

RANGE

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RANGE is an award-winning quarterly devoted to the issues that threaten the West, its people, lifestyles, lands and wildlife. No stranger to controversy, RANGE is a leading forum for opposing viewpoints in the search for solutions that will halt the depletion of a national resource—the American cowboy.

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Up Front

Anguish.

By C.J. Hadley



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On Oct. 4, 2016, allegedly intelligent folks from the Nevada Division of Forestry and the University of Nevada (probably with advice from the U.S. Forest Service) decided to start a “controlled” four-day burn in Little Valley, which is in the Carson Range of the Sierra Nevada, east of Lake Tahoe and west of Washoe Valley. The peaks rise to 10,881 feet and during a good winter 300 inches of snow on top is not unusual. It is also a place prone to extraordinary easterly winds. In his book “Roughing It,” Mark Twain called them “Washoe Zephyrs” and described wagons and teams of horses and cast-iron stoves being picked up by the sheer force of the blow. My trees prove Twain was right by dramatically tilting toward sunup.

I live in Washoe Valley. Everyone within 100 miles thought this plan was stupid. Tem-

this place. After six days, the smoke diminished, then was barely seen. But a few days later the winds returned with fury—up to 70 miles an hour in the valley and a whole lot more toward the peaks. At 2:30 a.m. on October 14, a fire was spotted in Little Valley. There was no lightning. There were no campers. By 3 a.m. I got a robo call from the Washoe County sheriff saying, “A fire is burning and voluntary evacuation is suggested.”

By 4 a.m., I was moving out. My strangely packed bag included a weapon, five overcoats and an Alaskan wolf pelt—which would have been useless later. I forgot my banjo.

I had help from neighbors Terry Sullivan and Gwen Barrett. I borrowed Sully's Suburban to transport my three Great Danes. Gwen drove my truck to transport my two horses. And Sully used his truck to drag their motor home. Then it was time to panic. My boys jumped in the high-backed SUV easily but Beauty was too decrepit to make it. I dropped her twice. Sully and Gwen were back at their place packing so I had to lift that 150-pound bitch by myself. She weighs more than I do and my sacroiliac and several ribs popped out just before we fled the flames.

Where to go? RANGE's parking lot (and a chiropractor). By eight, a friend in Reno had offered a place for me and my dogs. “They can even sleep on the couches.” I asked about a fence.



“It's about two feet high.” That would be like stepping over a dandelion for the badly trained Strider, Cache and Beauty so I had to decline.

Sully cooked breakfast in my parking lot in the motor home just before he found pasture in Gardnerville for the horses. I took the dogs for temporary shelter at my vet's.

The worst did happen to 23 of my neighbors whose houses and 17 barns and outbuildings turned to ash. One young horse died. And later that day I heard one of the controlled-burn organizers on the radio saying, “We didn't know there would be any wind.”

Mark Twain knew it. Why didn't they? ■

For an update on the Bundy/Malheur trial (and a follow-up to Judy Boyle's “Rancher Injustice” story on p.72), check rangefire.us for Todd Macfarlane's analysis and the verdict.



PHOTOS © C.J. HADLEY

The frightening Little Valley Fire at 4 a.m. on Oct. 14, 2016. Winds were pushing the flames north even though prevailing winds are usually due east. RIGHT: Cliff Bros. Ranch in Washoe Valley on October 19. Their home, historic barns, sheds and farm machinery, plus 3,300 bales and 55 tons of chopped winter hay are all gone. Fortunately, the cattle were on a pasture that didn't burn. Twenty-two other homes also burned to the ground. My few acres of dirt are across the grass in the trees, due east from the fire, and thankfully unscathed.

peratures that week were in the 80s and 90s and we had received no precipitation for months. Average annual moisture is less than eight inches. Snow was due. The forest was choked with too many trees and the meadow grasses were thick and decadent because no sheep or cattle have grazed there for decades.

On the first day of the burn, heavy smoke enveloped and choked us. On the second day, there was a note on a board at the end of my street saying: “Sorry about the smoke. We didn't think it would sit in the valley like that.”

Every day of the burn was more nerve-racking. Mother Nature is seldom quiet in