

House is 'an island surrounded by nobody'

Rampaging Carr Fire spares the home of a former Salem couple

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A strange mix of gratitude and guilt consumes Alisa Robinson.

You probably saw the photo of her home: A picture-perfect house surrounded by ash, burned trees and the skeletal remains of several vaporized houses.

It appeared in newspapers and on websites across the country after the Carr Fire jumped the Sacramento River and leveled entire neighborhoods in and around Redding, Calif.

Robinson and her husband, Bill, had only been in the home for four months.

After living in Salem for 30 years, they chose the property in Lake Redding Estates as the perfect retirement spot.

No one can explain why the fire skipped their house, destroying everything around it.

But after evacuating and spending a week back in Salem with her daughter, authorities let them return Aug. 3 to no power and no neighbors.

"All you can see is rubble. ... My house is an island surrounded by nobody," Robinson said.

"Living here, like this, is just horrid."

Psychologists call it survivor guilt.

Moving to Redding

Robinson and her husband wanted a change in scenery, having lived in the same South Salem home for two decades.

They were looking to retire somewhere with an abundance of sunshine, a place to ride bikes and escape the bustle of urban life, a place like Redding, population 92,000.

"It was a little paradise," the 57-year-old Robinson said. "The house was absolutely beautiful with this lush garden that had all these fruit trees — lemon, lime, plum, peach, pear."

The couple, married for 21 years, made the 380-mile trek south in April following two years of planning.

But it wasn't easy to say goodbye to Salem.

Robinson, a Connecticut native, came to Oregon's capital city via Southern California in the late 1980s to raise her daughter, Ashley Greer.

"It was very quiet there, and it had this country feel to it," Robinson said.

She was a travel agent with a Salem company before launching her own business, Alisa's Sunny Day Travel, in 2011.

She met her husband, Bill, who worked for 24 years at a WinCo Foods warehouse in Woodburn, through a Salem dating network.

"Salem was a big part of our life — it's where we met, where I raised my daughter," she said. "I miss it, but it was time for a new adventure."

Making a narrow escape

The Robinsons didn't think the Carr Fire would come near their home, believing the Sacramento River offered a barrier to the ruthless blaze.

Nonetheless, they packed up important documents, clothes, photographs and their six cats as a precaution.

"We thought it was just on the other side (of the water), heading up north to the Shasta Dam," she said. "That's what we kept hearing."

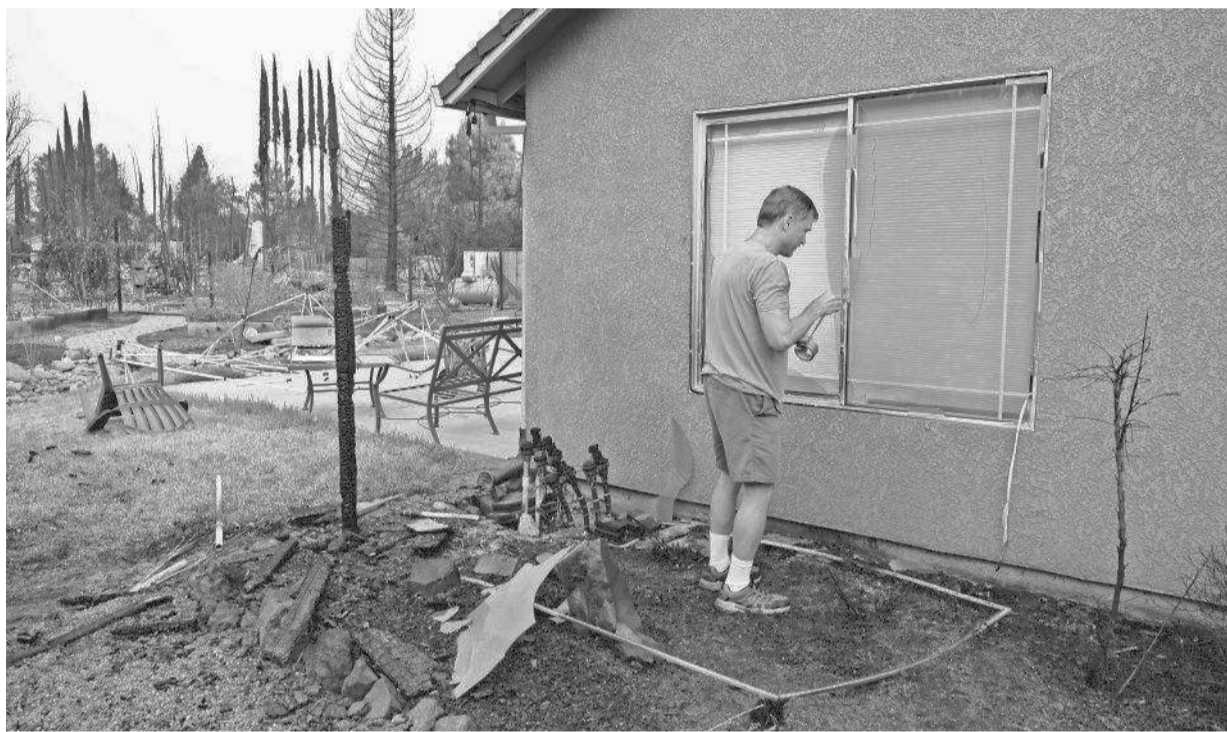
But from their backyard, the Robinsons watched in horror as "the cloud of fire" switched its course to the east late in the day, July 26.

A fleeing passerby told the couple that flames had jumped the river and were headed toward the neighborhood.

"(Bill and I) looked at



Top: The Carr Fire burned all the homes surrounding the Robinsons (lower center.) Bottom: Bill Robinson tapes broken glass at their Redding home which avoided major damage from the Carr Fire. Many homes in their neighborhood were burned to the ground. PHOTOS BY DAVID DAVIS AND KELLY JORDAN/STATESMAN JOURNAL



each other and we were like, 'It's time to go.'"

An hour later the fire ripped through the area.

"We just got out of there, and thank God we did," Robinson said. "It was so scary."

They stayed the night at a hotel with their cats, anxious about their home's fate.

Robinson's daughter was combing through Twitter around 12:30 a.m. July 27, looking for any sort of update to send her mom and stepfather.

She found a live-stream newscast featuring the Redding neighborhood and her mother's home, in particular.

Much to her surprise, the structure seemed unscathed. The same couldn't be said for the any of the nearby homes — many of which were still in flames.

"It was exciting, yet devastating," said Greer, who had visited there twice. "The neighbor-

hood looked like a dystopian wasteland. ... It's hard not to look at the house and the situation and not think of some sort of divine intervention."

"Once Ashley called, we had some reassurance, but we knew nothing was guaranteed," Robinson said. "Our house could be safe one moment and gone the next."

The Robinsons paid one last visit to their home early the next morning. It was still standing.

They fled Redding, driving to Greer's home in Salem. They tried to relax in the company of friends and family "to feel at peace again," at least for a little while, Robinson said.

"We just tried to escape reality for a week."

Robinson even donated money to one of her Salem friends, who was displaced after an illegal yard fire spread to a duplex.

Greer said she admired her mom and Bill's perseverance.

"I'm just proud of them for how calm they've stayed during this experience and their heart for the other people in the community," she said. "Even though they knew they could've lost everything, they just focused on the fact that both of them were safe and not on the material items."

"It was a real test of character."

Struggling to find meaning

The area Robinson once called "paradise" looks like a "war zone."

Most of their once lush garden is gone, including their beloved fruit trees and artichokes.

But they still have their home — and, oddly, their watermelon patch.

Robinson said the fire practically destroyed the entire backyard and a portion of the side lawns.



Alisa Robinson speaks with a utility company to get power restored at their Redding home. The Robinsons, former Salem residents, fled their residence during the Carr Fire which avoided major damage yet leveled homes on all sides.

Their irrigation system was damaged, as well as a propane tank used to heat water, which might also have leaked gas underground.

A window pane was cracked near the propane tank, but an additional layer of glass prevented the blaze from entering the home.

She said the fire looked like it went around the house, stopping right at the edge of the structure.

"I believe there's a purpose for everything," Robinson said. "I don't quite understand it, but there's still a reason all this happened."

Nothing remains of her neighbors' houses, except debris and an occasional fireplace. Smoke and ash still hang heavy, polluting the air.

"Yeah, I have survivor's guilt. ... I feel so blessed, and yet, so weird," she said. "It's like being in a war, like somebody dropped a bomb here."

"I don't think everyone is going to rebuild, but I think some of them will."

Robinson thinks it'll take a couple years before any semblance of normalcy or "rebirth" returns to the neighborhood.

"It's really, really sad," she said. "But we have hope that we'll rebuild and be OK again. ... We're going to get past this."

The apocalyptic blaze

The Carr Fire, which has laid waste to more than 186,416 acres across Northern California, started around 1:15 p.m. July 23.

The blaze — the sixth most destructive in state history — stemmed from a flat tire whose exposed steel rim scrapped across a stretch of Highway 299 near Carr Powerhouse Road, creating sparks that flew into dry vegetation.

Flames grew rapidly due to blistering temperatures and high winds that reached around 140 mph, destroying more than 1,000 homes and claiming seven lives.

More than 39,000 residents were forced to evacuate with thousands later returning to nothing. Twenty-four commercial structures and 500 outbuildings were burned, as well.

Officials estimate \$98.3 million in damage to roads, bridges, utilities and other public facilities in Shasta County, which President Donald Trump deemed a "major disaster area."

Contact reporter Olivia Heersink at oliviaheersink@statesmanjournal.com, 503-399-6657 or follow her on Twitter @heersinkolivia.

Obituaries

Bruce Everett Huntsman

SILVERTON - Bruce Everett Huntsman passed away peacefully at home on July 9, 2018 at age 83, with his wife Nanci and their beloved pets by his side. He is survived by his wife, Nanci Huntsman, and 5 children, Russell, Mark, Denise, Bart and Diane. He is preceded in death by two brothers and a sister. In lieu of flowers a gift/donations may be made in his name at Ken's Auto Body and Service Center 2333 N. Pacific Hwy Woodburn, OR., 97071, 503-981-3550, for the many medical bills he acquired. Funeral/memorial services will be held at The Chapel in the Hills 111 Silver Falls Hwy, SE, Silverton, OR., 97381, on Saturday August 25, 2018 at 2pm. We would welcome anyone who would like to share/speak regarding your memories of Bruce. Refreshments immediately following at the Chapel.



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