

Blaze chars

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monastery

Fires to
Fire Protection

\$350,000 damage reported at Buddhist mountain retreat

By Maya Suryaraman
Mercury News Staff Writer

A community of Vietnamese Buddhist monks north of Mount Madonna Park lost part of their monastery and several 300-year-old manuscripts in a raging fire Tuesday that caused \$350,000 in damage, the Salsipuedes Fire Department said.

The blaze at the Tu Vien Kimson monastery, at 574 Summit Road in Santa Cruz County, started about 11:30 a.m. in the building that housed the monks' office and library. Traveling with lightning speed, it leaped to two other buildings and to the tops of surrounding redwood and pine trees before it was brought under control an hour later.

"The tops of the flames were 120 feet in the air," said Fire Chief Ronald Hart. "The redwood and pine trees were blazing."

No one was injured.

About five engines and 40 firefighters from five departments helped bring the blaze under control.

Because of thick fog at the summit, two helicopters flown in to assist were unable to land, and the pilots could not even to see the fire, Hart said. But the fog also saved the day, preventing a devastating wildfire, he said. The monastery is about a quarter mile off the road,

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— Chief Ronald Hart

in a clearing surrounded by grass, brush and forest.

"If it (the fire) had happened three days ago when it was sunny and hot, we could have had another Lexington," Hart said, referring to the 1985 wildfire near Lexington Reservoir in Santa Clara County. That fire took 10 days to control.

Two of the monastery's five buildings were destroyed. The office and library complex burned to the ground, consuming computers, all the monastery's paperwork and irreplaceable 300-year-old manuscripts, the value of which has not yet been determined.

Monks at the monastery were not available for comment Tuesday. Neighbors said the religious community has been at its current location in the Santa Cruz Mountains for about eight years.

In addition to being a monastery, it sponsors retreats for the general public.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation.