

# THE WALKER FAMILY'S MEMORIES OF FIRESTORM 2003

by Carol Walker

On October 25, 2003, the time changed from daylight savings time to standard time, so before bed we changed the clocks back. Charley, our dog, didn't recognize the time change, so around 5:00 a.m. (standard time) on October 26, 2003, he woke me whining to go out. I told him he needed to get on the new time schedule, but got up to let him out (our usual practice). I went into the family room and opened the blinds. The scene in front of me was incredible. The tops of the entire mountain span that can be viewed from our family room were on fire. It looked rather like the world was on fire. I woke Paul and we viewed the scary scene together.

Santa Ana winds were blowing that morning, and the potted plants on the deck were blown over from the force of the winds. These winds, hot and fierce, blow from the east and are devastating when combined with fire. The winds were so high that Charley would not go outside—he stayed in with us. San Diego had suffered through several years of drought and the dry brush, combined with the high winds, provided ample fuel for a firestorm.

While we watched the progression of the fire, we also took steps to prepare in the event we needed to evacuate. Early in the morning this seemed a very unlikely thing; however, we wanted to be prepared. Paul went down to the lower yard and hooked our travel trailer up to the truck. We would have a place to stay in the event we were evacuated. I gathered things up in the house—important papers, pictures, etc. We spent the morning watching the progression of the fire and watching news coverage of the fire. The news coverage mainly centered upon the fire in the Ramona and Scripps Ranch areas. No mention was made that the fire was descending upon Blossom Valley, Crest, Harbison Canyon and Alpine. We could see it, and e-mailed the news stations; however, they never broadcast this information. In retrospect, it appears that had announcements been made regarding the advance of the fire toward the eastern communities, added preparation and defense might have been possible.

The fire raced over the crest of the mountains and down toward Interstate 8. As the morning progressed, the speed in which the fire was descending increased. Around noon, the advance of the fire and its magnitude was evident. We began packing in earnest. Pictures, photo albums, a few clothes, dog food and cat food and other necessities were put into the Durango. We decided that if the fire crossed Interstate 8, we would leave—whether we were told to evacuate or not. Our plan was, in the event we had to leave, to drive to a recreational vehicle park in El Cajon for the night. We made some serious mistakes in this area. We didn't fill the trailer with water—a big mistake and we didn't fill the vehicles with fuel—an even bigger mistake! Since our plan was to drive a short distance to El Cajon, it seemed logical that we would not use the gasoline we had and that we could fill the trailer with water at the park.

Around 2:00 p.m. the fire jumped Interstate 8 around the Dunbar Lane Exit. The flames were huge—we learned later they were sixty feet high—and advanced at an incredible rate up from the freeway. It was obvious that this fire was hugely out of control and we were in for a serious fight. We decided to leave. Unfortunately, the majority of the residents of Alpine were also trying to leave at the same time. The roads were jammed with cars, trailers, horse trailers and motorcycles. Traffic was almost at a standstill. Interstate 8 had been closed to through traffic at this time. The area of Crown Hills, on the north side of the freeway, faced mandatory evacuation. The only way out of Alpine was Dehesa Road or east on Interstate 8. We decided to go Dehesa Road to Greenfield Drive and out to El Cajon. Our long trek began. Paul and Charley drove in the truck and pulled the trailer; Little Girl, our cat, and I were in the Durango. We headed out for what we thought was a short ride to El Cajon.

Because of the traffic, it took over two hours to get almost to Greenfield Drive. Then the unimaginable happened. The fire jumped the road, crested the hill in front of us and bore down toward us. The entire line of traffic was told to turn around and head back from whence we came! Eegads—what to do! My gas tank registered less than one quarter full and we had just been in a line of traffic for over two hours. Now we had to go back and fire was coming down the hill toward us. Very scary stuff, here! We decided to drive back to Alpine and get fuel and then head east on Interstate 8. Another hour or so and we made it to Alpine. What a relief! We drove straight to the gas station and found that all power was out and gas could not be pumped. What a downer! What to do? Try to make it to Pine Valley. This was a very good plan; however, hundreds of other vehicles were trying to do the same thing. On we went!

During this time our cell phone was very busy. Family members and friends were calling to find out if we were all right. Now lots of people knew our predicament—lines of traffic, no gas, roads blocked and darkness upon us! When we got to the Pine Valley exit there was another huge line of traffic. It turns out that the majority of these cars were headed to the gas station in Pine Valley! We were afraid I'd run out of gas on the off ramp, so we pulled off onto the side of the road (along with many, many others).

Since we had taken no drinking water, and by this time were both thirsty and hungry, Paul decided to walk into Pine Valley and see what he could learn. He returned, over an hour later, with energy bars to eat and water to drink! Charley and Little Girl appreciated the water—we had taken their food with us. The energy bars tasted good too! By this time, it was completely dark and the traffic had died down, so we decided to drive into Pine Valley. By the time we got there, you guessed it, no power, no gas pumping! Good grief! What to do? We decided to call the Automobile Club to see if they could send someone out to us with gasoline. I explained the situation to the lady on the phone and she told me, very cheerily, "No problem, we'll be there in about twenty minutes." We waited and we waited and we waited. Finally, after an hour Paul called the Automobile Club to see what was going on. Once again we were told, "No problem—we're on our way." Again we waited. Nothing. Finally, the lady from the Automobile Club called to say they could not get through. She told us to flag down a highway patrolman or a

policeman and tell them our story. The problem was, we were among many people in Pine Valley with no gas and there were absolutely no officials of any kind in sight. All the officials were helping with the fires in other areas. Nothing to do, but go to sleep and try again in the morning!

We prepared for “bed” in the trailer. We put Little Girl’s sandbox in the shower in the bathroom, placed a big pillow on the floor in the bathroom and strategically placed her food and water in the little remaining floor space. She was very content in the small space and curled up on her pillow after she finished eating her dinner! She even purred very loudly when we went in to visit her!

Charley is used to camping in the trailer, so he was fine. The only different thing for Charley was a cat in the bathroom. That was extremely interesting to him, so we propped Little Girl’s cat carrier up against the pocket door to the bathroom to ensure Charley didn’t try to get in there to see what was up. Because the trailer was on a slant, we placed the cushions from the couches on the trailer floor, got out sleeping bags and tried to go to sleep. Charley made himself comfortable on the cushions—so we were three on the cushion bed! Sleep was very difficult—for one of us, impossible. The reports on the radio said Descanso, the town immediately west of Pine Valley, was being evacuated. That was extremely troublesome. What would we do if Pine Valley were to be evacuated? More scary stuff.

At long last the night was over. We got up around 3:30 a.m. and tried to think of what to do. Paul thought of the Golden Acorn Casino, about fifteen miles east of Pine Valley, so he called to inquire if they had available gasoline. You guessed it—no power, they could not pump gas. In desperation, Paul called young Paul at 4:00 in the morning and asked if he could try to get to us with gasoline. Pam also was thinking of driving from Arizona to deliver gas to us. Young Paul said he would do his best to get to Pine Valley and would bring all the gasoline he could carry. Paul and Paul talked and decided that the best strategy would be for us to try to get to Buckman Springs Road, about six miles east of Pine Valley. This would place us further away from the oncoming fire. The route to Buckman Springs Road was mainly downhill, so they felt both vehicles would be able to make it without running out of gasoline.

Off we went-- Charley back in the truck with Paul, still pulling the trailer, and Little Girl and me in the Durango, no gasoline to speak of and a fire advancing on us from the rear. Buckman Springs Road never looked so good when we arrived! We parked on the north side of the freeway and settled in for a long wait. We walked Charley, talked to Little Girl and Paul even slept a little. The cell phone service was not operational at this location, so we could contact no one. This was a little scary!

As young Paul was getting ready to leave his house, he heard that a portion of Interstate 8 had been reopened. He decided to try to make it to Pine Valley—a very gutsy thing to do! He made it as far as Lake Jennings Park Road. The freeway had again been closed because of flare-ups. He exited the freeway and told a highway patrolman of our predicament. The highway patrolman told him he could try back roads and wished him

luck. Off he went—through Blossom Valley (an area that was devastated by the fire), onto Old Highway 80, all the time pushing east. When he got to Alpine he decided to go up to our house to see if it was still there. There were many, many houses burned on the way up the hill, but our house had been spared. He got out and walked in our back yard and then returned to his truck to complete his journey. He drove up to the Willows Road freeway entrance and there was no one there to stop him from going onto the freeway. He decided to chance it. Onto the freeway he went—next stop, Buckman Springs Road!

Meanwhile, back on Buckman Springs Road the parents waited! Paul was napping in the front seat of the truck, Little Girl was in her carrier in the Durango and I decided to take Charley for another walk. I got out of the truck and started to get Charley out, when a white truck pulled up and the driver honked. I couldn't believe he was there—and so soon! I woke Paul and we ran to meet him! I never in all my life have seen anyone who looked as good as young Paul did at that moment! Our night of fear was almost over—he brought sixteen gallons of gasoline, an ice chest full of food, water for all four of us and news that our house had survived the fire! Such wonderful news and such a daring trip by our hero. We'll never forget what young Paul did for us that morning!

The men filled the tanks of both vehicles with gas, we drank water, loaded Charley back in the truck and we each took our assigned vehicle to start the trip back down the hill. At this time, the freeway was open and we thought we had it made. Wrong once again! At the Japatul Road turnoff, the highway patrol had closed the freeway. There were hundreds of cars lined up along the freeway and the off ramps waiting to head west on Interstate 8. We joined them. Paul and Paul again talked and decided to try and take the back way into Alpine—along Japatul Road. They went and talked to a highway patrolman who told them that as far as he knew, the road was open. We headed out again—this time, on back roads. Many cars followed us! As we got closer to Alpine, the smoke became denser and denser. It was as dark as night, even though it was before noon, and the air was so smoky it was extremely difficult to breathe. On we went, hoping for the best. Twice during this trip we went through barricades that warned “Road Closed”. These roads were not manned with officials, and the men felt the signs were there from the day before—that the main fire danger had passed. That proved to be true.

We reached Tavern Road and drove to South Grade Road and drove down South Grade toward the freeway. As we got closer to the freeway we began to see some of the destruction of the Cedar Fire. Homes we knew well were burned to the ground. Some escaped the fire—others did not. The fire was selective. One house would look like nothing had happened; the house next door would be gone. It was extremely difficult to see—smoke was still rising in many of the burned-out areas—hot spots were everywhere among smoldering debris. The radio reported that Interstate 8 at Dunbar was closed, but when we reached it we were able to get on the freeway. The hard part was truly behind us. I called Wendee on the cell phone and she got in touch with the others to let them know we were on our way.

The next two nights we “camped” in front of Paul and Torrey’s house in San Carlos. We couldn’t yet return to Alpine as fire flare-ups were still occurring and the power was off in all of Alpine. The power, in fact, was off for six days after the fire.

The classes in all the schools in San Diego County were closed for a full week. Because of this, Paul and I were with Ashleigh and Zachery and, when Torrey worked, with Cameron and Kacy. It was so smoky outside that we had to stay indoors with all the windows closed. Breathing was very difficult with all the smoke. The sky was eerie—dark with a huge red sun. This lasted for days.

On Thursday, we moved to the recreational vehicle park in El Cajon that we had intended to go to on Sunday! There we had full hook-ups and a dump station! We think the animals, by this time, thought we were now living in the trailer! They settled in.

Friday, Paul checked out of the trailer park and took the trailer and Charley home. Everything was fine then, but we still had no power. He came back to La Mesa late in the morning and Cameron, Ashleigh, Zach, Kacy, Amelia (a friend of Ashleigh’s) and the grandparents went out to lunch and to a movie in the afternoon. Amelia’s mom is a teacher and she had been called into work unexpectedly, so Amelia joined us for the day. Zach, Cameron, Papa and I had Rubio’s for lunch, Kacy and Ashleigh had McDonald’s and Amelia had pizza! All of it was good. Then we went to see “Good Boy” a cute story about a dog. It was an enjoyable day. When the parents got home from work, Paul and I headed back to Alpine. Little Girl was finally going home! She had spent the day in Wendee and Jerry’s bedroom. When we arrived, Paul hooked up the generator and we were good to go.

That evening we worked on the refrigerator. Everything that had been in the freezer and the refrigerator had to be thrown away. What a mess! The amount of soot surrounding the house was unbelievable. Paul blew soot off the deck, washed down the deck, swept the deck and started over again. It lasted for days. Piles and piles of ash. At ten o’clock that night, the power came back on! We were whole once again.

We knew so many people who were evacuated during the fires of 2003. Not only was the Cedar Fire raging in our area, but another fire was destroying much of Valley Center where Jeff, Betsy, Josh and Jeremy Abell, our nephew and his family, live. The Abells were evacuated the same day we left our home and could not return for over a week. Their home, thankfully, was spared. Further north, in Crestline, Mike and Carolyn Kleman and their children, my brother Jim’s son and his family, were also evacuated because of the San Bernardino fire—an arson fire. They too were among the lucky ones; however, their home was in escrow at the time of the fire and the sale fell through as a result. Friends Linda and Jim Walker and Frank and Cindy Sweeney were evacuated from Tierra Santa, Kathy and Joe Cady from Scripps Ranch, Victoria and Tim Kuebler from Ramona, Ken and Janice Horton from San Carlos and all our neighbors and friends in Alpine.

Six of the men on our street stayed behind and fought the fire as it got close to our house. They used fire hose that was at a construction site, connected it to the fire hydrant on our corner and fought hot spots as they came up. The fire came over the hill to MacKenna Street (the street that forks to the left at our corner) and over MacKenna down toward the freeway. The roof on the house two doors from ours caught fire and the fire was extinguished by these heroes before it did major damage. Within two weeks of the fire, that neighbor replaced his wood-shake roof with a tile roof. A report in the local newspaper credited the Alpine Heights/Via Corina volunteers with preventing more tragic losses.

We were among the lucky ones. While we had some uncomfortable times—we had a place to stay, loving family and friends surrounding us, and a home to come back to. So many others were not as fortunate. Natalie's former husband, Nathan, his pregnant wife Annie and little girl Samantha lost their home and all their belongings. Debbie, one of Wendee and Pam's best friends, had lost her childhood home on Arnold Way. Her father, Bill Dennett, lived there and almost did not escape the oncoming flames before the fire consumed his dream home. He actually ran down the road to beat the fire and was picked up by another resident—there was no time to get to his vehicle before it was engulfed in flames. We recalled when their home on Arnold Way was being built years ago. We went up the day the foundation was poured and talked about whose room would be where, and watched as the framing was completed and then the finishing touches on the home. All those old dreams were gone in a matter of minutes. At Debbie's own home, a few miles from that of her Dad, the fire burned the fence surrounding her home, but the home was spared. Debbie's Uncle Rick, who lived across the street from his brother Bill, lost a rental property and two garages. Stored in one of the garages were five antique cars which he had restored. Two women I know from the Alpine Woman's Club, Yoshi Townsend and Patricia Holmes, as well as Patricia's daughter, also lost their homes. Another member of the Club, Joan Manuele, lost a storage shed which was 120 feet long and stored prized old cars that her deceased husband had owned. She told me her son's heritage had been lost in the fire. Margaret Smith's son, a volunteer firefighter, lost his treasured sports car as it sat at the fire station in Harbison Canyon—it melted! All these people lost things, all these people were glad their lives had been spared, but all these people were negatively impacted and their lives were forever changed.

Over ninety percent of Cuyamaca was destroyed by the Cedar Fire. Included was Camp Wolahi, the Camp Fire Camp where our family spent so much time during our Camp Fire Days. Natalie, Pam and Wendee all attended camp at Wolahi and our entire family spent many weekends there throughout the years. It was a lovely camp with historic old buildings, rustic cabins and so many memories for all of us. Other favorite areas also impacted were Green Valley Falls, Paso Picacho and Stonewall Mountain.

The Cedar Fire burned approximately 280,000 acres and destroyed over 2,200 homes. Ramona, Scripps Ranch, Kearny Mesa, Cuyamaca, Julian, Alpine, Crest, Harbison Canyon all suffered devastation. Driving through Harbison Canyon a short time after the fire was a horrific experience. Home after home reduced to rubble. People's dreams, their future, their past were all gone in a matter of minutes. Many of these people had no

advance warning other than the fire itself. Many of the people in Harbison Canyon had no insurance—their loss was even more devastating than those that were covered by adequate fire insurance. All the devastation was caused by one man—a hunter who lost his way and set off a flare to signal his companion. A thoughtless and stupid thing to do in a mass of dry tinder; however, nonetheless a mistake.

We watched from our deck as President George W. Bush's helicopter, Marine I, landed at Shadow Hills Elementary School in Alpine a few days after the fire had swept through the area. The President came to survey the damage that occurred in Harbison Canyon. It was an awesome sight to see the President of the United States land in our area to provide support to the victims of this tragedy. We also watched the news as the current and newly elected governors of the State of California, Gray Davis and Arnold Schwarzenegger, toured the area with the President. The next day the new First Lady of California, Maria Shriver, also visited Harbison Canyon. It was a touching tribute and a meaningful gesture to those impacted.

A FEMA center was established in the Alpine Creek Shopping Center. On Sunday, November 2, we went to the market early in the morning—an hour before the FEMA Center opened for the first time. The parking lot was full. People were standing in line with tablets, file folders. Some looked fine; others looked stricken. Children were there in their pajamas. Parents were holding onto the little hands; everyone was reaching out to one another. Nate stopped by our house after he went to the FEMA Center. As we hugged him, he cried. So many memories lost and such a difficult time. It was a tragic time in Alpine and the surrounding areas, but it was wonderful to see how the residents all came together. Donations at the Alpine Community Center were overwhelming. The Center personnel worked long hours, and volunteers were abundant. We went down each day to provide any help necessary, but often times no volunteers were needed because so many were there to help. One day, a pickup truck from Home Depot arrived. It was filled with buckets and sifters (wooden frames with screening) that had been constructed by Home Depot employees to help the fire victims. Home Depot employees made 500 sifters and they were delivered to the Community Center. Later another pickup truck arrived from the Home Depot loaded with wheelbarrows and more sifters and buckets. These were sent to help the folks who had lost homes in the Harbison Canyon area. The Woman's Club collected gift certificates to assist the Club members who had lost their home. Such an outpouring of love was experienced. An amazing thing to see—in time of tragedy, a community does come together.

And one little boy saved a memory. Our grandson, Zach, and his Dad, Jerry, rode their tandem bike up to Crest the week after the fire. Zach was quiet as he looked at the devastation. After returning home, his Mom, Wendee, found a Tupperware container in the kitchen containing three small pieces of what looked like charcoal. Upon questioning Jerry and then Zach she learned that Zach had picked up the pieces from the ruins on Nathan and Annie's property in Crest. When Wendee asked why, Zach's first response was, "Am I in trouble?" His Mom assured him he was not, and told him she just wondered why he had taken these things. He looked at her with very sad eyes and said, "I just wanted a memory of Uncle Nate's house." I guess that says it all.