

Confessions of a Treehugger

or

How We Got Firewise

by Joyce Wolff

This article was written on behalf of the Forest Health and Fire Mitigation Committee in order to fulfill grant requirements for public education on forest health issues. It was written for The Chronicle News and appeared in two parts in that paper in early April 2007.

Fire season with its dread and anxiety will be here in a couple of months – perhaps sooner. Each year I feel more confident that my little cabin will be spared by wildfire for I have changed my erring ways.

Seventeen years ago when we bought land south of Trinidad in the ponderosa/pinon/juniper forest- we were city slickers. Well, small-town slickers at least, since our hometown, Los Alamos, in northern New Mexico isn't even twice the population of Trinidad. But there we took for granted, telephone service, paved streets, fire protection, mail delivery to our home, electricity, and water, none of which we had here.

We would live the dream that haunts and draws folks like us to places like this. Although Los Alamos is surrounded primarily by the same Transition Life Zone, 6,000 – 9000 feet, we hadn't lived in the forest. Most of the land adjoining the town is federal land prohibiting development in forested areas where we wanted to be. In addition the Santa Fe ambience, movie stars, and sports figures had produced high land prices and high taxes in any nearby forested areas under development.

When the land salesman hiked us to the highest point of the lot we would buy we knew it would be the site of our new home. We fell in love with it all: the wildlife, the views of rugged mountains and endless plains, and the quiet. We chose our building site in the trees on a hill we named Loma Lobo – wolf hill. I planned to spare and nurture each precious tree and bush, but soon realized that dense scrub oak and thick grooves of spindly trees (dog hair – I would learn) prevented me from hiking or walking anywhere. I could catch only teasing glimpses of those mountains and plains in the distance. After short forays into the woods I returned scratched, hot, and frustrated from tripping over hidden rocks and snagging my clothes.

Clearing a road was first priority. A friend and manager for the developer suggested the route as he led us thrashing through the underbrush setting flags as we went. It was beautifully laid out: a gentle slope around the hill happily avoiding the need to remove many ponderosas. How we loved these trees and grieved over every one that would soon fall.

We weren't here when the road was dozed so we were excited to see our new entry. It was a shock! It was the perfect mountain road we needed winding gently upward, but it appeared the whole hillside was ravaged. I had been propping up and encouraging every tiny tree seedling I found. Here was a hillside littered with ugly stumps. I felt terrible, but I gained a breathtaking

view of the Sangre de Cristos hidden before by overgrown trees.

As our project continued I complained bitterly about the need to cut down a beautiful "yellow-belly" ponderosa that stood too close to the edge of the future cabin wall. To keep me quiet, the foundation crew carefully jockeyed the huge cement truck in and around every pinon and juniper in order to pour the footings, muttering expletives all the while (I imagine.). When time came to erect the walls and add the roof, our carpenter son carefully built an opening in the porch roof, twelve feet from the ground to enclose the trunk. I had saved another tree.



Forester CK Morey Advises Ranch Residents on Proper Forest Management

Our first exposure to forest issues came from one of our first visitors, Colorado State Forester, C.K. Morey, who drove up one day, introduced himself and gave us a handful of publications and offered suggestions on fire mitigation. C.K. has always said, "It's not if a wildfire comes – it's when." Suddenly came the realization that if the woods around us or our home caught fire we would probably lose it all. We had done little thinning, we had no continuing water supply (our

cistern holds 1200 gallons) and our volunteer fire fighters were 15 miles away after they scrambled to get to the station, geared up and found us. Just finding us was a huge issue. There were then fewer than a dozen structures built in this development of over 15,000 acres and nearly 100 miles of dirt road – sometimes muddy, in many places narrow. Hmmmm...we need to think about this...

One afternoon C.K. took time to assess my first effort at trail building. An avid and gentle teacher he taught me how to put in dirt steps supported by logs, identified wildflowers, showed me how to properly use and carry a McCloud (an all-purpose digging/scraping fire-fighting tool) and said that even a narrow trail such as mine could be valuable in slowing down a creeping ground fire if the duff were carefully scraped away. He encouraged us to buy and keep handy a gas powered water pump we could lower into the cistern. He patiently hammered away at protecting ourselves from wildfire. (The Thin Man's name quickly became a household word in our neck of the woods.) We knew our trees and undergrowth were dangerously thick and overgrown. We'd better think about clearing some trees – a distasteful thought.

Appreciation for abundant wildlife led us to become volunteers for the Colorado Division of Wildlife. We found our little niche as secretaries to the Management Advisory Committee (MAC) for the Bosque del Oso Wildlife Refuge on Highway 12. At monthly meetings for the first several years of our involvement with the MAC we found ourselves immersed in proper forest management – imperative for healthy wildlife populations. All new to us we learned about: thinning, prescribed burns, plant and timber inventories, water, stream and fish management, grazing and politics. This was really exciting stuff.



Crowded Trees are the Fuel for a Catastrophic Fire

As more and more acreage was developing in Las Animas County it became apparent that there was a dire need for serious education in fire mitigation. The Colorado State Forest Service, BarNI Ranch, Division of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy and Extension Service began conducting seminars and tours aimed at teaching fire mitigation and forest stewardship. We were disappointed at the low attendance at these affairs, but people just weren't taking it seriously yet. We were hiding our heads in the duff, uhh, sand.



Tall, Spindly Ponderosas Result from Crowding

But if they give you books and give you books eventually you take a peek inside. An attention-getting realization dawned from a slide show presented by Merrill Kaufman of the Rocky Mountain Research Station. Dr Kaufmann, an engaging and inspiring speaker, is dedicated to forest stewardship. His historical photographs of forested areas in Colorado taken decades before the Smokey the Bear days of put it out in 48, show mountain slopes covered by meadows with only intermittent stands of trees. In nature's fire regime, wildfire occurs fairly frequently cleaning out the spindly trees and undergrowth that provide the fuel for catastrophic fires. Thick

and dense stands seem lush and green but are not what nature requires as we had presumed. What I was seeing out my cabin windows was not a healthy forest!

Ah, the road to enlightenment is slow and plodding. Sometimes you need to hit the mule over the head to get his (her) attention. In 2000 we got hit with the board. Los Alamos, our hometown was on fire, victim of a controlled burn which quickly was not. In tears I watched CNN as my friends homes were burning to the ground. My daughter and her family had been evacuated somewhere. This catastrophic wildfire ravaged 43,000 acres and destroyed over 200 homes. Little fingers of fire ignited by firebrands carried by high winds from miles away crept down the mesa tops and flew into the canyon bottoms. When later I drove around what was a residential area I was amazed and lost. All the landmarks from my growing up were gone. There were only melted cars, crumbling foundations - the houses incinerated – vanished. Limbless trees like black matchsticks were all that remained on the once green slopes that surround the entire west edge of town. It was a sad time in our lives.

It seemed to me, the Los Alamos fire was the signal fire that set the stage for the following seasons of extreme wildfire throughout the southwest. Bigger fires causing even more damage were burning simultaneously in several states. From Loma Lobo to the east we watched trees explode as fire marched up the slope below Fishers Peak - and to the west we saw flames from the Spring Creek fire and the smoke consumed us.

We were drought stricken as well. The onslaught was carried on by beetles attracted to crowded, weakened, and water starved trees. In Los Alamos the pinon juniper forests spared by the fire were dying at the rate of 90% an acre in some places while residents cut down treasured old evergreens they had planted in their gardens decades ago. We realized that our trees might resist beetle attack if they were thinned to allow adequate water. Healthy trees can usually "pitch" the beetles out.



Proper Clearing is Attractive. Deer Appreciate These Open Spaces.

Finally, after years of stalling, we took the first meaningful steps to ensure our safety. We soon had cut down and chipped over 100 trees close to the cabin. That ole yellow belly growing through the roof came crashing down as well. Not only had it started bumping into the frame of the porch during frequent high winds, but having it stick up through the roof was a wildfire magnet. The entrance road I had agonized over now passes through a properly cleared meadow leaving the tall ponderosas in place.

We and many of our neighbors have hired work done by Hydro-Ax, smaller Timber Ax and Fecon Bull Hog: powerful machines that cut into the dense growth, clearing it out. Brush Hogs mowers, and chain saws hummed, while this reformed tree-hugger charged through the forest color-flagging trees to save but more trees to go. With every tree that came down I could see what lay beyond and my erroneous dedication to "spare that tree" has evolved into an even stronger passion to get our property healthy. The most interesting change in our mind-set is seeing that the land we finally treated is beautiful in a new way. Now it looks right and is right - for the trees and wildlife and us as well.

Don't call me a tree-hugger! Who me? Not me? No, Sir, not me!

