

"BEWITCHED, BOTHERED, BUT NOT BEWILDERED" is the first chapter of my proposed book, **"SURVIVING THE FIRESTORM AND ITS AFTERMATH"** that recounts my experiences during and after the 2007 Witch Creek Blaze. This firestorm burnt large swaths of San Diego County destroying over 400 homes and killing ten people.

BEWITCHED, BOTHERED, BUT NOT BEWILDERED

BY Norman Magid, MD

Any catastrophe, no matter how immense, is fodder for the writer. ..Anonymous

"Evacuate immediately, the fire is close by!" The dreaded call, a reverse 911 message from the Poway fire department, awakened us at 4:30 AM, Monday October 22, 2007. Thank God, we had prepared for evacuation! Both cars had already been packed! Our friends, the Tedlows in Solana Beach, had already been alerted to our possible arrival. I drove the 99 Toyota and Elaine followed in the 2002 Camry as we headed west on the 56 to what we hoped would be refuge from the flames. Despite the calls for immediate evacuation, there were few cars on the road. Why? Were people still packing? Staying to fight the fires? Or did they not get the call to evacuate? Later we were to find that all three reasons accounted for the early sparse response.

Within ten minutes of our arrival at the Tedlows, a familiar car appeared in their driveway. It belonged to another former New Jersey couple, our friends, the Steins, from Rancho Bernardo. They received no warning call, no reverse 911 alert from the fire department. Sid sleeping fitfully heard horns blasting away at 4 AM, opening the front door he saw fire attack houses across the street. To his horror when he looked up his own cypress palms that were ablaze. There was no time to pack! Sid and Iris jumped into one of their cars and fled to the Tedlows. They were convinced that their house was gone. The Steins, longtime residents of RB, had packed their cars for evacuation many times in the past and had never needed to leave. This

time they did not prepare. As Sid lamented, "The fire had started a little more than 12 hours earlier to the east of Ramona at least 20 miles from my house. How could it have moved so fast?"

Our introduction to the devastation of the Santa Ana wind driven fires came with the Cedar Inferno of 2003. The flames had spread to Poway from the East eventually reaching Espola Road less than 2 miles from our house. Earlier that day we packed for evacuation awaiting the call to flee. We spoke to our friends, the Tedlows, old California hands, having lived in San Diego since 1987. "Don't worry," they assured us, "The Santa Ana winds die down at night and, if they don't start the next day, the fires will be stopped short of your place." But worry we did! We could see the flames coming over ridges and hills from Ramona. Fortunately for us, the winds did stop that night. The next day they were very mild permitting the fire crews to bring the Cedar Blaze under control. But it was a close call! A week later we surveyed the damage in the Scripps Ranch area. Scattered through the community were quite a few houses burnt to the ground interspersed amongst many that were untouched or only partially damaged. This was a very sobering encounter for us Easterners whose experience with fire destruction is on a much more limited scale. In the East one or two buildings are destroyed; rarely a whole city block will be consumed. Never did we see multiple dwellings burnt to the ground scattered in many different sections of the county. In the East, fires are rarely driven by the fierce winds; this enables the fire-fighters to contain the inferno before it causes widespread damage.

Strongly affected by this devastation, we decided to be better prepared for the next Santa Ana fire. Elaine typed up a protocol for possible evacuation. I marked the boxes to be saved with red tape. Then we addressed the improvements needed to reduce the possibility of our house burning. Most dangerous was the highly combustible wooden shake roof of the next-door house

on the right, the East side. The owner had not been the most cooperative of neighbors either to the previous owners or to us. When I pointed out his very inflammable roof, he said, "It doesn't leak and it is code." We called in the Poway authorities, who after examining our neighbor's roof, agreed that it was a fire hazard. But they also admitted that it was consistent with the building code of Poway. They were powerless to force him to change the roof.

Our preparations would be put to severe test in just four years! Fierce Santa Ana winds with speeds initially of 30 to 40 miles an hour, and with gusts exceeding 80 miles at times, began on Friday, October 19, 2007. Our trees took the brunt of this onslaught with many limbs down. The heavy lawn furniture was easily tossed about. By Saturday a disastrous fire had started in Santa Monica. Sunday dawned clear and sunny, but the strong winds were still blowing. Then word came of a fire in distant East County at Harris near Tecate. This conflagration, now known as the Harris Fire, was many miles away, too far to be of immediate concern to us. Then about 1:30 in the afternoon a report came in of a new, small brush fire to the east of Ramona, near the Witch Creek. It was less than 100 acres, but due to the high winds, the fire-fighters were having difficulty containing the blaze. The next communication, a few hours later, announced that this blaze, now called the Witch Creek Fire (a fitting name for a conflagration starting the week of Halloween) was totally out of control and was spreading West with a vengeance driven by the forceful Santa Ana winds.

Despite a sky overcast by smoke and filled with the odor of burning brush, Elaine and I attempted to take an afternoon walk. Our favorite place, nearby Blue Sky Reservation, was blocked at its entrance. Neighboring Lake Poway was also closed to visitors. This was an ominous sign: these were canyon routes from Ramona and previous corridors for Santa Ana driven fires to spread west! It was now obvious to me: another Cedar Fire had returned! We

headed home and started packing both cars. On our calendar was a wedding in Boston in two weeks, so I started packing with this trip in mind and finished by filling my suitcases with additional clothes. My wife's dress for the wedding was being altered at the seamstress. We then went down Elaine's protocol packing essential items and stowing the red-marked boxes in our cars. Among the list were our rolodex and personal telephone directories, both of which were to prove invaluable in the following weeks. Elaine packed her jewelry and I saved my writing papers. By midnight both cars were fully packed. There would be only 4 and half hours of restless sleep before the evacuation call came. A half hour later we were on the road to our safe haven on the Coast.

It was a most unhappy and apprehensive group which gathered at the Tedlows' in Solana Beach. Sid and Iris Stein, without having a chance to pack the barest of necessities, were convinced their house had been consumed by the flames. We became upset when television reported that the flames had reached our street, St. Andrews Drive. Our hosts, Dave and Joan Tedlow, wondered if they too would be evacuated. The fire had already invaded nearby Rancho Santa Fe. We tried to rest, but with the others still glued to the nearby loud TV, sleeping became difficult. Later that morning about 11:00 AM we heard: "There is an order for mandatory evacuation of adjacent Del Mar and voluntary evacuation of Solano Beach is recommended." Our safe haven was no longer a refuge from the Santa Ana driven flames! The Steins and Tedlows decided to go north to Carlsbad; Elaine and I chose to go further up the coast to Dana Point in Orange County.

The Blue Lantern Inn at Dana Point had only one room available and that for only one night; we were lucky to get it. With a mass of evacuees from the San Diego Fire (at one point reaching well over a half million people) almost all the available rooms from Los Angeles south

to the Mexican border appeared to be taken and the evacuation centers were overflowing with people ordered out of their homes. The sky at Dana Point while better than that in San Diego was still overcast and one could still detect the aroma of burning brush. A new fire had started in the nearby Irvine Mountains, but the Inn provided a decent place to rest and refresh.

Support and comfort came from all quarters, friend and stranger alike. Overhearing our conversation in a restaurant in Dana Point, a woman completely unknown to us offered to put Elaine and me in her home or on her boat. We thanked her for her kind offer, but said it wasn't needed. On our return to the Blue Lantern there was a hand written letter reiterating her offer. This was the harbinger of good will and support that would come our way in the days to come. We were to see the best face of America, the one that offers generous help to victims of calamities both here in the USA and throughout the world.

Thanks to cell phones we were able to maintain contact with our family and friends as we wandered from refuge to refuge. The Tedlows assured us that their home in Solano Beach was now safe to return to and again offered to put us up if we were willing to accept living without hot water. Their gas had been turned off when they evacuated and would not be back in service for several days. We gladly accepted, and Wednesday afternoon we drove back to Solano Beach.

Before we evacuated on Monday, we were assured by Gateway Gardens, the assisted living facility in Poway where, Cele Swotes, Elaine's 100 year old mother resided: "Yes, that they had plans to evacuate all their people if necessary. The entire group would be moved to the evacuation center at Mira Mesa High School.;" Over the next two days we could not get any news about Cele. When we called Gateway Gardens, there was no answer. Contacting the Red Cross and the Mira Mesa Center afforded us no information as to her whereabouts. She was not listed as being in any of the evacuation centers. It was late Wednesday evening, when we finally

located the entire Gateway Gardens group. They were living in one of Mira Mesa's temporary school buildings now filled with about 50 cots to provide sleeping facilities. Two Gateway administrators were onsite and many of the employees were on hand to provide help for their elderly wards. We found Cele sitting on the porch of the barracks kibitzing with two of the caregivers. She welcomed us with a big smile. "No, she didn't know why she was there. And, yes, she was looking forward to returning to her own rooms." Later when she was back at Gateway Gardens, Elaine again asked Cele about her move. Her mother now remembered that they were told that they were going on a camp adventure and that she was grateful that we had come to visit her there.