

Burning Memories

By Ed Hockett

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Introduction

The New Year is obligatorily a time for reflection. This year my annual reflections began in November as I sat in my car mired in the dry creek bed under the Gas Well Canyon railroad bridge. My first reflection was how thankful I am for the eternal good will of Ed Gieske and Mike and MaryJo Shelton who would come in the middle of a snowstorm to extricate me from my stupidity. Next, I wondered how events had brought me to this place. When I came here I was a teacher. Why am I trying to be a firefighter/EMT? The answer is elusive because the year has been a difficult one. Many of my friends who became involved in the Department at the same time have left. Still, emergencies continue. For much of the early part of the year I sat in my home confined by ice and snow. I could only listen to the radio helplessly as emergent events unfolded in the District. When the weather cleared, I witnessed unmerciful things such as medical emergencies, rollover crashes, and fires seemingly always happening in the middle of the night. I would have preferred not to see any of these events, but one in particular haunts my annual reflection.

Burning Memories

"Why do fire alarms always happen in the middle of the night?"

I asked myself this question rhetorically, as I awaited the incident description and address information that would shortly follow the fire tone that had just sounded next to my ear. For all intents and purposes I was dead to the world. My eyes had not opened and there was not the slightest hint of muscular twitch to indicate I was anything, but dead. My brain was vacant, but my subconscious was alert. It was praying fervently that this would be a medical call in Starkville or out Highway 12. Something that would be so far away that I would be excused from attending.

I had attempted to use the last holiday of the summer to its fullest advantage. Unfortunately, that meant first catching up on grading the papers that had accumulated much too rapidly since the start of school. Then, I had to finish my weed assignment on Alpine Meadows. Next, I needed to catch up on my own yard work which I had neglected since I returned to school as well as do the normal daily/weekly chores. The three-day weekend had allowed me to catch up, but at the high cost of my time and energy. I had this one night to recover before resuming school early Tuesday morning. "Please, can't this be something where I am not needed?"

"Fisher Peak Fire Department." "Fisher Peak Fire Department." Please respond to a structure fire at 33... Fisher Peak Parkway."

The rest of the message was lost as the radio violently crackled with activity. A structure fire! I had been unable to capture all the numbers, but I knew the address was on the Ranch and had to be one of a handful of neighboring houses. The image of a popular firefighting recruiting poster flooded my mind: Three firemen stand facing an oncoming crown fire with a caption below saying, "Who will help you put out a fire at your house?" Without realizing I had even left my bed, I found myself tying my shoes and preparing to grab my radio.

As I rushed down the hall to the garage, my night owl wife stepped out of the office and fearfully whispered, "A structure fire?" I must have assented because she followed with, "Whose house is it?" I could not say anything more intelligent than, "I don't know, but it has to be close."

Outside in the night air my mind and the radio traffic cleared. Ed Gieske was struggling mightily to establish order in the midst of chaos. I reported I was in route and received instructions to go to the Lazaro Martinez Station to pick up Brush Truck, 4162. I still do not know how, but By the time I got on Alpine Meadows I knew exactly which house was in peril. As I came down the hill through Gas Well Canyon, wisps of gray smoke escorted by the down-slope wind floated across the road ahead of me. The wind! How strong was it? How much of a factor will it be at this hour? I glanced to my left as I rounded the curve. The dark night glowed with a disconcerting crimson at the head of the valley. I recalled the night of the Mauricio Canyon Fire and how the reddish sky had sent the Ranch into panic. Is panic what I would find at the top of the hill? I listened intently to the radio as I simultaneously scanned the rapidly approaching roadway for wildlife and encroaching fire.

The irony was staggering. I had gone to my first Fire Department meeting naively thinking I would be taught how to fight a fire on my own property. My ignorance was quickly channeled to the realization that firefighting is not individual, but team work. Not long ago we proudly proclaimed no fire could ever take hold on the Ranch because so many firefighters lived here, and response would be immediate. Now, the radio was telling me I was the only Ranch firefighter headed toward this fire.

When I turned on Fisher Peak the fire was soon visible. Just as a moth, my sight was irresistibly drawn to the terrible sight of the house at the bottom of the hill immersed in shimmering flame. I did not know the current owners, but had visited the house in the capacity of Area Leader. I had come to know the former owners well, and remembered on my last visit there they had proudly invited me in to look at their remodeling. The imminent loss of that place of pleasant memories seared my soul. I grudgingly noted that the flames leaped high, but straight up. Apparently wind was not currently a factor. I immediately radioed that the house was fully engulfed. The strategy would have to be defensive. I requested that our brush trucks be called and our ponderous water tender be rolled immediately. Then, as an afterthought recalling our recent training on the Ranch, I instructed Chuck Ferrero, who was now dispatching, to call for a key to unlock the Kupferle hydrant that I knew was at the bottom of Lodgepole.

I had feared panic would be reigning along the Fisher Peak/Timber Park/Fox trail corridor, but I found the results mixed. I observed residents hastily packing their cars in preparation to flee, others casually observing the spectacle, and others apparently sleeping blissfully ignorant of the danger lurking on the other side of the hill. I wondered if the Ranch calling tree had been put

into effect. I feared that in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, concern for others in a disaster had become as out of fashion here as it has every where else. At that moment I had to remove those thoughts from my mind. Fire suppression had to be the priority.

I motored down Fox Trail trying to remain vigilant for wild and human life. Fifteen minutes into the incident I arrived at the Lazaro Martinez station. I was startled to find it hidden in total darkness. I assumed the night light must have burnt out, but later learned it has been turned off to preserve night on the Ranch. I stumbled in and into the darkness searching desperately for the right key on my key chain and the lock on the Station door simultaneously.

I could already hear the pulsating siren of 4157, our engine purchased for \$1.00 from the Folsom NM Fire Department wailing up Gallinas. Subconsciously I comprehended that Chief, Buddie Curro, had determined our best chance of scaling and descending the hills to the fire lay with this refurbished engine. Shortly I would discover that Buddie and his wife Donna not only had nearly arrived at the station before me, but would arrive fully dressed in their bunker gear.

Had I had time to express my admiration at their quick and complete response I would have done so. Unfortunately I was still feverishly searching to gain entrance to the station. Although I barely qualify to drive our brush trucks each year, I had intended to have our Brush Truck 4162 fired up and ready to lead the way to the scene. Nevertheless, my nerves, the adrenaline, the pressing sense of urgency, and the increasingly louder wailing of the engine bearing down on me were too much for my fumbling hands. When I heard the whine of shifting gears followed by a renewed bellow from the engine as it charged up Fox Trail, I screamed "*****," in utter frustration. I jammed my keys back into my pocket and sprinted to the road desperately flagging my arms in an effort to catch a ride.

At first, I thought I had been missed in my heavy cloak of darkness, but in the glimmer of the passing headlights I could see Donna's shadowy figure on the passenger side gesturing wildly. Almost simultaneously the engine bucked and came to a sliding halt producing a choking cloud of dust. I ran to the engine and told Buddie I could take Donna's seat and direct him to the fire. Meanwhile, she could bring 4162 behind us. I failed to realize she knew even less about starting 4162 than I did. Nor did I know that 4162 would not function well this night even when it did start. I should have realized, though, that it would be even more difficult for her to unlock the door in the total darkness we would leave her in than it was for me. All that was rational escaped me especially when Donna jumped out immediately. I quickly retrieved my bunker gear from the back of my car, but drew an impatient horn blast when I lingered to shut off my car and turn out the lights.

When I entered the cab Buddie appeared as intense as I felt. He knew getting the engine up our hills was a question we never really wanted to have to answer. I had already caused him to lose momentum, so the very real question of the moment was: could he maneuver the engine to the top of the hill? I refrained from conversation to allow him to concentrate completely on the critical task confronting him. Instead, I tried to make use of the time by donning my bunker gear and monitoring the engine's radio. The engine groaned under the labor and strained to reach the top as Buddie expertly manipulated the gears. As adroitly as Buddie drove, each slow turn of the wheels only meant lost time to me. When Ghormley's garage loomed in the darkness, I cheered

in exultation. The engine did likewise as Buddie shifted up, and we barreled down Timber Park and on to Alpine Meadows.

Mike Friedrich had awakened when the homeowner's dogs began barking at his front door. Despite his recent bypass surgery, he did not hesitate to involve himself in the incident. While help was being mustered, he hustled to the intersection of Alpine Meadows and Timber Park. There he positioned himself and the next-arriving Sheriff's Deputies to guide incoming traffic. They waved at us as we approached, but scurried to the side of the road as soon as it registered that Buddie had no intention of stopping or slowing. Buddie was now focused on regaining the time we had lost in climbing the hill. I alerted him to turn left on Lodgepole. We were then whistling downhill as we approached the end of the cul-de-sac. As the distance exponentially narrowed between us and the coming turn, I described the steep driveway we would descend and speculated we might not be able to approach the fire. Buddie absorbed every word of information, but only responded with action.

After downshifting to enter the driveway, he swerved at the last moment to avoid a stray dog that materialized out of the darkness. "Damn! That was close." He muttered softly as he navigated the turn. Once in the driveway, he advanced cautiously. In an instant, we went from seeing nothing in the profound darkness beyond the headlights to total immersion in garish light. The suddenly illuminated silhouettes of trees and bushes began a frenzied dance. Buddie experienced no difficulty in visualizing exactly where to park the engine. The engine gasped when he set the brake. I sat mesmerized by the enormity of what was before me until the bang of Buddie's door slamming shut reminded me that it was time to act.

Buddie had already mounted the water engineer's compartment. "Grab the attack hose." came as a commandment from above. I placed blocks under the tires, and viciously tugged the attack hose from its bed littering the ground with a spaghetti formation of hose. I hesitated. I recalled that I had always been taught to work in pairs. In a flash, I grasped that tonight I was lucky to have someone engineering, much less a working partner. It was up to me to guard my own safety. I lowered the shield of my helmet, shouldered the hose, and advanced the line. They say a fireman with an extinguisher is five times as effective as a normal citizen. I hoped I was more like a fireman than the citizen I am. I knew at best I had 1,000 gallons of water behind me, and a multi-faceted task ahead of me.

The fire flashed orange with scattered patches of blue. It crackled angrily as it was rapidly converting the house into a shapeless mass of glowing embers. The corner posts still rose starkly to the sky now supporting nothing. Nevertheless, each post was like an electrode giving off alarming streams of sparks that were lofting into the neighboring forest. Before I could act, I tripped. I looked down, and saw intact window frames lying on the ground blocking my path. I stared at them incredulously not comprehending how they had become hindrances under my feet. Later I would learn that the force of explosion had not only seamlessly removed the windows from their jams, but had ejected live embers 200 yards downhill/downwind.

When I located an optimum position, I braced myself as best I could. "Water on!" roared from the darkness, and the hose rippled. I aimed high at the corner timbers trying to stop the streams of embers. I intended to utilize my water resource wisely by letting the stream hit the top of the

posts and also drip/fall into the flaming mass. I was not able to extinguish the problem, but I slowed it.

As I worked, I nervously glanced at the ponderosas and oak that fringed the house. In firefighting we are always concerned about the extension of heat by conduction, convection, and radiation. In this case, conduction was not an apparent factor, but radiation and convection were. Would the trees betray me by suddenly igniting? The exposed ponderosas had withered, but were resisting ignition. Above my position, I could see a live coal on an oak branch laboring in vain to capitalize on earlier success. Apparently the year of abundant precipitation was working to our advantage. Nevertheless, when I changed position I sprayed the trees to lower their temperature.

Once I had delayed the spread of embers by convection, I turned my attention to ground level. A low wall of flame produced by exploded embers was licking the vegetation in an effort to move outward from the structure into the forest particularly uphill from the house. While I kept a vigilant eye on the corners, I splashed water across the expanding front of flame, so as to slow its advance as much as possible. In retrospect, the external fire was probably doomed without my efforts by the wetness of the year, the greenness of the vegetation, the lack of wind, and the high humidity of the night. At the time, though, I did not trust.

Donna's words, "Eddie, hon, do you need a rest?" startled me. I had been so intent on my task, I forgot I lived in a world with other people. Consequently, I had been oblivious to the Curro family reunion that had been taking place around me. Donna's son, Lynn Reynolds, and Buddie's daughter, Rhonda Barry, had rescued Donna from Station 3 and had arrived in our rescue vehicle 4161. Buddie and Donna's son-in-law, Brandon Barry, had accomplished the unenviable task of driving our ancient unwieldy water tender from Station 2 on the North side of Trinidad.

I had not realized relief was a possibility. Now that fortune was smiling on me, I gladly relinquished my position to Lynn. When I retreated I spotted a Deputy observing the fire. I asked him if anyone was in the house, but he did not respond. Thinking he had not heard, I repeated my question. This time he wordlessly pointed to the house. When I turned to the infernal glowing mass, I realized it was now not an appropriate moment to ask such a question. Later, I learned that pet dogs died trapped inside the house. I still wonder if I had gone directly to the scene, could I have saved them?

In years past the Department's Auxiliary was a powerful ally in such trying moments. They could always be counted on to bring much needed refreshment. On this night, Linda Austin acted alone. She met San Isabel's electrical truck at the gate to escort them to the fire. In addition, she brought us coffee. Disdaining the coffee, I wearily sat down on a retaining wall with a bottle of water to watch Lynn work, and Donna use a mcclleod to fight the external fire. Now that I could review the whole scene, I perceived the stern faces of Rich Babnick and Tim Guenthard as they appeared and vanished in the darkness with the flickering of the flames. They were each self-operating the pumps and hoses of their brush trucks on the lower side of the fire. I smiled at their tenacity. They are the true warriors for the Department who are always reliable in time of emergency.

Management of the fire seemed to be progressing well when the words "Water off!" pierced the darkness. We were out of water! Lynn ran back to the engine. Soon, Tim, Rich and he were carrying rolls of hoses up the steep drive toward the road connecting them as they went. We would have to draft from the tender or the Kupferle hydrant. Meanwhile, the fire leaped at its chance for recovery. I first lifted the handle of the frost-free stanchion, but nothing. When that failed, I joined Donna with a wildland tool and attempted to keep the fire at bay within the confines of the foundation. We engaged in this arduous battle seemingly forever.

Where was the water? I learned later that no one with a key to unlock the Kupferle could readily be found on this conclusion to a holiday weekend. Meanwhile, it had been forgotten that a key had been issued to the Department. The confusion caused a delay in opening the hydrant. Finally, to avoid further delay, the lock on the hydrant was broken. This later caused a minor discussion between the Metro District and the Department, but both parties agreed it was better to break the lock rather than not have water.

Once the line did get connected, the wait to receive water was still interminable for my aching back. The hose line from the hydrant down the drive was over 1,000 feet. Even with the water flowing downhill under good pressure, it required a lengthy time to finally reach the nozzle. Once it did, though, the fire was in effect history. We had contained it within the foundation, and it had already consumed most of the material available to burn. The abundant water supply quickly suppressed the remaining visible flames. It then became a question of babysitting the hot spots until there was no longer any possible threat.

We reworked the ash pit repeatedly, but hot spots persisted. Around 4:00 A.M. Buddie released the younger members of the Department (those under 60), so they would be able to go to their jobs. The old-timers (above 60) had to stay and babysit the fire to its conclusion. I arrived home at 4:30. That gave me a good 15 minutes before my alarm sounded reminding me it was time to get ready to go to school. In those intervening 15 minutes I reflected on how such a potentially dangerous threat had been averted. Luck was really the primary factor that prevented a full-fledged disaster this time. Will our luck continue, and if not, who will come to help put out the fire? I asked myself as I sleepily arose to face a new day.