

Canyon Creek Complex Fire: After the flames

By Dylan J. Darling
The Bulletin

CANYON CITY — Driving up Canyon Creek, south of John Day toward Burns, the devastation is dramatic.

The Canyon Creek Complex Fire tore through this canyon in mid-August, leaving the woods and community forever changed.

"This was so awesome in here before this," Grant County Judge Scott Myers said as he drove his pickup along U.S. Highway 395 through the canyon. For about 8 miles the highway cuts through where the wildfire burned and destroyed homes. Around each turn comes a shocking sight, remnants of once proud homes or homes that were somehow spared from the flames.

The Canyon Creek Complex Fire destroyed 43 homes, 39 in the canyon in a massive flare-up on Aug. 14. Another side of the

fire blew up more than a week later, destroying another four homes. Now those who lost homes are weighing whether to stay and rebuild or leave the canyon and live elsewhere. Concerns about potential flooding factor into the difficult decision.

The destruction is some of the worst in Oregon history. By comparison, the Awbrey Hall Fire in Bend destroyed 22 homes in 1990 and the Skeleton Fire, also in Bend, destroyed 19 homes in 1996. The two Bend blazes had stood as the worst in terms of homes lost in the state's modern history until the Canyon Creek Complex, Brian Ballou, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Forestry, wrote in an email.

Back in 1936 a wildfire that likely started in smoldering logging slash spread into Bandon, on the Oregon Coast, he wrote, burning nearly every structure in town and killing 11 people.

The small size of Canyon



Contributed photo/Jesse McKinley

A heavy air tanker drops fire retardant Aug. 15 in the Marysville area of Canyon City.

City, a mining boomtown in the 1800s and about 700 residents, amplifies the impact of the fire.

Three times in its history Canyon City has had to rebuild from disastrous fire, in 1870, 1898 and 1937. Those fires burned through the town's business district.

For the people who lost homes, barns and more to the Canyon Creek Complex Fire, the past two months have been a time to see what they can salvage and brace for wintry weather ahead. The same canyon that funneled the firestorm could churn with floodwaters this fall and winter, a worry also for people living along Canyon Creek whose homes did not burn.

"We are preparing for the next big rain, that is for sure," said Judge Myers. "We have a lot of black dirt with nothing holding it."

He has been in touch with about half of the people who lost homes. Their feelings about whether to rebuild in the canyon are split.

"It's about 50/50 from those

I've talked to," Myers said.

Rebuilding

Andy Jones, 56, lived in a home just off the highway for 15 years. The house, built in 1941, had history. It was known locally as "Hank and Guernsey's Place" after the couple who used to live there. Guernsey Pond, between the farmhouse and highway, long served as a community ice rink, with lights to allow for nighttime skating.

The home was likely the second house destroyed by the fire as it charged through the canyon, said Jones, an IT worker for the U.S. Forest Service. Flames charred cattails that surrounded the pond. While Jones and his wife have been living in Washington to care for his ailing mother-in-law, he said the couple plan to return to the canyon.

Walking around the blackened, ash-covered ground where his home once stood he said Wednesday that he and his wife plan to rebuild. "We are looking at it that we got to start a new book," Jones said. "... We are hoping that someday we'll be able to live here again."

When they do he said it will likely be up the hill, to be away from the Canyon Creek and the flood danger, and to have a

view of Canyon Mountain. The broad, rocky-topped mountain towers over the surrounding burnt woods.

Moving on

Since 1975, Arlen Van Nice, 80, lived in a home along the highway, in the canyon. Two weeks into cleaning up the couple were still sorting out scrap metal and hoping to find anything salvageable.

"You keep thinking you'll find something, and you don't," Van Nice said. "Everything is gone."

He had a small collection of items pulled from the ashes, mostly for sentimental reasons, in the back of his pickup.

"That's my skinning knife," Van Nice said, holding out a handle-less blade dulled by the fire. "I don't think it will skin any more elk."

The Van Nices have an acre of land along the highway. Before the fire it was lush and eight to 10 deer would pass through daily. Now that the woods are gone, the couple will be too.

Van Nice said they plan to move somewhere else. Where? "Someplace green," he said.

Undecided

Dean Elliot, 86, does not know yet whether he'll rebuild where his old home stood or move to a new spot.

He lived in a home along Canyon Creek for 53 years. His big concern is the flood and mud that will likely come down the creek during heavy rain and snowmelt.

Elliot and other locals are quick to mention the flooding of 2011, which damaged Grant Union High School downstream in John Day. They predict floodwaters could be worse this year due to the size of the fire.

For now, Elliot and his wife, Betty Elliot, are staying in a

rental in Canyon City.

"(The rental is) all furnished," he said. "It even had elk meat in the freezer."

Other damages

Along with 43 homes the Canyon Creek Complex Fire destroyed at least 10 outbuildings, according to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, which organizes wildland firefighting around the Northwest. Outbuildings include barns, garages, sheds and other structures. While such structures may seem small on paper, their loss can be big for the people who had them.

A signature silver barn used to tell people passing by on Highway 395 that they were at Deer Creek on the Berry Creek Ranch. The historic barn is gone, and that's just the beginning of the damage at the 400-acre ranch.

The fire also destroyed fence line and timber, said Gordon Larson, 51, a retired Oregon State Police commander who owns the ranch with his family. He's lived there since 1996 and since retiring in 2014 had looked forward to spending more time working on the land.

Cruising the ranch in a John Deere Gator, he stopped to point out where the Berry Creek Fire — one of the two fires that became the Canyon Creek Complex Fire — began and then all the damage it did.

"This ranch has been our entire life," he said. "(It was) really hard to see it burn."

He feels for his neighbors who lost their homes. While much of the ranch was left in ruin, at least his home and the new home under construction on the ranch survived the fire.

A member of the school board, Larson said he is proud to be a part of Canyon City and the greater area of John Day. He and his family have no plans to leave. They will rebuild the ranch.

"I'm not giving up on John Day," Larson said. "I'm not giving up on this canyon. I'm not giving up on ranching."

One of his neighbors is Judi Stimac, 72, who has lived in the canyon since 1999. Her house also remains standing, but she lost a barn, workshop and log cabin. The fire also destroyed her "campsite," a spot where she and her partner, Mike Nault, 71, would host barbecues for friends and family. The campsite was up the hill from her home, tucked into the woods they held dear. During a walk around the property Nault looked up at blackened snags lining a ridge.

"We will never live long enough to see the trees (like they were)," he said. "They grow real slow."

The couple were doubly affected by the fire. Nault has a home on Pine Creek, near where the second group of homes were lost to the Canyon Creek Complex Fire. His house stands, but flames took his water system and other crucial equipment for his off-the-grid home.

Heart of Grant County would like to thank all the hardworking volunteers that helped to make our second annual "Color Me Free" fun run such a success!

- Karen Johnston
- TJ Bremner
- Andrea Officer
- Sherry Dowdy
- Amanda Whale
- Ed Studtmann
- Peggy Murphy
- Glen Johnston
- Tracy Blood
- Kathy Kight
- The Bentz family
- Sonna Smith and the Grant Union Cross Country Team
- Mariah Boyd
- Ginni Frazier
- Cody Boden
- Shane Whale
- Tyler Blood
- Oaklee Clark
- Valeda, Byron, Meagan, and Austin Grant
- Laura Saul at Cloud 9 Hair Salon
- Hunting with HECS

Also special thanks to Healthy Together, Dr. & Mrs. Ken Peterson and Mr. & Mrs. Bob Armstrong at Oster's Professional Group for their generous donations

To the amazing people that contributed their efforts that we have failed to mention... we appreciate you all!

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FRI & SAT (4:20) 7:20 9:40
SUNDAY (4:20) 7:20
MON-THURS 7:20

GOOSEBUMPS PG
A teenager teams up with the daughter of young adult horror author R.L. Stine after the writer's imaginary demons are set free.
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SUNDAY (4:10) 7:10
MON-THURS 7:10

CRIMSON PEAK R
A woman tries to escape the ghosts of her past and is swept away to a house that breathes, bleeds... and remembers.
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MON-THURS 7:00

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Dearest family and friends of Grant County,

Words can NEVER express our appreciation and love that pours out of our hearts for everyone who sent food, flowers, cards and many (generous) gifts in loving memory of our Leonard. The love we felt then and now is overwhelmingly heartwarming to us.

I grew up here in Grant County all my life and love it dearly. Never in a million years did I think that I would have to experience such a tragedy of losing a child. And the love of this community has been such strength for us.

I would like to send a special thanks out to Troy Hanson, Kayln Burill and Jackie Osborne for going over and above the call of duty for our needs. You guys are awesome. Thank you. And Wally Williams for assisting the team at Driskill with our needs. You have helped so many people in this community with their loss of loved ones. Nobody does it with more heartfelt grace and compassion than you...Thank you so much.

We would also like to send a special thank you to Connie Wood, Sue Lemons and the lady Elks, Lucie Imoos, Pam Alley and the Forest Service ladies for the purchasing, preparation and clean up of all the food at the reception. Everything was perfect. Also, thank you all in this community who brought food, drinks, cards and accommodations during this time.

Thanks to all the firefighters and EMTs that showed such a warm welcome to us all on our drive home from Baker. We would like to send a special thank you to all of Leonard's young friends for coming to see us during this time. With that being said, we want to tell all of the youngsters of this community: Death is not a myth. It's a reality. It can happen to anyone at anytime. It has no age limit. So make good choices, look out for one another, and wear your seat belts.

Thank you all from the bottom of our hearts.
We love you,
Andy and Kathy Radinovich

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