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WILDFIRES' HEAD START



DAVID M. BARREDA — MERCURY NEWS

Travis Eicher tries to get a fix on the Martin fire, which broke out in Bonny Doon on Wednesday just before 3 p.m.

Fire & Fire Protection - 2008
EARLY FIRE SEASON

Bonny Doon blaze erupts; firefighters spread thin

By John Woolfolk and Sandra Gonzales
Mercury News

Warm, dry winds Wednesday fanned yet another roaring blaze in the Santa Cruz Mountains, whipping through the heavily forested area of Bonny Doon and forcing the evacuation of 1,400 residents.

Just three weeks after a fierce wildfire torched 4,270 acres off Summit Road and burned 35 homes, thick columns of smoke were once again visible for miles as firefighters scrambled to extinguish the conflagration burning in the tiny mountain community.

Wednesday's wind-whipped, brush-fueled Martin fire was the latest in a batch

of wildfires that ignited over the past two days in Northern California, from the coast to the Sierra foothills — an ominous sign for the summer.

"The biggest concern is that we are having a lot of fire activity," said Paul Van Gerwen, Bay Area spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "The vegetation is in a critical state, and we're going to be coming up on the Fourth of July and all the concerns around that."

By early evening, the Martin fire was threatening at least 1,000 homes and the

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BLAZES BURNING WEDNESDAY



Source: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, National Weather Service
MERCURY NEWS

MARTIN FIRE
1,000 homes threatened in Santa Cruz Mountains

FORECAST
Warm winds to drop; highs in 80s to 90s

55mn 6/20/08
CAREER IN THE FOREST CANOPY

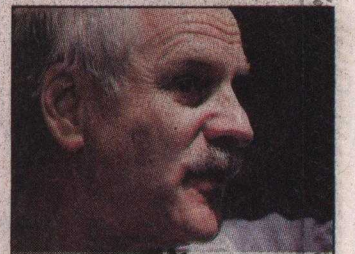
A modern-day lumberjack, protecting life and limb

By Bruce Newman
Mercury News

For days, fire had scorched the giant redwood tree, so that its blackened bark looked like a charcoal candle. But it wasn't the flames or the falling embers that worried Steve Liebenberg as he dug his spurs into the flesh of the 240-foot tree and hurtled up its side.

Liebenberg was dragging a fire hose and a chain saw up toward a knothole that probably first blinked open before Columbus sailed to America. Though it was a dozen years ago, the memory of that fire never leaves him.

Still rugged at 58, Liebenberg is the most veteran woodsman working in Califor-



Liebenberg
Has reputation for climbing trees while they're still on fire.

nia's most venerable forest during an already devastating fire season, and his privately owned tree service is the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's last line of defense. On Wednesday, he

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FIRE | Parched vegetation worries firefighters

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Bonny Doon Winery tasting room, with the fast-moving blaze expected to grow to 1,500 acres by today.

Though there were reports of damaged homes, fire officials said they could not confirm how many had been destroyed or damaged.

And with no estimate of containment and continued winds, fire officials feared the flames would move into more populated areas through the night.

Mandatory evacuations were ordered for Ice Cream Grade, Pine Flat and Bonny Doon roads as hundreds of firefighters descended on the hillside to douse the flames around the Bonny Doon Ecological Reserve — a large open space surrounded by homes. At least a dozen people took shelter at an evacuation center at a Santa Cruz County school.

Wednesday's wildfire erupted on Martin Road in Santa Cruz County just before 3 p.m., but dry winds accelerated the flames and it grew to hundreds of acres within an hour. The cause of

the fire is under investigation, and there were no injuries reported.

With her house dangerously near the blaze on Ice Cream Grade, Stephanie Jessen prepared to evacuate. "It jumped from two acres to 15 acres in about two minutes," Jessen said.

At about 4:10 p.m., Gary Meeham, who owns Bonny Doon Farm, was prepared to fight the blaze if he had to. He already had his fire hoses out. "The smoke is going over us and it's pretty intense. It's coming in our direction."

The blazes scattered across Northern California were taxing firefighters' ability to stay on top of them, Van Gerwen said, making them worry how they'll handle the next one.

"The resources we have stationed around the state are all being tied up," Van Gerwen said. "When you have five or six fires going, you start to have things spread pretty thin. . . . Any new fires that occur, there's a risk of not being able to control them."

Wednesday's fire outbreak was driven by strong offshore winds that howled over the East Bay hills at 30 to 35 mph



DAVID M. BARREDA — MERCURY NEWS

Cal Fire firefighter Justin Davis tries to keep the flames from spreading in high winds Wednesday afternoon in Bonny Doon.

overnight with gusts up to 50 mph. Similar to the Santa Ana winds notorious for fanning wildfires throughout Southern California, the offshore winds are warmer and drier than the prevailing onshore breezes that waft from the Pacific Ocean.

With vegetation already parched and browned by a record rainless spring, the

winds only make things drier, and any spark can quickly fan a raging blaze, Van Gerwen said. Vegetation normally isn't this dry until August.

"The state of the vegetation is two months ahead of schedule," Van Gerwen said.

Will Pi, meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said offshore winds are common in spring but have been

more frequent this year.

"It's been happening quite frequently, more than usual this season," Pi said. "It's been very dry. We've seen relative humidities down below 10 percent."

Forecasters said the winds on the highest ridges were expected to drop to 10 to 20 mph by today, with temperatures in the 80s and 90s. However, temperatures are expected to cool this weekend to the 70s in San Jose and 60s along the coast.

High winds sparked an early start to fire season last month when they fanned the Summit blaze into the largest Santa Cruz County wildfire in at least a century. That fire, which began before dawn May 22 and was contained May 30, remains under investigation.

Elsewhere, firefighters battled an 860-acre fire near Cloverdale in Sonoma County, which was 80 percent contained Wednesday evening. Smaller blazes in Contra Costa and San Mateo counties also kept firefighters working overnight Tuesday.

Farther down the coast, firefighters were still strug-

gling to contain the Indians fire, which began Sunday in the Ventana Wilderness 21 miles west of King City and had grown to 4,200 acres by Wednesday. Only 10 percent contained, it was threatening 30 homes.

Two miles south of Oroville in the Sierra foothills, the Ophir fire that erupted around 11:30 a.m. Tuesday had scorched 1,600 acres and 21 homes by Wednesday and was just 60 percent contained. Another Butte County fire that broke out Wednesday had consumed 200 acres and was forcing evacuations.

Farther south in the foothills, firefighters were nearing containment of a 1,200-acre fire in Tuolumne County sparked Tuesday afternoon.

Firefighters Wednesday contained three other fires that erupted Tuesday in Sacramento, Madera and El Dorado counties that together charred 9,800 acres.

The Santa Cruz Sentinel contributed to this report.

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THE MARTIN FIRE

TREES | Arborist of the ancients

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aced to the Bonny Doon fire to help evacuate horses.

"When there's something nobody else can do, a tree on fire that nobody else can put out," says Liebenberg, "they call me."

Billowing black smoke from deep within the tree's spidery network of rot — varicose veins of decay, inside a trunk more than 10 feet in diameter — revealed that the tallest redwood in the Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park near Santa Cruz was being consumed from the inside out.

As he pumped 500 gallons of water into the knothole, he could hear the tree's innards heave a hissing, reptilian sigh as water met the rising fire.

"If you have a lot of water and a lot of heat in a confined area, it will blow the tree to pieces," he says. "Steam is incredibly powerful. And I'm on the tree. So if it blows, I'm gone."

On the ground, where fire crews gathered to watch Liebenberg work, water poured from the tree's base — blood red from tannic acid, and heated to more than 100 degrees. As Liebenberg held the tree in a wary embrace, what worried him was the possibility that at any moment during the delicate operation, his world could blow up in his face.

For 41 years, this third-generation lumberjack has survived while servicing precious, old-growth forests. Liebenberg is revered within Cal Fire for his ability to extinguish trees that often can burn for weeks, sometimes sparking new wildfires.

But equally important is his ability to spot, and safely bring down, dangerous limbs that might fall out of another millennium and land on your head in this one.

"He's like an acrobat," says Ron Prince, former chief of the Santa Cruz city fire department. "I've seen him jump from tree to tree hundreds of feet in the air, clearing out all the dead and dry material. He's not only an incredible technician, but fearless, obviously."

Obviously. But not exactly. Before he ever climbed his first tree, Liebenberg discovered something that would prove to be important: He is terrified of heights.

"When I was a kid, I went with my dad to some building in San Francisco where we were way up high," he recalls, pausing slightly. "And when I was near the window and I almost had a heart attack."

That fear is always there, he says, but at times it overtakes him. In 1996, while working high on a 202-foot fir tree in Bonny Doon, Liebenberg began to feel clammy and light-headed when he suddenly realized exactly where he was. "It's fine when you're working," he says, "but as soon as you stop, you become mortal. I sat there for about two minutes and began to freeze up. It's a horrible feeling." So he hangs on for dear life.



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Steve Liebenberg, 58, has spent four decades climbing into forest canopies. His specialty is finding ways to save old-growth redwoods. "When there's something nobody else can do, a tree on fire that nobody else can put out," Liebenberg says, "they call me."



Liebenberg also keeps pet rattlesnakes. His appearances with a six-foot rattler were highlights of the Santa Cruz County Fair.

"I am the ultimate tree hugger," Liebenberg says. "I do it to save my life, and to save theirs."

He learned his specialized skills from his father, Les Liebenberg, who was still climbing and cutting big trees until he was 81, a year before he died.

"My dad taught me the way to get past fear is to accept death," Steve says. "You make a commitment, and you live in this little world that's right in front of you, like a bubble, because one mistake and you're dead. There's no falling a hundred feet and recovering."

"You want to know what faith is? It's letting go and just flying," Liebenberg says, describing the art of hooking and

unhooking the cable that holds him to the tree. "Before I switch trees, I'm hooked in and balanced. Then I disconnect and it's all ... faith. You can't screw up. I don't know why I don't pass out."

Nearing 60, Liebenberg does not scamper up and down trees as fast as he did in 1976, when he was the state champion high climber. He leaves the racing moves to his teenage son, who also has developed a love of the woods. But even with 65 pounds of gear strapped to his belt, including the souped-up chain saw that runs on 110-octane NASCAR racing fuel, Liebenberg doesn't dawdle. "I climb hazard trees that are at risk of falling," he says,

"so I have to get up as fast as I can."

There was a time when he lingered in the treetops. It was five years ago when his daughter, Veronica, was seriously ill. Liebenberg's fourth wife, Joanne, had just died of brain cancer, slipping away while he was out on a job.

"She was a magical thing in my life," he says. Almost immediately after her death, his daughter was diagnosed with lymphoma.

"This was before picture phones," he says. "So I used to call my daughter in the hospital and tell her I was in a tree, then I'd carve her initials and take a picture of the view." On weekends, he would take the pictures to her in the hos-

STEVE LIEBENBERG

Birthplace/hometown: Santa Cruz

Age: 58

Favorite chain saw: Stihl 090

First rattlesnake owned: Sidney

First rattlesnake to bite him: Crackers.

Family: Divorced three times and widowed. Four children: A.J., 37; Tarrah, 27; Paige, 21; Forrest, 15.

Name of company: Liebenberg Tree Service & Lumber Mfg.

Source: Mercury News

pital, so she could see the mark she had made on the forest. Veronica died six months after his wife. "It was a long climb out from that," Liebenberg says slowly.

No matter how often Liebenberg flirted with death in the treetops, it was the people he loved — the ones with feet planted firmly on the ground — who kept dying on him. And to make matters worse, his beloved Uncle Ray was also dying, and needed to be cared for. Ray Liebenberg had run for governor against Jerry Brown in the '70s. A lumberjack with flowing white hair, a beard down to his chest, who prowled the backwoods in a Cadillac loaded with chain saws, he was not an obvious choice for high office — and got the votes to prove it.

Around the same time, Steve and his father formed American Rattlesnake Trainers, performing for schools and at logging competitions with snakes they brought back from Texas rattler roundups. For years, one of the most eagerly awaited appearances at the Santa Cruz County Fair was Steve Liebenberg's six-foot diamondback, Uncle Sam, pulling a miniature Conestoga wagon around the fairgrounds.

Liebenberg is featured in a book titled "Snake Venom Poisoning" — his chapter is right next to one on cults — as a result of being bitten 10 times by

his slithering pets. There was a time when the possibility of a rattler strike bothered him. "We thought if you got bit by a rattlesnake, you died," he says. "That was like a rule in the cowboy movies."

As these poisonous strikes began to add up, his father counseled against bragging about them. "His dad used to say, 'Steve, don't tell them you've been bitten seven times,'" recalls Robin Musitelli, Liebenberg's sister-in-law. "Tell them you've been bitten five times. Otherwise, you sound crazy."

At the moment, he has only two pet rattlers — Dash and Squishy — but considers them the safest part of his day.

"People don't always realize they're taking their life in their hands when they go into the woods," Liebenberg says. "There's no such thing as a safe forest, and not a tree out there won't kill you dead."

Liebenberg is training his 15-year-old son to follow in his footsteps, to walk among the crowned heads of the oldest living things on Earth. The boy's name is Forrest, but sometimes you can't see him for the trees.

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