lived here for over 50 years and survived the Coyote Fire, almost went over the edge of the road at a curve near a 100-foot drop. The thick smoke had obscured all his familiar landmarks. If he had missed that curve, he would have surely died from fire and smoke. His wife drove out with her windshield burning because the leaves caught in her windshield wipers were on fire. One evacuee described it as driving into jet engine exhaust. Another man on Holly who had his scuba gear ready in his pool because he had planned to stay and fight, changed his mind when he saw those 100-foot flames and the dense, black smoke. He barely made it through that smoke to safety. Another could not leave because fire equipment blocked his driveway.

If this report says nothing more to us, it explains why it is important to leave early. Intense heat, 100-foot flames, total lack of visibility, reduced levels of oxygen, emergency equipment blocking egress, hydrants running dry. Add these factors to a single narrow, winding road out of the canyon and no escape options, and you have a recipe for disaster. If you are skeptical, read any report of the 1991 Oakland Fire in which 26 people died.

No need to worry because we've had our fire? Talk with the folks who were spared from the Tea Fire in November 2008 and then lost their homes in the Jesusita in May 2009.

Firefighting in the Future

Besides reminding us of the importance of timely evacuation, this report raises many questions for Mission Canyon residents. The recommendations after each incident are based on interviews with the personnel involved, as well as other sources. "Lessons Learned" on page 66 is meant for fire personnel, but it certainly relates to us as residents. They note that wildland fires generally occur under high wind conditions, creating rapidly moving fire and extreme fire behavior, behavior that can quickly surround firefighters with flames and dense smoke. Escape routes and safety zones are easily compromised when firefighters remain too long trying to defend a structure. The impor-

tance of mobility in fighting structure fires is stressed. Structure engines are larger and less mobile than wildland engines. "Consider actions in the deployment of firefighting equipment that will allow for rapid response to the changing fire environment, as well as maintaining the ability to escape to a safety zone." If this advice had been followed during the Jesusita Fire, few engines would have been up our narrow roads.

When flames reach the height of 100 feet as they did during the Jesusita wildfire, a safety zone with a distance separation of 400 feet from firefighters to flame is recommended in official fire-fighting handbooks. How many places in Mission Canyon would provide that degree of safety for firefighters? This report recommends, "Safety zones must be large enough for the fire to pass without the need for additional protection and be able to accommodate all firefighters and apparatus. Structures should not be considered safety zones. They are survival zones to only be used as a last resort."

Would you willingly go up many of our roads knowing a holocaust was coming? If these recommendations do influence firefighting techniques, doesn't it seem logical that more thought will be given in the future to protect the lives of firefighters by being more careful where they are deployed during a wildfire? It is important to recognize that the vast majority of firefighters in a wildfire are not local. They are from all over the state with no knowledge of the neighborhood and, in many cases, without accurate maps. If you live on one of the many narrow, winding roads in Mission Canyon, is the width of the road reduced even more by ornamental vegetation? Are there turnouts and places for a large fire truck to turn around?

Do you have a large, cleared space where firefighters would be 400 feet from flames? Could engines move quickly from house to house in your neighborhood? Can your road and your driveway accommodate a large structure fire engine? The answer to these questions for the vast majority of Mission Canyon residents is "no." Does that mean the firefighters won't be here the next time? No, but it does mean that as residents of a wildland-urban interface, we need to be realistic. We must accept that we live with the threat of fire, and that we must accept responsibility for doing all that we can to make our home more fire resistant and our property safer for any firefighter who may try to defend it.

Protect Your Home

This admonishment is on the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned website (<http://wildfirelessons.net>), "If fire condi-

tions render firefighting strategy and tactics untenable, get out of the way. Firefighters must have the ability to recognize when ‘all the water in the world’ will not stop a fire. Accountability for the defensibility of homes must lie with the homeowner. Firefighters need to know and believe that their personal safety is the number one priority.”

It is disconcerting to read how many of the homes burned during Jesusita were homes that had burned in the Coyote Fire, the last big Mission Canyon fire. Captain David Sadecki of Santa Barbara County Fire emphasizes, “defensible space is the single biggest thing that a homeowner can accomplish to improve their home’s surviv-

ability during a wildfire.” If you doubt that, look at the homes along Spyglass Ridge. You would expect them to burn, being on a ridge and directly in the line of fire when flames exploded, yet none did. Some damage yes, but none were lost. The homeowners on Spyglass work as a community to keep their ridge defensible, and it paid huge dividends in this horrific fire. Look up there to see what serious defensible space looks like.

For specific suggestions for your home, call Station 15 (681-5515) and ask them for their friendly advice on how you can make your home and property safer. County Fire’s online website, sbcfire.com, links to many publications and websites with more infor-

mation about fire-resistant construction, tools, and vegetation.

We plan to explore specific options in more detail in future newsletters, and we invite any of you who have found ways to increase the fire resistance of your home to contact me (guiteau@cox.net) so we can share the information.

The reality is that firefighters can only do so much in a wind-whipped, out-of-control fire. They are men and women with families, too, and no one’s home is worth a life. The same is true of residents. Think twice before you ignore an evacuation warning. Our recent horror story had a happy ending. We need to keep it that way.

N E W S I N B R I E F

Walking Sans Sidewalks

People of all ages are out walking in the Canyon, and that’s a good thing. To their credit, there are some folks walking to and from work every day. The vegetation in some places causes them to go way out into the road and stop traffic (if they are lucky). If your home is along the road, please cut back enough vegetation so that people can fit into the right of way.

If it is a maintenance problem—just remove the stuff!

It would be great if we had pedestrian and bike paths on our public roads, but since we don’t, we should be making them as safe as we can. The folks who walk are keeping vehicles off the road, which benefits all of us as well as promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Our Brush Day Heroes

Kudos to David and Mario Borgatello, owners of MarBorg Industries, for all they do for us. Once again, they donated roll-offs, drivers, and a porta-potty to make Brush Day on June 11 a huge success. Dan Upton of Upton Construction and his front loader allowed volunteers to enjoy the day more as a social outing than the usual brutal workday. What a difference machines make! The Botanic Garden supplied Jason, one of their gardeners, and a truck to help folks get brush to the dumpsters, and Cesar Trujillo, owner of Encino Landscapes, donated his time, his energy, and his truck as well. The MCA Gardeners cut back overgrown vegetation to widen the walkway, and to expose the beautiful stone wall at the corner of Mission Canyon and Foothill roads. In total, 27.93 tons of brush were taken to the dump, where our fees were waived, thanks to Supervisor Salud Carbajal. Santa Barbara Woman’s Club donates the use of its parking lot for us each



The MCA Gardeners doing their part for Brush Day.
PHOTO: Cass Ensborg

year, and Fire Station 15 eliminates all traces of our activity at the end of the day. Brush Day is truly a community working together.

Hotshots Gone

The loss of the County’s Hotshot team based at Lake Cachuma was felt most keenly by the Tepusquet community, which relied on the young and energetic crew for vegetation management services, but county-wide, parks, roadsides, and other areas will also soon feel their loss to the Fire Department’s budget cuts this year. The group’s captains moved into the regular Fire Department, but the safety standards coordinator—a retired forest service battalion chief—was laid off. County Fire’s air program continues, however, and the department recently annexed parcels in Los Padres to add some revenue to its depleted balance sheet.

Regarding parking enforcement in the canyon, we’ve learned that Officer Rob Stuva is off community relations and now training new officers, but remains the primary contact for parking issues (M-F, 8am-5pm, 967-1234). For best response, call CHP from your landline telephone; outside business hours, call 477-4174. The two officers who

patrol the canyon also cover the 101 from the Ventura County line to Las Positas, and will respond, barring emergencies elsewhere.

Meadow Terrace Removed

Spring and summer activities at the Botanic Garden have included the restoration of the Meadow area, including the removal of the terrace. The Cultural Landscape Master Plan project kicked off August 3 with a presentation by Charles Birnbaum, president of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, and Susan Van Atta, a S.B. landscape architect. The period of significance has been determined to be from 1936 to 1950, and the plan should be completed by the end of the year.

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*Chair of committee

The MCA Newsletter was prepared with the help of Lee Anne Dollison, graphics, production and photography.

Board meetings are held the first Tuesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. at the Natural History Museum’s MacVeagh House. All are welcome to attend.



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Jesusita Lessons Learned Can Narrow Escapes Teach Us Safety Lessons?

The Consequences of Using Rat Poison

by Susan Davidson

Coyotes hunt and eat rodents, as do hawks, foxes, bobcats, snakes, skunks, owls, and domestic dogs and cats. These predators keep rodent populations under control, but they often die after they eat poisoned rats or gophers. The rodent population increases. People use even more poison. This is not a wise solution.

National Park Service researcher and UCLA ecologist Seth Riley concluded in 2005 that poisoned rodents were affecting, in turn, bobcats, coyotes, and mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains area. Coyotes had been observed ingesting nine to ten rodents a day, and were themselves prey for mountain lions. A long-term study of bobcats observed a strange die-off that started in 2002. Mange was the unlikely culprit, and when biologists found concentrations of anticoagulants in the cats' livers, they began to suspect the poison compromised the animals' immune systems and their ability to fight the mange. Other studies worldwide have documented the



This baby coyote ate a poisoned rodent and would have died a slow agonizing death without the help of S.B. Animal Control, as reported in *EdHat.com*.

PHOTO: Santa Barbara County Animal Control

poisoning of hawks, kit foxes, weasels, and owls with anticoagulants, which are found in products like d-Con and Tomcat.

Trapping is the alternative to poison if care is taken to protect pets and other wildlife. (Poisoning symptoms in dogs and cats are quite different. Descriptions can be found at petmd.com/dog/conditions or petmd.com/cat/conditions. Scroll to "R" for rat poison.) Large rat traps, baited with

peanut butter, can be placed under milk crates with a heavy brick on top. This allows rats to go in for the bait, but prevents other animals from getting hurt. Battery-operated "Rat Zappers" are also popular, less messy, and effective.

To decrease rat traffic, it helps to eliminate their food. At night, take in your bird feeder, and poultry and pet foods. Wrap the base of fruit trees with aluminum sheeting and keep fruit off the ground. Remove vinca and ivy from your property because rats hide in these places. Cut back vegetation that can be a ladder to the roof. Keep lids on trash containers and make sure they're tight. A good website to learn about rats, their habits, and how to safely and professionally control them is at unitedwildlife.com/animalsrat.html.

A more detailed article on this subject can be found at MissionCanyon.org. We invite readers to write webmaster@missioncanyon.org with tips on how to safely get rid of rodents, and we'll post them below the article.