

THE ALPINE SUN SHOPPER – October 3, 2013
Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society

FIRE!

At this time of year, many residents of our community pause to reflect on years past and what can happen when a spark reaches the dry chaparral in our area—wildfires of epic proportion. I think most of us are on alert for the dangers as we remember fires of the past.

In her book, *Alpine—History of a Mountain Settlement*, Beatrice LaForce writes, “You will note, if you read this history, how many accounts of pioneer homes and other buildings have ended with the words... ‘destroyed by fire...’ Wooden structures were almost always doomed when fire struck for there was no means of saving them in these pre-fire-department days. Forest fires swept away some but more were leveled by the accidents common to the times—open fireplaces sparking the roof or hearth rugs, overheated wood ranges, upset candles and oil burning lamps, and even then, the number one fire menace—careless smokers.”

The truth of this statement is evident as we think of the many early buildings in Alpine that were consumed by fire. Among them Charles Emery’s Alpine Store in 1904 and C. V. Hilton’s Store in 1933. Benjamin Arnold’s Los Robles home, converted to a sanatorium after his death, lost to fire in the 1920s—today only the stately rock entrance remains. In 1955 the historic Ye Alpine Tavern burned to the ground. The building that was the Japatul School until 1947 was lost in the 1970 Laguna Fire. While the loss of these buildings was terrible, it doesn’t compare to the loss of life and property sustained by raging wildfires—most fueled by deadly Santa Ana winds.

Jim Hinds, local military researcher and Archivist for the Alpine Historical Society, provides the following information regarding a deadly east county fire, “On October 2, 1943, 113 Marines from Camp Pine Valley and 10th Cavalry at Camp Lockett, were committed to the Hauser Creek Fire in the Cleveland National Forest. As the Marines, under forest service supervision, were cutting a fire line off the main road a spot fire erupted blocking their escape route back down to the road. Four Marines were able to escape safely to the road. Almost all of the Marines sustained various degrees of burns and were evacuated to the Camp Lockett hospital. As evening approached, the survivors returned to Pine Valley. Relieved by the 28th Cavalry, the 10th Cavalry returned to Camp Lockett. The Army would carry the fight day and night. During the second day a Cavalryman lost his life in the fire. In total three Marines lost their lives on the fire line, four more in the Lockett hospital. Of those evacuated to San Diego, two more died over the next five months. In total during the five day fire, nine Marines, one soldier and possibly one civilian lost their lives in the fire. Owing to war time manpower shortages, military personnel were utilized to fight wildfires. They had received training from the forest service, and the Hauser Creek Fire was not the first fire that personnel from Pine Valley and Camp Lockett had been sent on. The fire consumed 16,000 acres.”

Ms. LaForce wrote of the 1970 Laguna Fire, “Old timers cannot remember ever having seen as fierce and prolonged a fire as the terror that drove over us with the wind and blackened skies last September.” The Laguna Fire was started by downed power lines in the Kitchen Creek area of the Laguna Mountains on September 26, 1970. Within 24 hours it had burned westward about 30 miles to the outskirts of El Cajon and Spring Valley. The fire killed eight people, 382 homes were lost and 175,425 acres were consumed. At that time it was the second largest wildfire in the history of California—the first being the Santiago Canyon Fire of 1889. Ten homes were

lost in Alpine along with many out buildings, corrals, and garages. Hardest hit in the 1970 fire were Harbison Canyon, 114, and Crest, 117 homes lost. Fire Chief Dale Bennett stated in his official report, “We had hard driving winds with gusts up to 85 miles per hour driving out of the northeast and changing around to the west. The driving fire storm reduced visibility to zero.”

This month marks the tenth anniversary of the Cedar Fire—the worst wildfire in California’s history. October 25, 2003 is a date many Alpine residents will never forget. Images of the fire and its terrible aftermath will be with those of us who lived through it forever. This monster was caused by a lost hunter who lit a fire which then burned out-of-control. The fire killed 15 people burned 280,278 acres, and reduced 2,820 buildings (including 2,232 homes) to rubble before being fully contained on November 3. Driving down South Grade Road on October 26th, the sight of the smoldering remains of peoples’ homes was a grim reminder to all of the devastation faced by so many of our friends and neighbors. It was an eerie feeling to see a mass of rubble with a fully intact home right next door—who knows what determined which homes burned and which survived. In the aftermath, the community went into action. Churches opened their doors and served as donation centers for the clothing, food and basic necessities needed by their less fortunate neighbors and FEMA locations were opened to help process claims. On November 4, Marine One landed in Harbison Canyon and President George W. Bush toured the devastation and consoled families. From our home we saw the helicopter land and felt an overwhelming sense of pride in our nation for this caring gesture.

A collection of photographs donated by many individuals showing the horror of the 2003 Fire is available on the Historical Society website, www.alpinehistory.org, Historical Research, People/Places/Events, Cedar Firestorm 2003. Binders with these photographs are also available for viewing at the museum.

When the fire siege of 2007 started, it was almost surreal. How could this be happening again? The Witch Creek Fire, caused by downed power lines, burned 197,990 acres, destroyed 1,040 homes, and took the lives of two people. The Harris Fire burned 90,440 acres, resulted in five deaths and destroyed 206 homes. Both fires started in San Diego County on October 21, 2007.

The fires we mentioned are but a few of the major wildfires in Southern California’s history. As we look back at these devastating events, there is hope that lessons were learned that will help in future such events. Many of those who suffered loss recovered, but few have forgotten the still vivid images of these fires. Let’s be ever vigilant!

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Ye Alpine Tavern - 1954



The remains of the Tavern – September 17, 1955.