



Quiet, Except for the Wind

We just kept hoping it was not our turn.

By Carolyn Dufurrena

The fire started August 5, a Sunday afternoon, 13 years and two days after our last big fire. Lightning struck the most remote corner of our remote place in northwestern Nevada. A continental divide runs through this country; deep, steep-sided canyons rise to granite-boulder ridges fringed with head-high bitterbrush and sage, falling away north and south, east and west in a jumble of topography. Aspen groves gather around springs and meadows of wild iris. Feed was thick this year, but brittle, dry. Last year was as bountiful in moisture as this year has been austere, and we all knew a fire would run hot through that dry brush and bunchgrass. We just kept hoping it was not our turn. But it was.

Still, it looked like there were opportunities to stop it. The bottom of Cottonwood Canyon on the first day, the top of Maggie

Creek summit the second afternoon. There were windows of time, after the first gather brought the cattle off Holloway Mountain, ash raining on the cowboys' hats. "We had to leave a cow with a day-old calf, they just couldn't make it over the summit," said my neighbor Crystal. "But there was a spring there, she could have gone back to that green spot with him." We all wanted to keep that picture in our heads.

The cowboys go back the next day to gather Maggie Creek, pushing cows and calves down to the flat towards Denio, ahead of the plume that grows by the hour. Herds inevitably get mixed up in the high country, but there isn't time to sort the neighbor's stock, and those pairs travel down unfamiliar country. They don't like it, and we see a dozen or more that evening heading back up the same canyon, trying to get home through

country that is burning.

Fires in Nevada usually blow up and burn fast, done in three days. This fire eats a canyon a day, day after day, blowing north into Oregon, east into King's River Valley, then back west. Five days in, and by this time there is a Type Two Incident Management Team camped out around the Denio School. The fire creeps along the ridge all day Friday, until the wind kicks up. Resources are already spread thin when another lightning strike over east of us causes all air attack to be pulled off. The wind is blowing about 25 miles an hour.

I am on my way home from town when Tim calls me. "I'm going up to camp to help get the horses out. I might stay up there tonight." The fire is still 15 miles away from Lovely Valley Sheep Camp. There should be more than enough time, a couple days

maybe, to gather and move out of this part of the mountain range, where our sheep summer, where the camp tender lives.

"Don't come up here," he says.

"I won't," I promise. Still, I drive the highway north on past the ranch, watching the billowing cloud of smoke. The fire has been creeping its way south along the ridge, but in what seems like a moment, it flashes in life, blowing down the ridge. Mud Creek, Shyster Creek, Sage Hen, in literally minutes, the fire is 15 miles down the ridgeline. I watch it approach the twin peaks that mark the horizon just behind sheep camp. I call Tim. "Where are you?"

"We're getting the hell out of here," he says. His brothers and the kids are ahead of

"The land owns us, not the other way around. We are part and parcel of the ridges and the soggy meadows, the dusty alkali and the storms that cross the emptiness.... It is the landscape that sustains our circle, and permits us to remain."

CAROLYN DUFURRENA, FROM "FIFTY MILES FROM HOME: RIDING THE LONG CIRCLE ON A NEVADA FAMILY RANCH."

him, horseback. The herders are waiting on the road someplace ahead, their camp packed, their dogs nervous. Everything they could throw into another pickup from the house is in another truck ahead of him. He's the last one.

"There's fire on three sides of us. We're getting the hell out," he says again.

"What about the sheep?" I ask.

"Wait for me at the hot springs," he says.

"I love you," I say. But he is already gone.

Crystal is waiting at the ranch house. "Come get me," she says when I call her.

We drive faster than anybody should back to the hot springs. It's dark by now, and we are just waiting, watching for headlights. "Oh jeez," she says, when she sees the glow lighting up a dozen miles of ridge. "Oh jeez."

Normally it takes a couple of hours to trail horses out of camp. Down a rocky road from the cabin, up a trail over a ridge, down the other side, through another canyon. But tonight, they don't have that kind of time.

It's quiet, except for the wind. We walk back and forth in the tumbleweeds. My flip-

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TOP: Cattle coming out of Maggie Creek near the Nevada-Oregon border on Day 2 of the Holloway Fire. Several ranches neighbor on the north end of the Bilk Mountains. Cowboys brought everything to the flat ahead of the flames, but some animals that found themselves in unfamiliar country turned around and went back up the canyons. BOTTOM: Ranchers watch as fire creeps across the ridge from Cottonwood Canyon into Maggie Creek, a new watershed, wondering whether backfire and a dozen cut fire lines could save this drainage. No resources were available. OPPOSITE: Holloway Fire smoke plume, still in Cottonwood Canyon, Monday afternoon on August 6, Day 2.



The Brush Corral was built in 1944. Living sagebrush grew up through brush woven together by shearers. They used almost no wire or hewn lumber. Though there were many of these historic structures in this part of the world at one time, this was the lone survivor. It burned to a shin-deep circle of white ash, right. Day 10.



Our sheep camp above Lovely Valley was seasonal home to our camp tenders, cowboys and kids during the summer months. This was one of the places our kids learned to work and to play. They learned what it meant to rely on family, and on themselves. Although ranchers made repeated efforts to connect with the fire management team's command, key fire personnel were unaware of this place till the fire had already passed through. Hopefully there will be changes to the way fire management communicates with local stakeholders. Day 8.





This band of sheep spent one awful night in a wire corral on a windy ridge as the fire swept through. Miraculously, they survived that night with only minor burns; however, several died later, apparently of lung damage. BELOW: Cattle find their way to the ridge through the moonscape that remained after this lush meadow burned to ash. Day 8.

flops crunch in the gravel. Stupid, not to have changed into boots and jeans before. The glow brightens. The fire crew is in Denio, but they only work the day shift, and this fire is working all night.

My eyes bore holes into the darkness looking for headlights. His life is not supposed to end tonight, I think. Not this night. Not this way. Crystal's phone rings.

"Where are you?"

"Bring the horse trailer to the Texas Spring Corrals," her husband says, and so we bring the horse trailer, making our way through cows and calves running every which way, scattered across the crested wheat field in the dark. Headlights appear. They're out of the canyon. We pull up the hill, and our lights show us seven horses, heads hung low, seven cowboys—all family—leaning on

their necks. Sheepherders, dogs, all accounted for.

Halters are passed from hand to hand. Horses thump into the big trailer, cowboys talking low and gentle to the animals that have brought them all out safely.

"What about the sheep?" I breathe, asking Tim in the dark. A thousand head are in a corral, on top of a high ridge. Left loose, they would surely run before the fire, and the hope is that with the short brush on top, that there are enough of them, the ones in the middle might survive. He looks up the ridge. "They're already burned over. The fire has passed them." They head out, done all they can for this night. It's 10:30 p.m. They are all so tired.

Miraculously, the sheep in the corral survive the night, although some will die later, their lungs white with ash. The cabin at camp survives, although no corrals remain to hold livestock or horses to do the work.

The Brush Corral is miles down the country still. In an era when nature and man worked more

comfortably together, sheepherders grubbed sagebrush from a thick patch in a tilted oval, using living brush for posts, laying the brush pulled from the center head to tail between the posts. Four feet high and nearly as thick, the young sage plants grew right up through the walls, weaving themselves into the pattern to make a living holding pen that held a whole band of ewes and lambs. At one time, there were corrals like this all over the mountains, but this is the last one. It is a shin-deep pile of ashes now. Up high, where the bomber missed, a strip of retardant, like old blood, covers the ridge.

The fire is nowhere near over. It will burn south for days to come, racing down the ridges, eating its way down the slopes almost like lava flowing in the night, but fast, faster than any lava flow.

The fire team never gets ahead of it. In the end, it is 720 square miles of blackened earth. ■

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