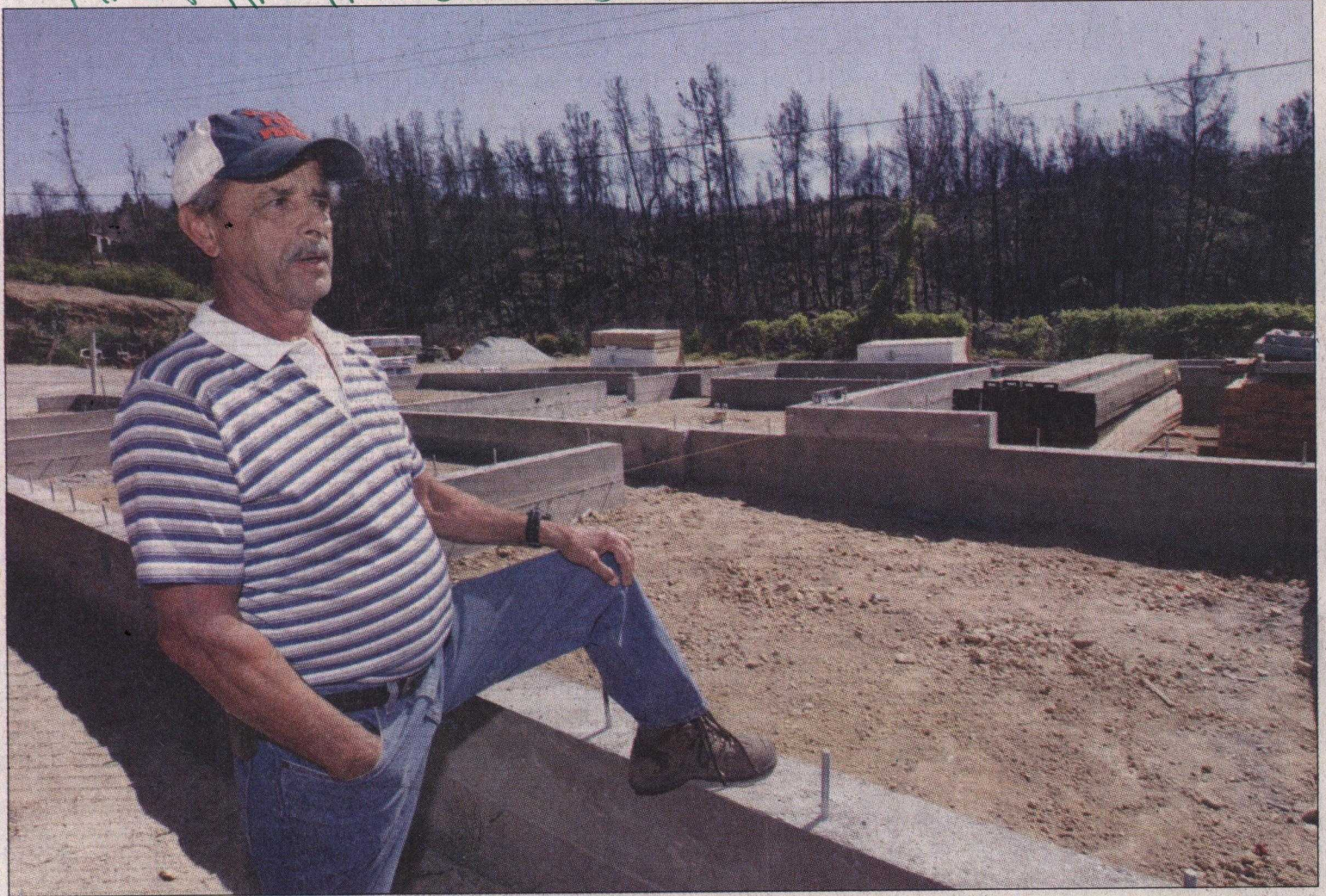


Rebuilding homes, lives

Fire + Fire Protection - 2000

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DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Ron Wohnoutka is rebuilding his home on Ormsby Trail one year after the Summit Fire destroyed it and the homes of most of his neighbors. He's already rebuilt his 88-year-old mother's home across the street. He's surrounded by burned hillsides but green sprouts are starting to emerge.

In one neighborhood ravaged by blaze, only some have returned

By JENNIFER SQUIRES
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CORRALITOS — A year ago this morning, high winds kicked up embers from a smoldering brush pile and flicked them into dry brush.

Within hours, the Summit Fire raged down the hills and destroyed homes as fire crews tried desperately to get a handle on the blaze. The 4,270-acre wildfire, which erupted between Summit Road and Maymens Flat, was the first major wildland fire in the region in years and the beginning of the worst fire season in recent memory.

Now, 12 months later, "normal" — with quite a few changes — is slowly returning to the mountains above Corralitos.

"People are in good spirits," said Dave Peterson, the owner of Corralitos Market. "That was a really devastating time. ... Now people are coming out of it and starting their lives over."

Patches of green are reclaiming the moonscape hillsides and fresh shoots are sprouting on the trunks of charred madrone trees. At one destroyed home, a wisteria hedge

SUMMIT FIRE

ACRES BURNED: 4,270

STARTED: May 22, 2008 at 5:20 a.m.

CONTAINED: 6 p.m. May 27

LOCATION: Summit Road and Maymens Flats, between Corralitos and the town of Loma Prieta in Santa Clara County

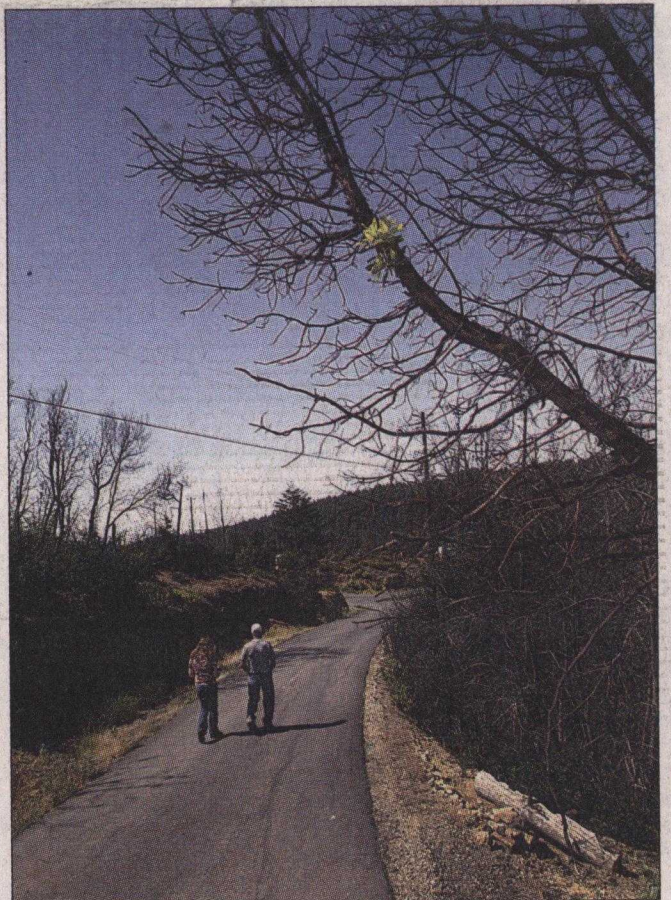
CAUSE: Six not properly attended burn piles at 31000 Summit Road, according to Cal Fire. The case was given to the Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office in the summer and contractor Channing Verden, 60, of Los Gatos has pleaded not guilty.

STRUCTURES DESTROYED: 63 homes and 69 outbuildings

COST TO FIGHT FIRE: \$14.85 million

that survived the fire flourishes on the fence.

The residents of some of the 63 homes consumed by flames are rebuilding, but this time their houses have sprinkler systems built into the ceilings and, out front, fire hydrants and two squat dark-green tanks that



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

A burned-out madrone sprouts a tiny section of new leaves as life comes back to the mountains above Corralitos one year after the Summit Fire.

SEE FIRE ON A2

FIRE

Continued from A1

together hold 1,000 gallons of water. All are county requirements for an area considered "urban-wildland interface."

But for every family rebuilding, it seems one has left the mountain. On Ormsby Cutoff Trail, one of the areas most decimated by the fire, four of nine families are coming back, according to Ron Wohnoutka, one resident who is rebuilding.

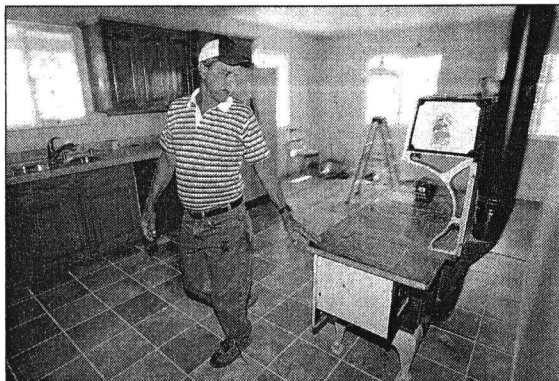
"That's the sad part with the fire — we lost a lot of neighbors," he said. "This was a great neighborhood."

The families driven out of Wohnoutka's neighborhood by flames will come back together for the first time Saturday for a barbecue. It may be their final neighborhood gathering. It also seems to be the only event commemorating the fire, though much of the Corralitos community will gather Sunday at the 50th annual Corralitos Padres breakfast.

"All the community is really rallying together," said Peterson, who is also a Padre. "Some of the people are just now getting back."

One of the first homes rebuilt in the fire zone belongs to Wohnoutka's mother, Gertrude, 88. Her three-bedroom, two-bath house with hardwood and tile floors follows the same floor plan as her house that went up in flames, but this time around the wooden exterior has been traded out for stucco, another county building requirement.

"It's been quite a struggle to get everything going," Wohnoutka said. "We worked on mom's house first because she wanted to get back up



Ron Wohnoutka found his mother an antique stove like the one she lost in the Summit Fire.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

there as soon as possible."

If all goes as planned, she'll move back in early next month. Across the street, Wohnoutka has a crew framing his new house this weekend. He and his wife have been living in a Rio del Mar rental for the past year, but he said never questioned returning to the mountain, where bees, crickets and birds already have moved back in.

"It's so pretty up here. It's so peaceful," Wohnoutka said as he looked out toward Monterey Bay from the concrete foundation of his new 3,100-square-foot home. "I just love it here."

But with all the optimism comes a twinge of concern. Cal Fire Capt. Tony Akin, who is stationed at the Corralitos firehouse, said the fire conditions this spring mirror what they were a year ago.

"We're in the exact same level as before, if not worse," he said.

Akin explained that the combination of dry vegetation and warm days is dangerous and it doesn't take much to drive a fire out of control. The Summit Fire sparked before fire season was declared last year, igniting in 56-degree weather with a layer of morning fog on the hills. However, it was windy that day.

Los Gatos contractor Channing Verden, 50, was arrested in April and charged with starting the Summit Fire. He has pleaded not guilty to one count of causing a fire that caused an inhabited structure or property to burn and faces seven years in prison if convicted.

Verden allegedly had been clearing vegetation from a property on the summit and allowed two burn piles to smolder, which sparked the wildfire. A few illegal controlled burns have gotten loose already this spring, Akin said, but the lack of wind has prevented the fires from spreading.

Beginning this weekend, Cal Fire will increase the number of fire engines it staffs in the Santa Cruz-San Mateo district from four to seven although fire season officially has not begun.

On Monday, 16 firefighters will begin inspecting properties to ensure people are clearing the required "defensible space" around structures. Akin said that, already, he has seen more residents taking care to reduce fire danger near their homes by maintaining that 100-foot clearance.

"Those three fires — for the people in the mountains here — that was a wake-up call," he said.