CORBETT RESIDENTS SHARE THEIR FIRE STORIES
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for Crown Point Country Historical Society

Living in one of the most beautiful spots on earth has limitless benefits. The expanses of forests, the open space to live well, and the sweep of clean, moving air down the scenic Columbia River Gorge are welcomed by all of us who have chosen to live here. Those same attractions in altered circumstances also can signal danger. Parts of our pristine area were recently declared level 1 (get ready in case), level 2 (pack and wait for an evacuation assessment), or level 3 (pack and evacuate the area immediately). A fire, reportedly started by a teenage boy on the 2017 Labor Day weekend in the overly dry ravines of Eagle Creek, sped out of control quickly. The Gorge winds switched back and forth over three weeks, threatening forests, homes, and wildlife in all directions, but primarily switching to the east, then to the west, then back and forth again. The area - hot, dry, and rainless for weeks prior - was a tinderbox.

As hundreds of firefighters arrived, the smoke became thick, roads were closed, and people and animals were evacuated. The news stories reported for over two weeks that the "Eagle Creek fire is 0% contained." Wherever your location or whatever you did in the earliest days, one feeling was common to all residents: concern.

A number of Corbett residents recently shared their stories of those first two weeks. Linden Burk recalls," I remember the fall of ash - like snow, the smell, and the silence in the woods, elk huddled in a field, and whole burnt leather-like leaves blown from the flames miles away." Jim Stein was in Cascade Locks where there were several hills on fire near the west bound ramp on I-84. The smoke was illuminated by the flames, and another hill silhouetted by the light. "Suddenly," he recalls, "some firs ignited, raising a ball of flame at least 400 feet high." Ken and Heidi Smith were on a trip to Idaho when Ken's daughter, Nancy, called them with the news that their house and property was at level 2. They turned around and came home. Jean Motley counts as her most concerning moments watching the thick, acrid smoke envelope her house and seeing burned debris on her driveway. Midge Davis reports her scariest moment came when, after packing up medicine, paperwork, a few valuables, clothing, and her husband's poems, she followed Bud's car – at night by then - in their van "with loose steering." Michelle and Gunnar Abramson, flying back at midnight on Monday from a family wedding in Colorado, remember the thick blackness outside the plane window. "There were no lights here and there as is usual when flying down the Gorge towards PDX at night." Suddenly there were "rivers of fire everywhere," they recall. The plane was flying low and the cabin immediately filled with smoke. One awakening passenger behind them commented, "It smells like a campfire in here." Patti Meyers was working outside on Monday in the daytime when the smoke got so bad that she had to go inside. "The realization then hit me that we might be in danger."

Most residents packed essentially the same things: a few changes of clothing, their pets,medications, and paperwork which included files, computers, flash drives, important documents, vehicles, insurance policies, photo albums, and older family pictures. A number of people like Sharleen Palakiko, Wade Green, and Hank and Carol Rice said they packed their paperwork, some food and clothes and family keepsakes,

the specifics varying from family to family. Chuck Rollins and Steve and Judy Lehl took things a step further by taking truckloads of documents, photos, and other historical materials related to the general, as well as the pioneer history, of the Columbia River Gorge. Dave McFarland's evacuation list was simple: pictures (and his art), auto and home paperwork, extra clothes, and "shoes that fit." Some residents of the area stayed home while others rented storage units. Evacuees stayed at Red Cross shelters, with friends or family, or in hotels. Some people, even at level 3, remained in their homes throughout the period. One couple in the evacuation area who stayed the whole time later confided, "When we had to go out on the deck to put out glowing embers, we wondered if we should have just left." Mary Mallery, a camp host at Rooster Rock State Park, found breathing difficult. She said that the undergrowth in many stretches was all burned away. "Sadly," she observed, "the wildlife will pay the ultimate price."

A number of Corbett residents said they hosed down their decks, roofs, and houses. Several, like Heidi Smith, said they should have cut out the shrubbery close to the house or outbuildings, and vowed to do so now. Frank Motley used a cat to clear brush away from the house in a previous Gorge fire and tries to keep an open perimeter around buildings. Most people called family to tell them what was happening.

Some of our neighbors here had been through fires before. Patti Meyers was working at Multnomah Falls when the last fire approached some years ago. She volunteered to make meals for firefighters at Rooster Rock. "I see things in a different way now," she said. Although Thomas Hooker says he "took a nap" when he first heard about the Eagle Creek fire, he says his family packed some things. He had fought two fires before: clean-up on the Bunker Hill Fire in Southern Oregon, and a mountain fire in 1960. Jeannie Driver remembers when her husband, Frank, fought the enormous *Tillamook Burn*, a series of four large fires spanning the years 1933 to 1951. Hank Rice remembers as "very scary" a forest fire coming within an eighth of a mile from his home when he was a child. As a teenager, he worked the fire lines on other fires. Linden Burk also remembers childhood fear about a fire near her home in Wyoming, as well as the 1991 Multnomah Falls fire "with smoke so dense it looked like heavy fog." Midge Davis' memory of the 1951 Mill City / Detroit Dam fire encapsulates much of the anxiety about the unknown direction and outcome of forest fires. "At the time, Bud was working on the dam. We had three small children – a three year old daughter and infant twins. I watched the fire coming over the ridges one by one, each coming closer to Mill City. 'Where is my husband?'" I asked. "Fighting the fire," they told me. "Were sending supplies; he's OK." I found out later that he was actually hosing down the *dynamite* shack, getting as wet as the building. I wondered how I would escape with three babies and one buggy if the fire reached us? The answer I told myself was to pack the baby buggy with milk, diapers, and babies, hold on to my little girl's hand and go onto the road in hopes of hitching a ride."

Rocky Graziano, part of our public protection force, has a closer and interesting take on the close-packed events in the many days of the Eagle Creek Fire unknowns. "I was helping with the evacuation notices," he reports. "The scariest thing I encountered was at the fish hatchery. I had been watching the fire there and at about 4:30 pm as I headed west on I-84, I saw that the fire had jumped two miles to the west. There was a massive flume across from the Bonneville Dam exit, high up on the cliff face. We had first done evacuation notices in Dodson and Warrendale. I saw fire through he trees

while we were knocking on doors. It got really dark, and there were still houses we had not checked. It got a little frightening because we could see an actual wall of fire. Our concern was to not get surrounded by the flames or have the fire jump and cut us off from an exit. Our local citizen patrol helped us all through the night. We did “roll calls” over the radio throughout those hours as I didn’t want any volunteers to get separated or left behind. The day after the fire jumped, when I returned to our Corbett Safety Action Team office (SAT), we packed up our most valuable and expensive equipment items. Next time - we need to add a stockpile of masks.”

As a community, we all saw the efforts of many hundreds of individuals - the Multnomah County Sheriff’s personnel, our local volunteer firefighters, the Citizen Patrol, the Red Cross and other agencies, paid fire personnel, and volunteers from across the northwest and from other parts of the US. Long time community booster Nev Scott noticed that in many of the ongoing regional and national stories about the Eagle Creek fire, “our local firemen were not mentioned.” Luckily we know who they are, and there is no doubt they, and all other neighbors who helped neighbors in various ways, are owed a great debt of gratitude by our entire community.