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Fred Sand: The Nuns Canyon Fire of 1964

In mid-September 1964, the combination of a power line, a house and a hot North wind sparked a wildfire on the Torrieri Ranch, the area now known as the Nuns Canyon Vineyard, off Nelligan Road in Northern Sonoma Valley. Fred Sand, then a volunteer with the Kenwood Fire Department for only three years, was deployed to help contain the fire as it rushed across the foothills toward Adobe Canyon. “It came towards Adobe Canyon the first day,” he remembers, “and that night stopped on the ridge above Sugarloaf.

Then, the next day the wind shifted and it went toward Sonoma.” Propelled by the strong winds, the Nuns Canyon fire burned for three days and consumed more than 10,000 acres before being extinguished by “water bombs” behind what is now Sonoma Cinemas. Even with the range and speed of the fire, however, Sand remembers few evacuations, “It wasn’t populated up there like it is now,” he says. “Now it would be a disaster.” Over the course of the blaze, Sand and the crews just “did what protection on the houses [they] could” and tried to keep up with the flames.

“I remember one instance that kind of got me a little excited. The second night, right after the wind had changed direction, we were down off somewheres between Trinity and Cavedale road watching the fire come up fast. Ed Geib and I went into one of houses that was protected, still watch-ing the fire getting closer, and we dumped all the water we had on it. But before we knew it, [the fire] was on the other side of us. It had jumped the house. It was a real strong wind.”

Estimates were that winds reached up to 70 mph in the valley. Although exact numbers are hard to come by 44 years later, the Nuns Canyon Fire is still considered one of the largest fires in the (recorded) history of Sonoma Valley. Since that time, Sand has put in 47 years as a volunteer with the Kenwood Fire Department, but all his years of fighting fires have reinforced a simple bit of advice over and over again: “Keep it clear around the house, keep the brush away. And when something like that starts, the best I can suggest is get out of there.”

Gene Reid: The Cavedale Fire of 1996

As if an echo of the wildfire of 1964, Gene Reid, then the Fire Chief of the Mayacamas Fire Department, found himself in a similar situation in 1996. Like the Nuns Canyon fire, the Cavedale Fire started on a dry day in late summer, with the combination of a breeze, a tree limb, and a power line in close proximity to a house. The call came on the afternoon of August 2, 1996, and Reid was the first officer on the scene. “When we got the call it had already burned up to a house,” says Reid. At the time, the family was not at home, but a neighbor seeing the smoke had alerted the fire department.

Reid says when he saw the volume of smoke, he called for support. Working in conjunction with crews from nearby districts like the Valley of the Moon Fire Department and later the California Department of Fire (CDF), Reid says at first they thought the house could be saved, but were unaware that the house had a basement. Once the fire got inside, Reid had no choice to pull his men and “we lost it.” However, with this, the worst of it seemed to be over.

“We were having a meeting,” remembers Reid, “discussing how we almost had it contained, what to do next and I looked up and there was this huge column of ash going up...and we just watched it drift South, over Moon Mountain and the vineyards and it began raining ashes. It just literally rained and we

watched as hundreds and hundreds of tiny fires started.” The crews jumped into full gear and Reid started assigning crews to cover the new fires as they spread. Reid headed to the top of the vineyards that had caught fire, in an effort to work down towards the flames, “but so much had already lit, the fire started to create its own wind up the hill.” After four days (two of “intense burning” and two “under control”) the fire had burned 2,100 acres in Sonoma Valley, “only overlapping a little” into Napa County, including 50 acres of vineyards. Steep terrain complicated the fire crews’ efforts, but there were no “unusual conditions.”

“Wildland burns,” says Reid. “There’s not much we can do about that.” Reid echoes Fred Sand’s advice to keep your house clear, “It’s required by law now that you have to have 100 foot clearance around all buildings.” Neglected tree maintenance by PG&E was ultimately found to be at fault for the Cavedale Fire. “Fire’s [an] area fact of life; there’s always going to be a chance of fire,” says Reid. By mowing land or mulching the grass in with dirt to make it fireproof, keeping trees trimmed and paying attention to how your house is constructed— building your house out of a nonflammable material like concrete—Reid says landowners can better prepare themselves for when the next big fire occurs.