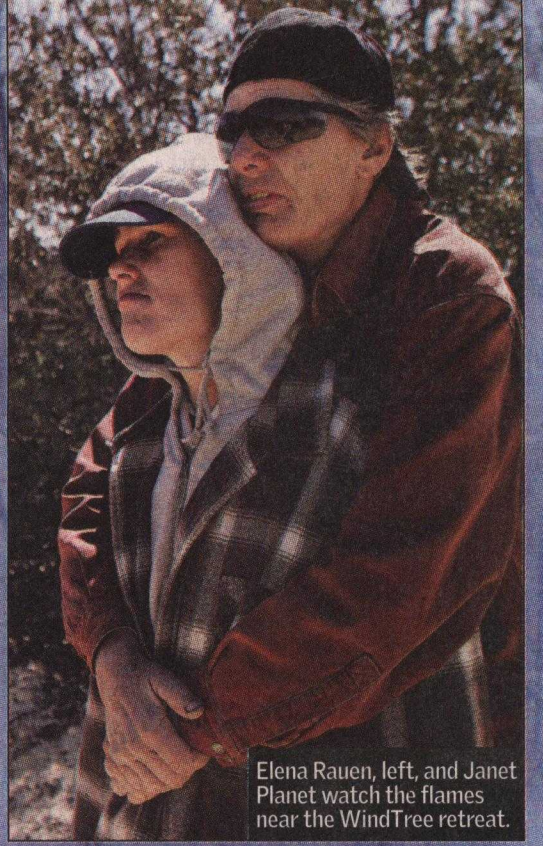


SO EARLY FOR THIS

WITH BACKCOUNTRY ABLAZE, A HOPE FOR WEAKER WINDS

1,000 FLEE; 3,400 ACRES BURN; A DOZEN BUILDINGS DESTROYED



Elena Rau, left, and Janet Planet watch the flames near the WindTree retreat.



5/23

No one was reported injured in the Summit fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

(INSET): KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS; (ABOVE): MARIA J. AVILA — MERCURY NEWS

Fire + Fire Protection - 2008

Outside Corralitos, builder's dream burns

By Julia Prodis Sulek
Mercury News

CORRALITOS — Hugo Zazzara leaned against the brick wall of the Corralitos Market & Sausage Co. on Thursday, steadying himself against the grief of losing the house he built and fought to save.

As his knees buckled and he caught his breath, he braced against the funneling wind that had whipped up the flames and destroyed the home he spent 11 years building.

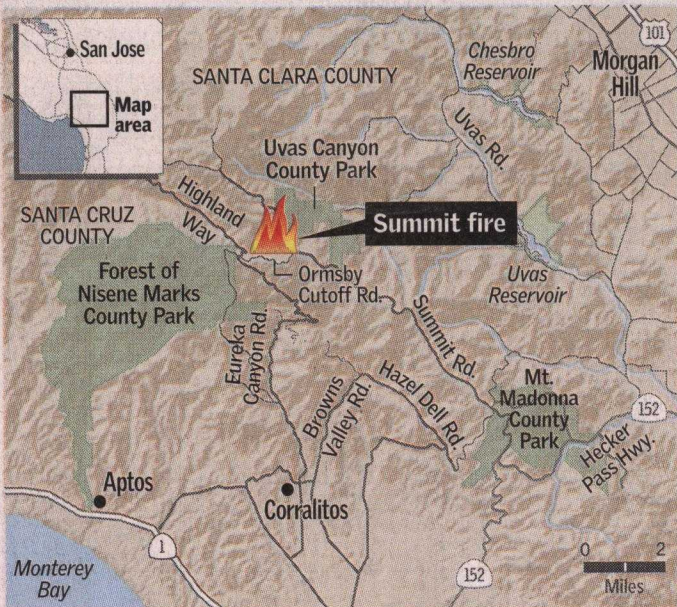
A young woman he didn't

know put her arm around him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Bethany Madsen said. "Are you sure you're not hungry or thirsty? We live next door."

Outside the market and across the street in the little grass plaza with a wooden gazebo, the residents of this rural outpost in the Pajaro Valley near Watsonville gathered to share hugs, offer their trucks and cell phones to the dispossessed and drink donated water to wash down

See CORRALITOS, Page 8A



Map provided by ESRI

MERCURY NEWS

Along charred road, 'Everything is gone'

By Patrick May, Lisa M. Krieger and Ken McLaughlin
Mercury News

Wind-whipped and brush-fueled, a fierce wildfire devoured a 3,400-acre swath of the Santa Cruz Mountains on Thursday, destroying at least a dozen buildings and forcing more than a thousand residents to flee as an army of firefighters tried to cut off the blaze before it spreads today toward more populated areas.

Behind thick smoke seen throughout the South Bay, dramatic scenes of angst

and disbelief unfolded from Summit Road to Eureka Canyon, where fire officials said the blaze was moving late Thursday as it headed toward the Santa Cruz County community of Corralitos.

"Everything is gone," said Ian McClelland, who lost his home in the remote mountains off Maymens Flat Road, near Uvas Canyon County Park. "The house above me is gone. The house below me is gone."

See FIRE, Page 6A

SSMn 523-08

FIRE | Unseasonably early wildfire

Continued from Page 1A

By Thursday evening, 350 residents had been forced to evacuate with another 1,400 asked to leave their homes voluntarily. There were no reports of injuries.

Bolstered by a record dry spring and wind gusts up to 40 mph, the Summit fire made an unseasonable entrance for a California brush blaze — an ominous message to Northern California for the fire season to come.

"This is way early," said Saratoga Fire Capt. Bill Morrison. "Usually we expect this in September or October."

The big hope today: Weaker winds that will shift toward the north and cool temperatures forecast through the weekend. Still, nobody had an estimate when the fire would be under control or what the final damage toll would be.

On Thursday, fire crews scrambled through the isolated backcountry to hit the Summit fire by ground and air, while some homeowners along Summit Road desperately cut down trees to fashion a defensible space around their homes. As word spread over news reports, so did the fire, its blackened path jumping quickly from 500 to 1,700 acres by mid-morning and doubling again in size by late afternoon. The fire was 15 percent contained by early evening.

Fast-moving flames

Mountain residents near Uvas Canyon County Park woke to the fire about 5:15 a.m. McClelland was getting ready to leave for his job at Lockheed Martin in Sunnyvale when he looked out his bedroom window and spotted the blaze over the next ridge.

"I couldn't believe it," he said. "I stepped outside and the wind was blowing 40 to 50 knots."

He and his wife, Melena, grabbed their dogs and turned the horses into the meadow. While Melena fled, Ian stayed to try to fight the fire. "I tried to get the well pumping and an ember hit a tree next to me and went up in flames," he said. "There were flames along my leg, so I said it was time to go."

The couple lost a concrete house with metal roof that McClelland said burned from the inside out. They also lost a four-car log garage and a log barn on their 23-acre property. The couple did not have fire insurance; Ian McClelland said the area is considered too high risk.

They had a 300-foot clearance around the house, "but it wasn't nearly enough."

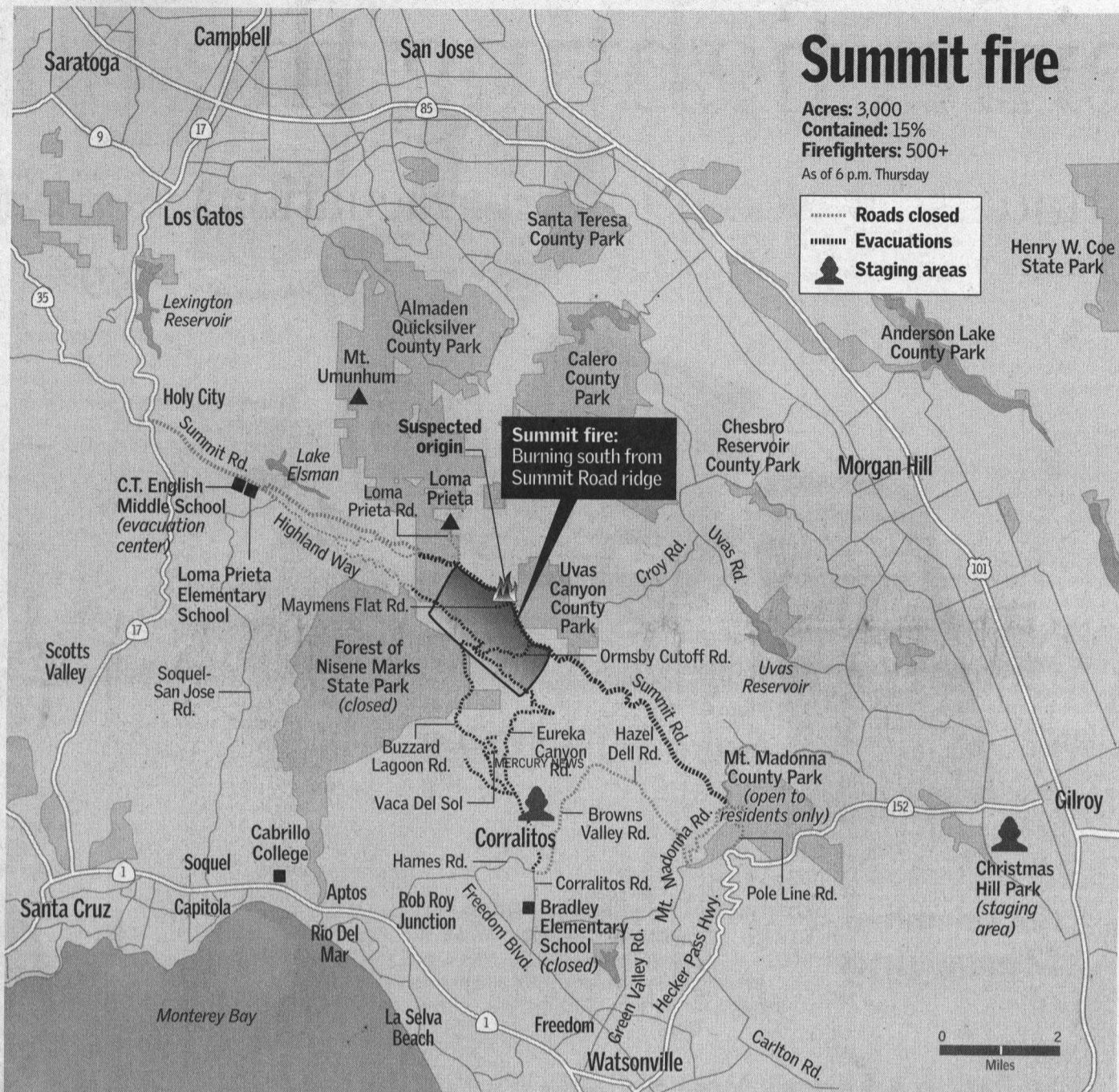
His neighbor Kenneth Kim, 66, also lost his home.

Kim had woken at 4:50 a.m. for an international phone call, and the vintner and retired electronics company executive couldn't get back to sleep. Then he smelled the burning wood and saw the flames.

As the Kims fled in their car, Kenneth honked the horn at each of the six houses they passed, alerting them to the coming danger.

Hours later, looking through binoculars, Kim could see the remains of his home smoldering.

"It looks fried," he said. "That's a very bad sign. I feel scared. I feel mad. Should I



destroyed 10 structures and burned as many as 3,000 acres, said San Jose fire Capt. Craig Schwinge from a wind-swept command post on Mount Madonna Road. Electricity had been turned off in a four- to five-square-mile area around the upper portion of Mount Madonna Road.

Among those evacuated were about 200 students from Murdock Portal Elementary School in Cupertino who had been attending a weeklong science camp south of the fire. None of the children were hurt.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, monitoring the Summit fire from a campaign event in Union City for Sen. John McCain, declared a state of emergency. "We are sending extra resources to this fire," he said, noting it's important to get enough resources as early as possible.

Holding the line

By midday, the battle plan was clear: At the southern end of the blaze, fire crews from several valley departments, including Sunnyvale and Saratoga, were struggling to keep flames from jumping to the east side of Summit Road and into Santa Clara County.

"I'm looking at all the houses to make sure they're all protected," said fire Capt. Bill Morrison of the Saratoga Fire Department, pointing to homes on the Santa Clara County side of Summit Road. "We're just trying to protect what we can until the wind dies down."

The fire broke out less than a half-mile from Shannon Watkins' house on El Doric Road.

"The smoke was almost like the movie 'The Fog,'" said Watkins, who works in Los Gatos. "It was like a monster movie to me. It was frightening."

With the winds whipping in every direction, Watkins feared the worst. Her house was nestled snugly between dozens of highly flammable trees.

She dashed out of the house, but remembered to take a cherished possession.

"I took my grandmother's ring," said Watkins, who lives at 800 feet near Mount Madonna County Park.

As she was driving to work she thought maybe she should have grabbed her passport, Social Security card and other identification items just in case the wind swept the flames to her house. She also worried about her outdoor cat, who normally shows up in the morning for food, but was missing on Thursday.

"I hope he's OK," she said.

Perhaps the eeriest remnant of the fire could be found hours after flames swept through Kenneth Kim's house, now reduced to a cinderblock shell.

As firefighters surveyed the scene, a shrill sound could be heard coming from the depths of the blackened husk.

"Oh, look," said CDF spokeswoman Angela Petersen. "The fire alarm is still ringing."

Mercury News Staff Writers Mark Gomez, Lisa Fernandez, Joshua Molina, Mary Anne Ostrom, John Woolfolk, Julia Prodis Sulek, Sandra Gonzales and Denis C. Theriault contributed to this report.



Fire crews scrambled through the isolated backcountry to hit the Summit fire by ground and air.

start over? I don't know."

The cause of the blaze remained under investigation. One resident, Holly Waddles, said she had recently seen "people clearing the land and burning brush in big piles" near where the fire started, near Summit and Maymens Flat roads. "Last week, I hiked over there and it was still smoldering."

She thinks those embers may have started the Summit Fire, "because it started so early in the morning and there were no dogs barking so there was no one out there setting this fire."

With 40 mph winds — lik-

ened to the notorious, dry Santa Ana winds of Southern California — and a lack of measurable rain in the area since late April, the weather became the fire's accomplice. Flames chewed through thick brush and timber.

By 7:30 a.m., sheriff's deputies from Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties had begun evacuating residents living in a three-mile stretch from Mount Madonna Road to Ormsby Cutoff Road, which ties in with Summit, according to Chris Morgan, a fire prevention specialist with Cal Fire. At that point, Morgan estimated there were at least 20 homes

threatened by the fire. Morgan said at least four air tankers packing 1,200 gallons of fire retardant were being used to fight the blaze.

"Our main priority is evacuations, getting people out safely," Morgan said.

At least three schools — C.T. English Middle School and Loma Prieta Elementary School, both on Summit Road in Los Gatos, and Mount Madonna School in Watsonville — were closed for the day and turned into evacuation centers for residents in the path of the blaze.

Cal Fire soon had six crews and 40 engines on the ground,

and firefighters were using four air tankers to douse it from above. They were encouraged by 30 percent humidity and relatively mild temperatures. National Weather Service forecaster Steve Anderson said "some cold Canadian air" was helping to keep the day's high at around 72. That's a little cooler than normal, said Anderson, describing it as "good for firefighting."

Desolate landscape

Still, the fire moved on, leaving a tortured landscape of soot-blanketed chaparral and the charred knobs of manzanita. In mini-dramas played out across the mountainside, fire crews from as far away as Hayward trucked in water, air-conditioning units, generators and Gatorade to set up camps from where their battle would be fought, while residents tried to gauge where the blaze was headed next.

John Lauer, a retired contractor on Browns Valley Road in Corralitos, was concerned about his cousin who lives near the threatened village south of the fire. Lauer tried unsuccessfully to talk his cousin into evacuating.

"I know how fast these fires move," Lauer said. "I've been in desert fires where you cannot outrun them."

Lauer and his cousin spent part of the day chopping down trees to create a no-fire zone around the house. The air, thick with blowing ash, resembled a nuclear winter. There was the putrid smell of smoke in the air, and the winds flared in billowing gusts.

By noon, the fire had de-

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SUMMIT WILDFIRE

Mountains awake to tense drama



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

Someone hung a sign on Serenity Way off Summit Road pleading for help to save a home from the advancing flames.

INFERNO PUTS FOLKS ON THE RUN

By Joe Rodriguez
Mercury News

The west wind hadn't let up all night. By early morning, the sound of it thrashing the canyons and agitating houses was joined by others — radio chatter and the crackling of exploding trees.

Holly Pedemonte said she jumped out of bed and turned on the television and radio. An evacuation order was in the works. The helicopters whirled and the fire engines were rumbling to her bit of paradise, the Santa Cruz Mountains along California's famed Central Coast.

"Start loading up the car," Pedemonte told her son. "We're getting out of here."

It was 7:20 a.m.

She then drove down Eureka Canyon Road to help some friends throw clothing, cherished fixtures and valuables into their SUVs. Other friends hosed water onto the roof of the home on Geronimo Way, less than a mile from the besieged town of Corralitos. Then the group drove to a safe gathering point for evacuees, albeit for a long and tense wait.

"I'm very, very scared," Pedemonte said with frazzled nerves. "I hope we don't lose our house."

Meanwhile, a large group of visitors from "over the hill" woke up to the same black sky, the smell of ashes and a fright-

ening predicament. Chrissy McPheeters and 170 schoolchildren from Cupertino had stayed overnight for a science camp at the Koinonia Conference Grounds on Eureka Canyon Road.

"The power was out, the sky was bright orange, then black," said the teacher from Murdock Portal Elementary School. "We heard the choppers and said, 'Mmmmmmm, what's going on?'"

Not hesitating

The fire was three to five miles away from Koinonia. Not waiting for an evacuation order, the conference center staff decided to bus the Cupertino students out of the wooded area immediately. The problem was, Cupertino's school buses were tied up on their daily rounds.

Julie Ales, the school's principal, called a nearby Watsonville middle school, whose principal gladly sent buses to rescue the youngsters by 9 a.m.

"No one panicked," Ales said. "In fact, the kids were having a great time. They were disappointed they had to come home."

McPheeters joked that she didn't use the experience as a "teachable moment." She had a headache when they returned home, but couldn't tell if it was from the fire or the kids. She'll probably discuss with them the science of wildfires.

Further south and just after noon, at Christmas Hill Park in Gilroy, Santa Clara County Sheriff's search and rescue

teams waited for assignments with comrades from Fremont, Newark, Union City, Hayward and Alameda County.

Later, they were followed by engines from throughout the Peninsula, towns like Brisbane and San Bruno and Woodside. Each time, when their orders arrived, the men and women changed quickly into their fire-fighting gear and drove a winding, tricky 45-minute route to try to stop the fire's southern march.

Back in the hot zone, Kevin Seth was the quintessential New Age Santa Cruzan when he woke up in the morning, but within hours he had become a biblical Good Samaritan.

The 30-year-old artist packed some glass-blowing tools into his car and took off, driving up and down Eureka Canyon Road, picking up evacuees and taking them to safety, and even giving rides to news reporters.

Close calls

On one trip, a tree branch exploded three feet in front of Seth's car as it fell into the road. Minutes later, another tree branch almost came crashing through his windshield.

Unfazed, he said the area hadn't had a fire in years. He pointed to the thick undergrowth that was fueling the fire, which was jumping up to the tree tops. As he drove, the air seemed to darken and become hotter by the minute.

Seth said he woke up to radio chatter about the fire. He and

his roommates at their home on Rider Road evacuated quickly, but Seth decided to patrol up and down Eureka, offering rides as he tried to keep tabs on his friends' homes.

Ironically, he is a regular at the annual Burning Man festival, a New Age gathering in Nevada that ends with the ritual torching of a giant, masculine figure.

"I like fire," Seth said in a moment of humor. "I'm a glass-blower."

By early afternoon, everyone in his rural neighborhood who was going to be evacuated was gone. So he drove to Corralitos, where he grew up. He talked about his cherished lifestyle in the mountains but also about the social, careless misfits who share the area.

"I hope it wasn't some crazy crackhead who started this thing cooking meth, causing all of Corralitos' to go up in flames," he said.

Seth had heard both bad and good news. Some of his friends had lost their houses. Someone on the radio was talking about a man who was trapped in a mobile home, then pulled out by helicopter. And a firefighter at the top of Eureka Canyon Road told him, "This fire is nuts. The weather is crazy. I'd get out of here if I were you."

Staff writers Ken McLaughlin, Lisa M. Krieger and Denis Theriault contributed to this report. Contact Joe Rodriguez at jrodriguez@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5767.

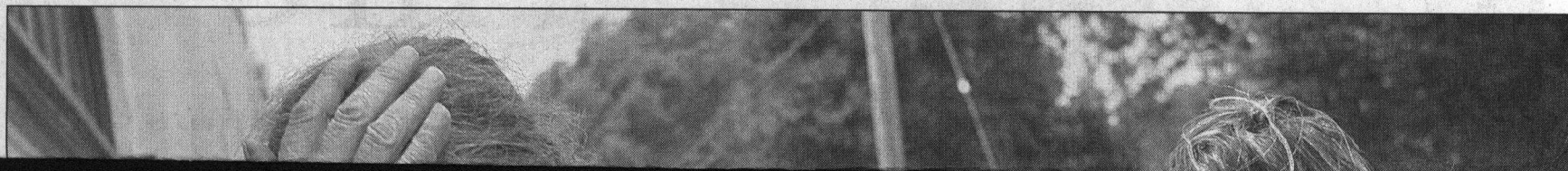
"There's a fire in my backyard! Can someone please give me a ride?"

CORRALITOS | Flames devour man's dream

Continued from Page 1A

the blowing ash.

Parents lost their tempers. Children cried. And a woman who just got word that her



house was in danger fall into the street shouting, "There's a fire in my back yard! Can someone please give me a ride?"

Someone did.

Dogs that made it out alive howled as the fire engine sirens blared through the intersection of Browns Valley and Eureka Canyon roads.

The wind blew so hard it knocked down the road barriers, toppled garbage cans and buffeted the hand-painted signs advertising the Lumberjack Breakfast on Sunday, where \$8 tickets guarantee "all the hot-cakes you can eat."

Furniture maker's loss

Most people here know Hugo Zazzara, the furniture maker who built his own house on two acres on Dove Lane, nearly eight miles up the canyon from the market. New people from Monterey and Santa Cruz have moved in over the past few years, tearing down the cabins and sheds and putting up mini-mansions in the hilly apple orchards and redwood groves. But like the George family that has a chicken ranch up Rider Road, or the Hagans who keep horses, Zazzara was one of the old-timers. He's 54 with a pony tail holding back long red hair that's turning gray.

Everyone knows how much his house meant to him, how hard it was for him to leave. When it was all over, his 33-year-old son, Nathan, stood in the town plaza with streaks of soot on his face and told the story:

Zazzara loved the Victorian architecture of the old Chart House in downtown Los Gatos, a place that is now the popular Trevese Restaurant. He dreamed of replicating it for himself one day.

In 1981, he made a trip to the Los Gatos Town Hall, copied the blueprints and built it board by board. He poured a foundation strong enough to withstand an earthquake. He gingerly installed his great-grandfather's stained glass windows from 1893 that had been handed down to him. He milled his own redwood roof decking. He painted it white with blue trim.

On Thursday morning, he was rousted by his son, who lives in a trailer down the hill. The sky was orange. The smoke billowed over Ormsby Ridge.

"The redwood forests never burn," Zazzara assured his son.

"But Dad, these winds are howling today."

The gusts were so strong that branches were cracking off



GARY REYES — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Bethany Madsen comforts Hugo Zazzara, who lost his home to the fire burning through the woods near the town of Corralitos. Zazzara built the house over 11 years.

the redwoods.

"I want to stay with the house," Zazzara said.

Father and son grabbed garden hoses and tried to douse hot spots. But the rubber melted and the water stopped as they sprayed the burning stacks of madrone and walnut near the house that Zazzara used to craft furniture.

Saving themselves

"Dad, we've got to get out of here," his son shouted as the flames headed for his father's workshop.

But Zazzara wouldn't leave this house that he never took out a loan for, a house he paid for with cash from welding jobs and furniture commissions. Nathan knew that if he didn't drag his father out, he would stay until it was too late. A battalion

chief came by and persuaded Zazzara to follow him out in his car. But when Zazzara got to the end of the dirt road, he jumped out and started heading back on foot. When his son tried to block his way, Zazzara picked up a broken redwood branch and brandished it.

"Dad, no! Please," his son said.

"I'm a man," his father said. "Leave me alone."

Nathan Zazzara thought that might be the last he'd see of his father, until later when he saw him walking through a neighbor's property. The roof of the Chart House replica had caught fire. There was nothing left to do.

The two drove into town together and pulled onto a side street around the corner from the market. For the first time, Nathan Zazzara saw his

father cry.

In the plaza, volunteers handed out water and burritos donated from a Watsonville taqueria. Two women from the church down the road announced a spaghetti dinner at 5:30. Dave Peterson from the Corralitos Market made extra sandwiches and put out urns of coffee. He gave a woman with a lost kitten a cardboard box and a bag of kitty litter.

And Bethany Madsen, 29, who lives next door, made her offer again to Hugo Zazzara.

"We're here if you need some lunch," she told him.

"Well," he mumbled, his head down, "maybe I'll come by in a little while."

Contact Julia Prodis Sulek at jsulek@mercurynews.com or (408) 278-3409.



Firefighters clear out brush Thursday to protect homes from the Summit fire on Dove Avenue off Eureka Canyon Road in Corralitos.

SUMMIT WILDFIRE

San Jose firefighter Shannon Stevens bundles his headgear as the smoke thickens near the Santa Cruz Mountains house he was guarding.



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS



GARY REYES — MERCURY NEWS

Sabine Dukes and Don Jacobs evacuate their Corralitos neighborhood as wind-driven flames threaten the community Thursday.

Fleeing, fighting the flames

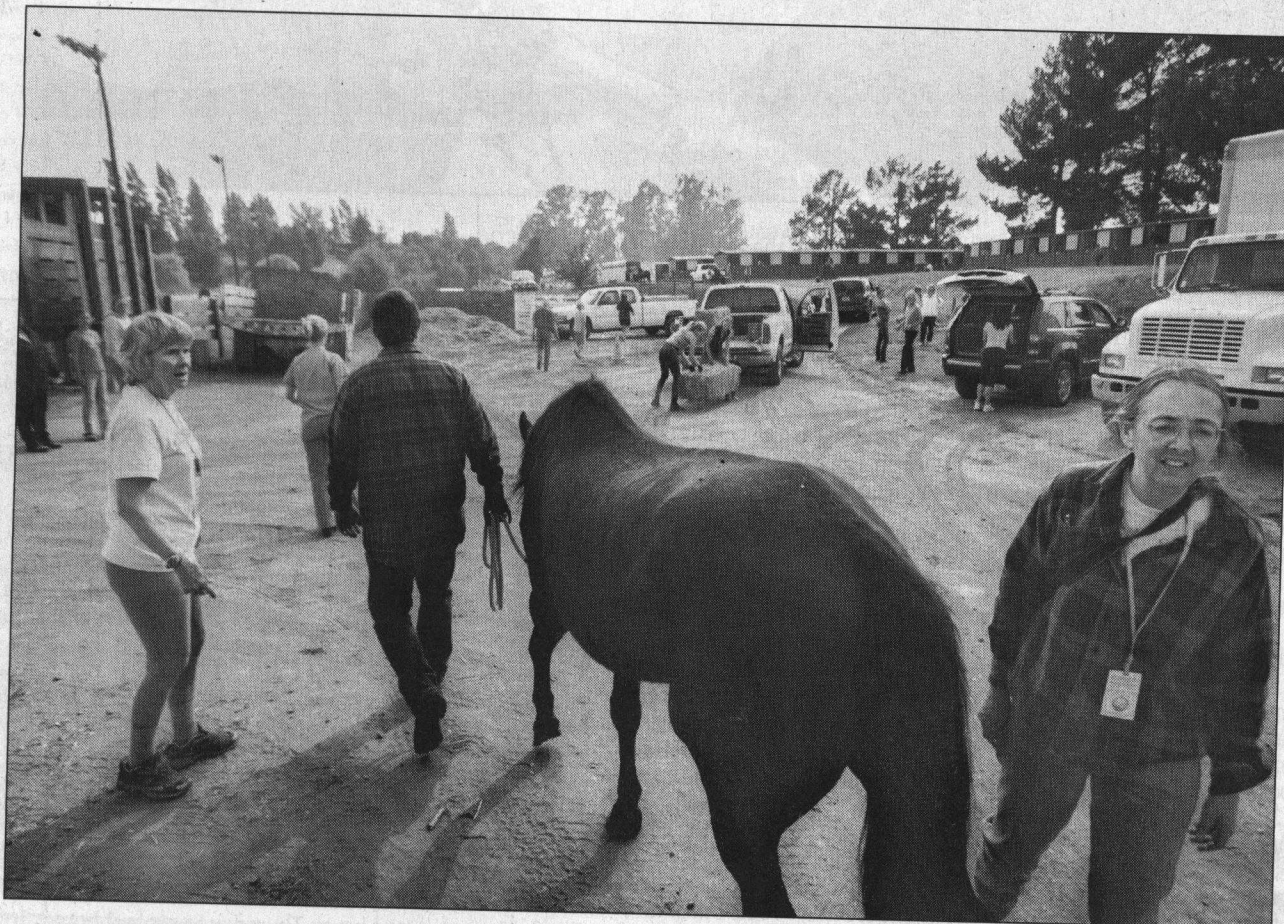
Blaze in tinder-dry woods forced evacuations as crews arrived





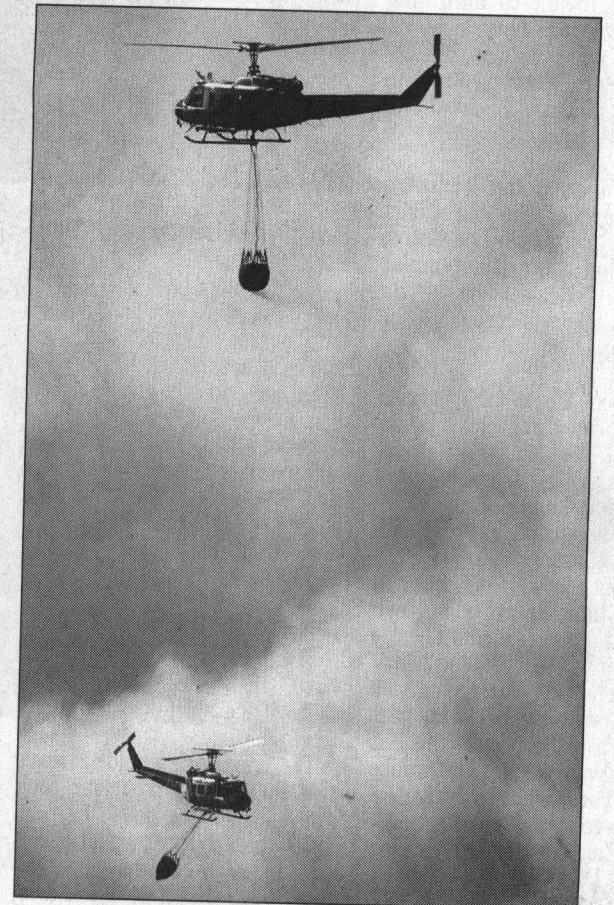
Ian McClelland surveys what's left of his Maymens Flat Road home near Uvas Canyon County Park. It was just one of the homes that had been confirmed destroyed by the Summit fire.

RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ — MERCURY NEWS



A volunteer arrives with a horse at the emergency shelter for people and livestock at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds.

DAI SUGANO — MERCURY NEWS



RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ — MERCURY NEWS