

# FIRE!

## Conflagrations take their toll on communities, emergency responders and journalists who report the devastation

When the telephone rang in the Pendleton home of my grandfather on the night of Dec. 8, 1922, it was a long-distance call from Astoria where a fire had broken out.

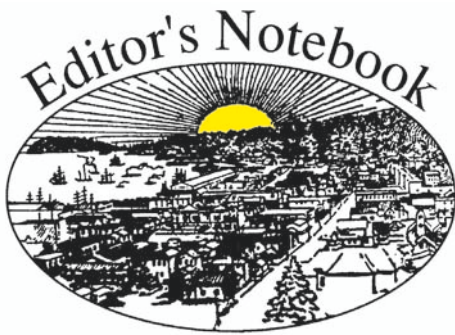
E.B. Aldrich and his partners owned the *Astoria Evening Budget* newspaper in addition to the *East Oregonian* in Pendleton.

Grandfather packed his bag and headed to the railway station, where he boarded a train to Portland and thence to Astoria.

As he traveled, Publisher Merle Chessman in Astoria was hosing water on the newspaper's roof. The fire rapidly burned out of control, destroying as many as 30 downtown blocks. Nearly 2,500 Astoria residents were left homeless. Damage to businesses and property exceeded \$15 million.

Fire entered our company's life again last month. A 100,000-acre fire in Grant County threatened the communities served by the *Blue Mountain Eagle*, one of our company's weekly newspapers. The Canyon Creek Complex fire has already destroyed 43 homes, jeopardized the town of Prairie City and come within a quarter mile of our publisher's home. It is only 57 percent contained as of this writing.

This major event happened while the *Eagle* was in the midst of hiring an editor. Over the summer, interim editors had coordinated its rou-



Steve Forrester

fine news coverage. Nancy McCarthy of Cannon Beach was acting editor during the fire.

Over the course of more than two weeks, our reporters and photographers captured the essence of fear and tragedy that comes with such a massive conflagration. Tim Trainor and George Plaven from the *East Oregonian* traveled to Grant County to help out the *Eagle's* two exhausted reporters, Angel Carpenter and Cheryl Hoefler. Sean Ellis from the *Capital Press* arrived last week.

Reporting on a fast-moving event like this is also an endurance test. Publisher Marissa Williams worked 16 straight days. Her staff worked 11.

Describing her personal travail, Williams recounted: "We were packing for evacuation, and I was setting sprinklers on the roof. I climbed off the ladder and the firefighters grabbed me by the shoulders and said: 'It's time for you to leave. We



Cheryl Hoefler/The Eagle

**Blue Mountain Eagle Publisher Marissa Williams working from the office in John Day.**

are taking a stand at your house."

"We had nine pieces of firefighting equipment at our house. If they had lost our house, they would have been in trouble with Canyon City."

Evacuated, Williams and her husband sat "across the canyon and watched our house and the planes dropping fire retardant."

Our websites allowed our weekly newspapers to be daily news operations. As the fire progressed, the *Eagle's* staff posted minute-by-minute updates. They also used social media to tell the story.

"With Facebook, it was easy to quickly upload photos, as well as video," said Williams. "We had a front-row seat. We sat there for four straight days."

The results demonstrate the power of digital news publishing. The *Eagle* website audience increased more than 500 percent. Their e-edition grew 35 percent. On one day, Aug. 15, an astounding 175,949 people were engaged on the *Eagle's* Facebook page.

"The outpouring of appreciation from outside our area is phenomenal," said Williams. "We had thank-you's such as: 'We live in Hillsboro; have friends there (in Grant County); we can't tell you how much we appreciate this coverage.'"

There were still print editions to publish. With the help of our company's design studio in Salem, the *Eagle* produced dramatic front pages that captured the intensity of the fires, the courage and skill of fire crews, and the anguish of families who lost their homes and belongings. —S.A.F.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2015 • No. 35 • 20 PAGES • \$1.00 www.MyEagleNews.com



As flames approach the hills behind Prairie City, buildings in town glow in the fiery light.

## Between day and night: The fire never stops

A change in shift for firefighters is also a change in mood. JOHN DAY — Shift change is a critical time for firefighters combating the Canyon Creek Complex fire. It's when vital information on fire behavior, trouble spots and weather conditions is transferred between day and night shifts. Shift change happens twice a day.

## Trial by fire

'You could feel the heat of the fire and smell the smoke' By Sean Ellis and Nancy McCarthy Blue Mountain Eagle After watching a raging wildfire consume their neighbors' properties to the south and west of them for two weeks, Prairie City residents experienced their own trial by fire last weekend. It took only a switch in wind direction for the fire to turn onto the ridge just above the town, the flames so brilliant against the night sky that the buildings below glowed in the fiery light. Streets filled with smoke. Early-morning stress scared residents out of bed. Half the town received orders to evacuate immediately; the other half was told to prepare for evacuation any minute. In the smoky haze, headlights appeared as a convoy of trucks and cars, filled with prized possessions and ran-



A change in the weather Sunday afternoon reveals the blackened hillsides of the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness in this panoramic overlooking the southern section of Prairie City from the east edge of town.

## Buses, trucks bring donations from Sandy

Donated supplies come from 19 western Oregon cities. JOHN DAY — A nine-vehicle convoy from Sandy dropped off thousands of pounds of donations Saturday for firefighters and community members affected by the Canyon Creek Complex fire. The convoy, which included four school buses stocked with basic supplies and groceries, also dropped off eight tons of hay for animals impacted by the fire. The donations were unloaded at the Canyon Creek Complex fire incident base on the Grant County Fairgrounds. Fire officials learned about the convoy and its donations "when they showed up at the back gate," said Stacy Weems, Grant Basin Incident Management Team public information officer.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26, 2015 • No. 34 • 52 PAGES • \$1.00 www.MyEagleNews.com



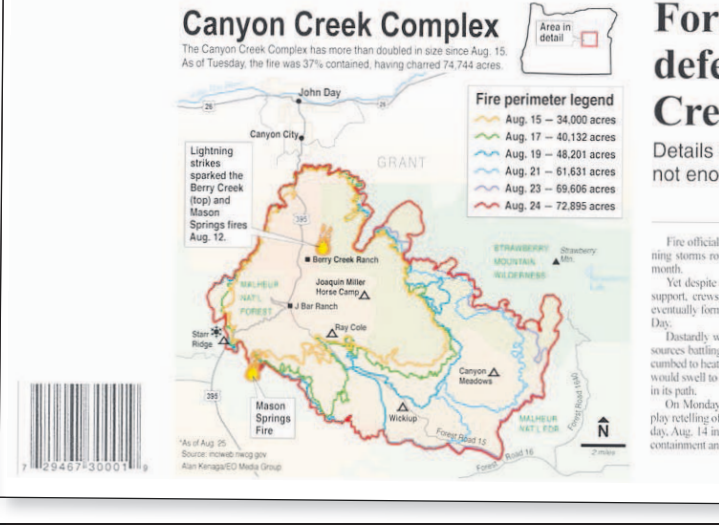
Sherry and Mike Dress stand embracing where their front porch stood before destroyed by the Canyon Creek Complex fire.

## Donations pour into center for victims

Fairgrounds Pavilion stays busy during massive relief effort. By George Plaven Blue Mountain Eagle. Judy Dunn was in Michigan when she heard about the devastating wildfire bearing down on her home along Canyon Creek south of John Day. Miraculously, the blaze missed Dunn's house — inherited from her late father — by mere inches, though others weren't as lucky. At least 39 homes have been destroyed in the Canyon Creek Complex, leaving families with nothing but a pile of rubble and questions about where to turn next. Stories of tragedy have led to donations pouring in from across the state as Oregonians dig deep for ways to help. The result is a massive relief effort now organized at the Grant County Fairgrounds Pavilion, which volunteers have transformed into a kind of one-stop shop for fire victims to get back on their feet. Shelves are carefully stocked with everything from macaroni and hot sauce to dog food and pillows. There are extension cords, lamps, books, dishes, water, toasters, paper towels, bug spray and more donated clothes than can possibly fit one location. Though the fire spared Dunn's house, it did destroy an outbuilding and pump house that left her without running water and electricity. She and her husband, Jim, are staying at a friend's place in Canyon City until they can rebuild. Saturday, Aug. 22, Judy Dunn and her friend, Loni Redheffer, stopped by the Fairgrounds Relief Center to pick up just a few odds and ends. "This is just beyond anything I can imagine," Dunn said. "This is amazing, the effect of everybody who came together."

## TOGETHER. FORWARD.

Couple finds memories in rubble, plans to stay in community. By Angel Carpenter Blue Mountain Eagle. CANYON CITY — Only the chimney is left standing in the rubble where their home once was. Mike and Sherry Dress's 5,400-square-foot home, destroyed by the fury known as the Canyon Creek Complex fire, used to be a gathering place for family and friends, including exchange students. The home where their six children grew up was one of the 39 homes destroyed in the canyon south of Canyon City on Aug. 14; the day two fires merged and blew out of control. These two fires became the Canyon Creek Complex fire, which has so far scorched 74,744 acres — nearly 117 square miles. Known as "Eagle's Nest," the 2 1/2-story house, on 97 acres of timbered land, was built in 1954 and was originally owned by Dr. Jerry and Martha van Der Vliet. The home where their six children grew up was one of the 39



## Forest Service defends Canyon Creek response

Details show initial attack was not enough to save local homes. By George Plaven Blue Mountain Eagle. Fire officials knew trouble was coming when a series of lightning strikes rolled over the Malheur National Forest earlier this month. Yet despite an initial attack that included both air and ground support, crews simply couldn't control the fire two times that would eventually form the hellish Canyon Creek Complex south of John Day. Dastardly winds and bone dry fuels quickly overtook the resources battling the blaze, to the point where one firefighter succumbed to heat exhaustion. Over the next three days, the complex would swell to tens of thousands of acres and consume 39 homes in its path. On Monday, the Malheur National Forest released a play-by-play retelling of its response between Wednesday, Aug. 12 and Friday, Aug. 14 in an effort to describe how exactly the fires backed containment and grew into such a powerful, destructive force.