

Extinguished, Exhausted

Fire + Fire Prevention - 2000

6-23-08

Mary Lou Samms fights back tears as she talks about her two dogs and her cat. The animals were killed in the Trabing Fire, which also destroyed her Grizzly Oaks Lane home. County Animal Services is holding the remains of Samm's two dogs for her, as she wants to bury them on the property.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

With fire now out, families face daunting tasks ahead

By J.M. BROWN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

LARKIN VALLEY — South County residents whose homes dot the valleys and ridges scorched by the 630-acre Trabing Fire that ripped through Larkin Valley returned to their homes for the first time Sunday to survey the damage, search for surviving valuables and comfort one another.

Nurse Mary Lou Samms, whose 2,500-square-foot, two-story refuge at 200 Grizzly Oaks Lane was destroyed, held tightly to a fire-licked page of an old book that was part of a collection left to her by her late parents and grandparents.

It was one of the few possessions she could recognize after Friday's fast-moving blaze roared over her 6½-acre property, killing her two Labradors and cat. Authorities recovered the bodies of 3-year-old Cookie and 2-year-old Lady still inside their pen in her front yard, but Samms had yet to find the remains of her 5-year-old black cat, Bebe.

"We're gonna start over," Samms, who was working at San Jose's Good Samaritan Hospital when the fire broke out, said as she began the arduous process of cleaning up. Before she rebuilds, however, she intends to cut down as many invasive eucalyptus trees around her property as possible.

"I'm going to get Roundup and spray every little sprout that comes up," she said before getting a hug from neighbor Linda Grande, whose home at 1121 Trabing was spared.

"We just got lucky," said Grande, a mortgage specialist whose 5,300-square-foot Spanish-tiled house was saved by firefighters. "They were amazing."

After officials lifted all evacuation orders at 7 a.m. Sunday, some residents were left to sift through piles of ash as they set their sights on rebuilding with insurance money, while others returned to virtually unscathed homes firefighters were able to save. Some recalled driving through walls of flames and columns of smoke as they fled their homes, or in some cases tried to reach their homes to save pets and irreplaceable belongings.

At least 15 structures were

California firefighters on overload

By MARCUS WOHLSEN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN FRANCISCO — Hundreds of wildfires sparked by lightning flared Sunday across the heart of wine country and remote forests in Northern California, the latest batch of destructive blazes in the bone-dry state.

One had spread across nearly 6 square miles by early Sunday after starting the previous afternoon in Napa County and quickly moving into a mostly rural area of Solano County.

The fire threatened more than 100 buildings as it fed on grassy woodland about 40 miles southwest of Sacramento, said Roger Archey, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire.

It was 35 percent contained Sunday evening and had destroyed one home, officials said. Evacuations were ordered for some residents, said agency spokeswoman



A firefighter works Trabing Fire cleanup Sunday.

At A Glance

ACRES BURNED: 630.

CONTAINED: Full containment Sunday night.

STRUCTURES DESTROYED: An estimated 15.

EVACUATIONS: 2,000 ordered, lifted 7 a.m. Sunday.

SHELTER: Santa Cruz County chapter of American Red Cross, 462-2881.

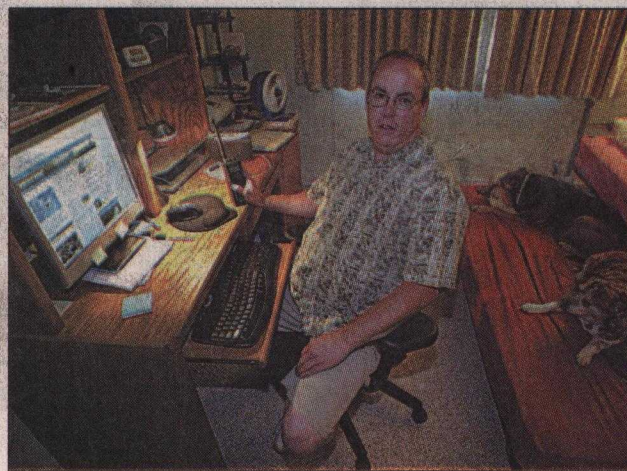
CAUSE: Initial reports indicated fires were intentionally set by a motorcyclist heading north on Highway 1. Cause remains under investigation.

INJURIES: Three minor to firefighters.

ROAD CLOSURES: Buena Vista Drive between Trabing Road and Larkin Valley Road; Highway 152 at Casserly Road. Larkin Valley Road reopened.

ANIMAL EVACUATIONS: Santa Cruz Animal Services Authority is available to help with livestock and domesticated animals. People needing assistance moving livestock or sheltering pets should call 454-7303, press No. 1. Donations of grass hay or shavings for animal bedding can be brought to the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds in Watsonville. Monetary donations and gas cards for volunteer rescuers also appreciated. Call 535-2181.

Mark Woodward is 'Santa Cruz Native,' the blogger who gleaned fire information from county dispatchers and fire crews via his police scanner during the Trabing Fire and put it immediately on a Sentinel online forum to keep viewers informed.



In midst of crisis, blogger steps to fore

By NATHAN ICHTERTZ
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

As firefighters battled the Trabing Fire last week, Mark Woodward worked alongside them from his Scotts Valley home office — by blogging.

Woodward, who blogs under the name Santa Cruz Native, was armed with a Radio Shack scanner, and he relayed real-time information from authorities to often confused, worried residents and their friends and loved ones.

"I heard the first dispatch of the roadside fire," said Woodward, who

was sitting at his computer as news of the fire first crackled through his scanner.

Starting around 2 p.m., shortly after the fire broke out Friday, Woodward relayed information on evacuations, road closures and the direction the fire was spreading on a forum on www.santacruzsentinel.com. He said Sunday he wanted to dispel any rumors and false information circulating the Internet so people could find useful information as quickly as possible.

The fire, which quickly spread to

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Trabing

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burned, but crews were still assessing the damage Sunday after lightning strikes sparked several blazes Saturday and delayed the cleanup.

On Sunday, a flare-up believed to be a remnant of the month-old Summit Fire was spotted about 4:05 p.m. in a deep canyon off of Russell Ridge just south of Summit Road and Ormsby Cutoff Road, where numerous homes were destroyed in May. Paul Van Gerwen, a Cal Fire spokesman, said crews were battling that blaze, which may have been caused by Saturday's lightning.

The Trabing Fire — which began around 2 p.m. Friday between Highway 1 and Trabing Road — was fully contained Sunday night and fully controlled Tuesday night. All roads were reopened Sunday except for Buena Vista Drive from Trabing Road to Larkin Valley Road, due to downed power lines.

Officials said Sunday they were still investigating the cause and could not confirm reports that a motorcyclist had been spotted setting several small blazes along the freeway. A source close to the fire response reported Friday that authorities had detained someone in connection with the blaze, but Lt. Gretchen Hurley of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office said Sunday that no one was ever placed in custody.

Charles Cunningham, who lives at 1126 Trabing Road and was in San Francisco when the fire erupted, was among the fortunate. He had heard from a neighbor that his 1,400-square-foot house on 10 acres that had belonged to his late father had been spared, but "until this morning, I couldn't confirm any of it."

As he and wife Barbara waited on the edge of the fire Saturday, he recalled "thinking about the worst-case scenario and the best-case scenario. We were prepared for the worst."

Neighbors Fred Thoits, who lives at 205 Grizzly Oaks Lane, and Richard Simon, at 1120 Trabing Road, lost their homes. Samms, who lives up the road



Dan Coyo/Sentinel

Bruce Begley sifts through the ashes of his Trabing Road home, which included a \$50,000 guitar collection and 2,000 record albums. He found a ceramic whistle that still carried a tune.

from all of them, said Thoits apologized for not being able to save her dogs as he fled the flames.

"It's overwhelming," Samms said between tears as a friend helped her try to find jewelry and \$3,700 in cash she had stashed in her bedroom. "I found the love of family and friends."

Samms, who bought the fixer-upper five years ago, said she had replaced its shake roof and taken other steps to reduce the threat of fire.

"I know the fire department did everything they could," she said.

Bruce Begley and his girlfriend, Michelle Lewis, pieced through the rubble of his home at 675 Trabing Road, one of four structures on his family's 30-year-old compound, which his mother says she wants to

rebuild. Begley, a contractor who also plays in local bands Vincent's Ear and El Cuarto Verde, said he lost 40 guitars, sound equipment and several thousand LP records.

Begley, who reached his house briefly on Friday as flames lined the road, was astounded at what did survive — an indoor cat who came running up from the woods when he arrived Sunday, and a ceramic Mayan whistle bird he bought last year at the Santa Cruz flea market.

But his girlfriend's prized possession, a 2001 Harley Sportster, sat melted in a storage barn.

"She died with dignity," Lewis said.

At least six other vehicles burned on the three-acre property, including a neighbor's black Jeep that was abandoned after the woman and her friends fled

the fire with Begley on Friday. Curiously, tomato sauce from Begley's kitchen had survived inside its can, as did a bottle of hot sauce from his charred refrigerator.

When Tiffany Wilkerson ran out of her house on Windsong Way, she didn't even have a chance to grab shoes, much less track down the two rare ocelots that lived with her. The cats, which are on international list of endangered species, were fertile females named India and Kenya; they haven't been found yet.

Wilkerson and boyfriend Greyson Lanzarotta weren't giving up hope that the cats would find their way back. Lanzarotta left out raw meat to attract the cats.

The couple said breeding the ocelots can fetch more than

\$20,000.

"You never realize what you've lost until you've lost it all," Lanzarotta said.

Another resident of Windsong Way, Hal Branges, who lost his home, said two of his 21 llamas perished when a burning structure collapsed on them. The others were hustled away to safety; they're now at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds.

After chatting with Branges about their losses, Lanzarotta said, "At this point, you might as well laugh because the other option is to cry."

Sentinel correspondent Keenan Weatherford contributed to this report.

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State

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Nancy Carniglia.

Wildfires have destroyed more than 175 homes in Northern California so far this year. Blazes started popping up in the region just as California's unofficial fire season began in mid-May, following the state's driest two-month period on record.

Two blazes about 25 miles south of San Jose forced several residents from their homes Sunday. The fires covered about 2 square miles Sunday evening. Officials said one was 30 percent contained, the other 40 percent and that most residents would be let back into their homes by Monday. The fires were also blamed on lightning.

Thunderstorms were responsible for as many as 75 fires in Shasta-Trinity National Forest, about 160 miles north of Sacramento. They ranged in size from less than an acre to more than a square mile. None immediately threatened homes, said Forest Service spokesman Michael Odle.

Mendocino County had as many as 90 fires, charring a total of 5,000 acres, Cal Fire officials said.

South of San Francisco, in Santa Cruz County, a fire that destroyed homes and closed a stretch of highway was contained Sunday after charring just less than a square mile. Evacuation orders were lifted Saturday, a day after roughly 2,000 people fled their homes.

The Trabing Fire was the third major blaze to hit Santa Cruz County in the past month. A 520-acre blaze destroyed 11 buildings in the Santa Cruz Mountains last week, and a fire near Corralitos covered more than 4,200 acres and destroyed about 100 buildings a week before that.

Along the coast in the Los Padres National Forest, a wildfire burning since Saturday forced 75 homes and businesses to be evacuated. And just miles away, firefighters worked to stanch a huge fire that has destroyed two homes since it began two weeks ago. It was nearly 60 percent contained after charring 83 square miles.

Near the Nevada border, authorities said Sunday that they are studying a "person of interest" in last summer's catastrophic Lake Tahoe wildfire but lack enough evidence to make an arrest.