

Surviving the Sylmar Wildfire, Nov. 15, 2008  
By Natalie Wooldridge

Living in the middle of a sprawling suburban neighborhood, nearly a mile from the base of Los Pinetos Peak in the eastern corner of the Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, I've always considered my home, my animals, and myself relatively safe from the dangers of Southern California Wildfires. I mean, there's this raised 8 lane freeway (the 210), a 4-lane boulevard (Foothill), and 3 streets worth of homes between me and anything resembling "wilderness."

No problemo, right?

Oh sure, I've moved the horses I keep on my little half acre to friends' homes further afield a few times when smoke blanketed us from fires elsewhere, or freeways got closed and I couldn't get them home from an event or trip, but never in the 8 years of fire seasons while living in Sylmar, have I ever felt like we were in any real danger.

All that changed in the wee hours of Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008.

Fact was, my home, my animals, my roommates, friends and I, we really were pretty safe from the wildfire that swept west towards us from Veterans Park in Sylmar about 5 miles from where we live about 10:30 the night of Friday, Nov. 14. I had gone to bed that night about 9:30 with no idea that there even was a fire. A month earlier there'd be a fire 8 miles west of us in Lopez Canyon that had everyone fairly upset for a while, but neither it nor its smoke and debris ever got anywhere near us. Why would this one be any different?

I learned of the Sayre Fire near Veterans Park in Sylmar about 11 p.m. when a friend roused me from a dead sleep with a phone call. A mental check of geography even in my groggy state assured me we were safe and at least 5 miles away. Checking the TV news and internet, there was no evacuation warning for my neighborhood. Nothing indicated we were in any danger. I went back to bed only to be roused again around 2 a.m. when the unthinkable happened: Nearly 500 elegant modular homes in the Oakridge development next to the idyllic Stetson Ranch Equestrian Park less than a mile east of my neighborhood turned into a hellish inferno as the wildfire swept past.

Whipped by 60 mile per hour "Santa Ana" winds, the burning modular homes started a driving storm of huge embers, burning debris and thick, choking smoke blanketing my neighborhood bordered by 210 and I 5 freeways.

My safe neighborhood was now the front lines of chaos.

Flames from the burning modular homes rose 60 feet or more (we could see the tops of them from the back yard!) sweeping up one side of the Freeway near Glenoaks Boulevard then jumped all 8 lanes of concrete freeway to cascade down the other embankment towards Foothill Boulevard which borders us.

Dozens of fire trucks, some from as far away as St. George Utah, were the only thing between my neighborhood and complete annihilation. I watched firefighters run for their lives to escape exploding propane tanks hurled skyward from the Oakridge homes to land like tank shells in the street. I also heard and saw what intense heat and flame can do to a local power substation (think CNN "Iraq Invasion" footage) and numerous transformers hanging high and dry on 40ft telephone poles. The black, smoke-filled night would suddenly light up like high noon in a cascade of sparks and white-hot flame then be plunged back into inky darkness again leaving the observer almost blind.

Plunged into absolute darkness by the power outages and the intense smoke, my roommates and I struggled to breathe and move about. Fortunately the horse trailers were already packed with horse gear and camping stuff as we were planning to participate in an SCA event that weekend. Thankfully, this preparation made it easy to find lanterns, fire extinguishers, medical face masks (so we could breathe) and goggles (we use them when camping) to protect our eyes from the debris and smoke. We were preparing to load the horses and leave when the home across the street went up in flames. Stepping through my front door was like stepping into a furnace. Embers had set the home's 40+ year old shingle roof alight. Within moments, there was a 30 foot wall of flame the entire length of the home just 20 feet from my front yard.

Strangely, shock and horror were not the first things I felt. Instead, I went into "Action Jackson" mode. Everything I needed to do became crystal clear. Time slowed. My roommates Eileen and Judy and my horse friend, Cynthia, and I all set to packing our vehicles, moving animals and securing the house. Every horse got it's halter, rope, and a fly mask to keep the debris from hitting their eyes (even though this meant they now couldn't see much). I don't remember actually writing my name and phone number on the strips of duct tape that ended up on halters but somehow that got done. The paddock sprinklers got turned on, the lawn sprinkler hose was rolled out. Just as we were loading the horses in the trailer to escape the flames 10 feet from the line of Italian Cypress trees along my paddock fence from the burning home, four huge fire trucks pulled up in the cul de sac, lights and sirens whaling.

The neighbor's house started burning about 4 a.m. By 4:30 it was a smoldering ruin.

Thick smoke, and the blowing ember storm lasted well past sunup. At one point, Cynthia and I walked three blocks to a friend's home to help her walk her two horses out of her yard and down to the relative safety of my place which was further from the flying embers. Without a trailer or an evacuation plan, my horsekeeping neighbor had literally waited until it was almost too late to ask for help. A fire crew was hosing down her barn roof as embers flew everywhere. The horses did surprisingly well in the chaos because the humans stayed calm, although the older mare seemed to think that she should scream at the top of her lungs everytime a fire truck roared past us with lights and sirens leaving me deaf in my right ear for about 3 days!

My roommates later told me I sounded a lot like a drill sergeant, but you know what? Stuff got done, no one panicked, and because someone (i.e. me) was giving instructions (OK, 'barking orders'..but I did remember to say please and thank you!) everything stayed orderly, the animals didn't get upset and no one got hurt.

So the lessons? Here's a list of things I learned surviving the Sylmar Fire:

1. Have an emergency kit in the house, the truck, in the car, in the horse trailer. Things like flashlights, lanterns, bottled water, first aid kits, a scarf to help you breathe in smoke, an adjustable monkey wrench (you wouldn't believe how many things I discovered I needed to use a wrench on that night!)
2. Make sure you have a radio that doesn't need to be plugged in or need batteries to operate. A thoughtful friend bought me a hand-cranked short wave radio as a gift some years ago. That thing worked like a charm for all three days of the power outage and fire. Without it we wouldn't have known about road closures, evacuations or other important information. Laptop batteries and DSL connections are soon toast in a crisis. The fire in Sylmar demolished several cell phone towers. You may not be able to rely on your cell phone or your computer for information. Good old fashioned radio is more reliable.
3. Have an evacuation plan, even if you think you will never EVER need it, and practice at least once a year. Make sure you involve your neighbors, our friends and your family. Make sure others know your plan BEFORE you need to use it. You may not be in any danger from a wildfire but what the home next to you or the barn on your own property suddenly burned? What would you do? Where would you go and how will you keep your animals safe?
4. If you don't own a truck/trailer of your own, make sure you make an evacuation plan with someone who does, discuss it, practice it, have a plan B if necessary. Make plans and hope you never ever need them.
5. Have a Plan A, Plan B and a Plan C for evacuation. Crisis situations can change in an instant. Due to the road closures in our neighborhood, we weren't actually able to reach the "official" large animal evacuation site at Hanson Dam. Fortunately, I had horse-friends who were able to keep the horses for us for a couple days when we were eventually able to get out. In the past few years, these friends had brought their horses to me during various times of crisis. We now have an evacuation pact!
6. Make sure you have a cell phone charger in EVERY vehicle, including your truck!
7. If animals are part of your family, treat them as such and keep them safe! Making sure dogs and cats are crate trained is guaranteed to keep them safe in an emergency. My three dogs spent the better part of 48 hours crated during the crisis. They stayed calm and they were safe. They were easily moved from home to truck, to evacuation location, and back home again. Two people in our neighborhood lost their pets in the chaos. One jumped the fence and ran off (and has yet to be found), another didn't get evacuated with the family escaping from Oakridge Park and is feared dead.
8. There's already lots of information out there about creating "Defensible Space" around your home; installing emergency gas, electricity and water shutoffs; and a myriad of other safety tips so I won't list them here, but make sure you review these tips as part of your evacuation/emergency planning process.
9. Install smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in every room in your home AND IN THE BARN! Change the

batteries every six months-doing it when we 'spring forward' or 'fall back' for daylight savings is a good way to remember. (I have to replace all my smoke detectors. They worked fine during the fire but got totally choked with smoke and soot in the aftermath).

10. Have at least one commercial-sized fire extinguisher within easy reach of your barn. Mount it on a wall, so it's prominent and won't get blocked by anything stacked next to it. They cost about \$100 and while you probably can't expect to save your barn in a fire, it will buy you and your animals time to escape, unscathed.

11. Keep fire extinguishers in your horse trailer, your truck and your tack shed. The chemical kind used for small kitchen fires work wonders to keep you and your stuff safe. They are only a few bucks each and should be recycled/replaced yearly.

12. Remember "stuff" can be replaced. Don't try to pack or save your possessions in an emergency. Just get out. Grab your family, your wallet, your phone, your keys and your critters and just LEAVE. By the time you see flames, it very well could be too late.