

GORGE FIRE OF 2017

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Saturday Night

Turning onto I-205 from dinner near the Portland airport, the four of us (John and Micky Keiter and Beverly) saw two large plumes of smoke in the Gorge. One was definitely in Oregon. The other was either in Oregon or Washington. I knew wherever it was - we (our community) were in trouble because of the east winds.

This type of fire had occurred in 1990 under the same conditions except the wind was much harder. That fire was said to be kept on the ground due to the high winds which pushed it back to the ground. Compared to the 2017 fire, there was no warning or concern for evacuation that I remember. I do remember asking myself what I would take. Personal family photos, original art off the walls, several family heirlooms and the cats. Having been trained in the volunteer fire department I knew a bit of defensible space theory and did a bit of that, but not like this time.

Sunday

After the news came of the large fire on the Oregon side of the river at Eagle Creek I started to plan. Again it was understanding a bit of fire behavior coupled with the 1990 experience. Most of that day was spent removing wood and burnable material from around the house and putting stuff in boxes for a quick exit.

The fire had burned 16 miles in 12 hours or was that 12 miles in 16 hours? It didn't really matter because if the wind would have continued the fire would have been in our front door within 8 to 12 hours. Ash was falling like fine snow. I gathered the boxes I had packed on Sunday and put other "important stuff" (at least for me) such as the computer hard drives and loaded them in the trailer we had in place in front of the house for a trip to start on Tuesday. Next, the old rocking chair from my Grandmother (ca-1900) was loaded on. In early afternoon, Beverly, who hadn't been too interested, sprang to action and started to pick out her favorite addition books and other treasures, photos, writing projects, a few special pieces of pottery.

Early that evening I called our friend Jo who lives on 153rd in Portland and asked to park the trailer in her driveway and unload a few things in her garage. About 10:30, while I was gone, Beverly got a knock on the door to evacuate - some eager Eagle Scouts telling her that we were now a Level 3 and did we know that? Thirty minutes later, another pair did the same thing.

Monday

I returned from the trailer run and at 1:30AM we left the house. Beverly and our cat Posey were in the Toyota and had an easy drive down Division Street with only two or three cars in sight; at that hour, you have most of the streets to yourself!

The evacuation was well staged and no traffic jams. I will say right now if the fire in 1990 had continued with high winds, a number of people would have died. For the criticism emergency management received, they did an excellent job. Setting up of checkpoints for local access surely did keep the possibility of looting down.

Tuesday

The next day I passed the checkpoint and retrieved our 1976 oak table which I had finished during our first year of marriage, and several antique furnishings (ca late 1800, early 1900).

Also, with our son Abe's help I did more tree limb removal and swept leaves off the valleys of the roof. We watered down the gutters to make sure tinder wasn't there or it was wet. We wetted down about 10-15 feet around the house. In the debriefing later I found that we needed to leave hoses and sprinklers in place so fire crews would do this if needed. There were 15-20 messages on the phone from concerned friends and family. even our blueberry U-Pick friends were calling in, and 30-40 messages on the email. I called Beverly and asked about cutting several tree shrubs next to the door and cover of the house to make the house more fire resistant. She said, "No!" As I was going through the checkpoint, a TV reporter asked how I felt and I replied, "The next time I come home, it could be a pile of ashes." But I had done all the firewire practices I could do.

Wednesday

The following day I did the same thing. Then came home and stayed the night even though the Level 3 was still in force. The wind had changed and the danger was lower. Beverly and the cat stayed in town.

Thursday

We both returned home. When we looked through the house with everything important removed, it didn't look like much had been removed.

The evacuation order was lifted, but I still didn't feel comfortable bringing our belongings home for another nine days.