

MVFD Fire History Project

Geoff Herrick, Trinity Resident

Interviewed by Jennifer O'Mahony

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Geoff-Herrick-by-JO-090918

[Start of recorded material]

Interviewer: Okay, now it's going.

If you could just state your name, your address, and that you agree to be audiotaped?

Geoff Herrick: Sure. My name is Geoffrey Herrick. My address is 2149 Trinity Road in Glen Ellen, and I am agreeing to be taped to conduct this interview. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Okay, great. Thank you. So let's start with "before the fire." Were you conscious that there could be a fire? Did you have plans? Did you ever think about what you might do if you had to leave or if such a situation happened?

Geoff Herrick: We were aware. We've lived on Trinity Road since 2012. Our neighbor, Doni Bird, her family has been on the mountain for quite a while so we had heard the stories of the fires in the 1960s. Doni has a number of animals that are between our properties. She had a very clear plan in terms of water and evacuation, spare trailers and trucks.

So we were aware of the danger and aware of what's happened historically. But I wouldn't say that we had the best plan in terms of, "This is what happens when things go down."

When we bought our property, we did some things that in hindsight, we weren't doing them necessarily for fire protection. But managing the property and some of the landscaping that we did turned out to be quite beneficial in terms of how we fared through the event.

Interviewer: Describe a little bit about the surroundings of your property.

Geoff Herrick: We're in an area on the mountain where it's more densely populated. We're about three and a half acres; there are a few neighbors that are similar-sized parcels. But then we touch some of the larger ones, which are about 60-plus acres. There were a lot of trees.

The property, we bought out of foreclosure. It had a lot of maybe deferred maintenance or people just hadn't done certain things so it was pretty wild. It was the house and then just the native scrub, Manzanita; all kinds of Acacia that grows like a weed.

And then up the hillside, behind us and into the neighboring property, there were a lot of what we understood the pine that was planted post the 1960 fire, which I think due to the natural lifespan of those trees and maybe some infestation of insects, they were already dying. So we were taking some down, taking some things down for views. But there were a lot of trees.

So that was the state of affairs. It's a pretty wooded area. We're not densely wooded, but there was just a lot of it out and about around us, yeah.

Interviewer: So you didn't have a specific evacuation plan or what you were going to take?

Geoff Herrick: No, not at all.

Interviewer: Do you live there full-time or part-time?

Geoff Herrick: I hadn't been living there full-time at the time. I wasn't necessarily living there full-time. It's been a gradual creep where my city existence in San Francisco has dwindled and our existence up here has grown. My husband Sean, a year and a half ago, started working up here and living up here full-time. So I would say for the last 18 months, we've been at the property more full-time.

But where we started when we bought, we were definitely on the weekend camp and then kind of fell in love with it all, the community, and just the place.

Interviewer: So Sean was actually living here full-time last year when it happened?

Geoff Herrick: Yep. He was living here full-time. I was actually at my brother's birthday party in Westchester that weekend. My brother's birthday was October 8th. So that Sunday, we celebrated his birthday in Westchester on the 7th. I flew back and landed in San Francisco, crawled into bed at our SF place. So I wasn't even here.

I got a call at 2:30 in the morning from Sean who had evacuated in total distress.

Interviewer: This is Sean O'Connor?

Geoff Herrick: No, Sean Kelly my husband.

Interviewer: Sean, your husband?

Geoff Herrick: Yep. He and another friend of ours were at the house. There was no evacuation. There was no knock on our door. We're at the end of a long driveway with a number of other homes. When Sean evacuated, I believe he went to our neighbor Doni Bird's house, and she was already gone. The horses were still there, which was a real sign that those hadn't been able to get evacuated.

So I got a call that he evacuated to Mike and Mary Benziger's house. I think it was 2:30 in the morning. He was like, "You're not going to believe this." He was quite hysterical, understandably.

So I, in San Francisco, went to the TV, and it was that same footage that everyone was seeing over and over of embers going down the road; no information. You really couldn't tell what was what. That was what I watched for a period of time.

Interviewer: Did you come back up here? Did you stay down there?

Geoff Herrick: I went to my office in the city. Whether it was through Marc Schwager on NextDoor, wherever information was getting, which was quite poor, but there were some things where I think you could track the fire. I felt like I was watching a graphic of it coming up towards us.

And then, my husband, he left the Benziger's house and went down to Sonoma because he needed to get away. Mike Benziger and our friend Erich Pearson stuck around. Because they were inside the evacuation zone, our friend, Erich, came back up to our house, and in a herculean effort -- there were Doug Firs burning -- he was cutting them away from the house. He dug fire lines.

There were some pictures I saw of where helicopters were dropping water right across the front of our property and across Doni's property.

Interviewer: And this was when?

Geoff Herrick: This was on Monday.

Interviewer: Monday, during the day on Monday.

Geoff Herrick: And then our community in San Francisco, there was another very good friend that I have known and went to Berkeley with, Scott Palkoski who's a volunteer firefighter. He had been in the parade

going down the hill in the fire engine on Sunday but then caught a red-eye for business to Manhattan.

He landed in Manhattan. By the time he landed, he was like, "How do I get back out there?" So he immediately turned back around, got out here, and got up and started jumping in the middle of it.

So that Monday night in the city, I was at Scott's house in San Francisco with his wife, Xanthie Drankus. I remember very vividly when we got the call that their house had been lost and to see and be in her home with close friends and then to say that that's been lost.

Interviewer: Where was their property?

Geoff Herrick: Their property is at 2050 Trinity. It's across the street but probably a quarter-mile from us.

But the fire was random. My folks were just here two weeks ago, and they haven't seen it. They said, "Wow. This was random." But then you talk to fire personnel, and they're like, "Yeah, the wind and what not and the topography."

So it looks random, but you can also understand why it did what it did. I guess that's a long-winded answer.

Interviewer: No.

Geoff Herrick: But I was in my office in San Francisco on Monday and then went to Scott and Xanthie's house. Then I understood that their house had perished. So I went to Lowes's and got generators. I loaded up our station wagon with water and supplies. At 4:00 in the morning on Tuesday, which I guess would have been the 10th, I drove up.

I was filling gas tanks for generators. It was like "fill the car with whatever you're going to need. You're going into something hairy." I came up Arnold and took a right on Madrone because there was a barricade on Arnold.

There were cops at the intersection of Madrone and Hwy 12, right there at the Hamel Winery. They wouldn't let me through. He was sympathetic, but he said, "No, I can't let you through." I don't think it was a local person.

So I went back down and said, "I'm going to just go up Arnold, through this thing," and I did. I thought it was before everything got really buttoned down. I got back up here and got to our house and turned on a generator. And, Scott, he was already up fighting the fire so he made our home his base.

Our concern was we wanted to make sure we weren't in the way and impacting things negatively. But really, the responsibility that I felt like I took on was our immediate little area. I didn't go too far up or down for the next 7 to 8 days. I went from 1850 Trinity up to MVFD Station 1. If they needed something up here, I would come

help, whether it was a tool or whatever. So it was animals and kind of patrolling our immediate area.

Interviewer: Where was the fire at that point?

Geoff Herrick: The fire had gone through. It was maybe going to Cavedale. They were trying to break it going further to Napa. But the hotspots were everywhere. It was a game of the winds.

I remember getting to my house and immediately getting a pump in the pool. We cut the pool open. When we had the generator, we could get the well going. Actually, I don't even think we could do that. We had a pump. We didn't have a well for a few days. And then we were able to fix that.

Interviewer: Yeah. Because that takes a pretty powerful generator.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah, we were able to get a pretty powerful generator. But the well had been melted so we couldn't get that done. But then we were able to jerry-rig that temporarily and, I think, three days later, get back on that.

So I just remember coming up, and it felt like you were arriving on the moon. It wasn't a blazing fire. It was like 5:00 in the morning on that Tuesday. Maybe the sun was coming up, but you wouldn't know it.

It reminded me of -- I used to travel a lot for business in China; you couldn't tell what was what, what time of day it was.

It was just eerie as heck. Powerlines were everywhere and just a sizzling sound, like someone had just put a fire out, but it wasn't totally out.

When I got to my home, I was like, "Wow, there are still things burning here." So I'm like trying to put those things out. But in the scheme of things, I think the people that experienced the 24, 36 hours before that, they're like, "This is pretty minor potatoes."

Interviewer: What kind of things were they talking about that they had experienced?

Geoff Herrick: Well I think the Doug Firs that were burning and fell away from our house or all the structures that we lost in the area. I didn't see that as much. I saw more trees and things that were still smoldering.

And then it kind of continued when the winds came. I think Wednesday night, they evacuated Station 1. They took the trucks down the hill because they said, "The winds are coming, and this thing could flare up again."

We ensured that we were safe. Again, Scott was at our house. We were connected to what was going on. We made sure we had plans

at that point. We had our pool, and we had some real safe areas marked out.

Interviewer: When you say "safe areas marked out," what guidance did you get?

Geoff Herrick: Well, Scott being a firefighter, we kind of walked around before the sun went down and before dark that night. We marked out areas. We knew that around the pool, there was very little fuel. Whether you had to get in the pool -- I know that cannot always work out well. But we assessed that there was not much left around that immediate area.

On our neighboring property, there were some concrete structures that we knew we would be safe in. We were very crystal-clear about where the water tanks were. There was a plan. It was like, you were putting a logistics plan together. "If this gets hairy, this is what we're going to do."

We also -- knowing the winds were going to come -- set up 90-minute patrol walks where every 90 minutes, someone in the house would go walk. It was a pretty big area. By that time, we had started to communicate with our neighbors because they realized that we were still there. They wanted information. We wanted to check on things. We wanted to make sure propane tanks were off. We wanted to secure the immediate area.

If people had animals, we were helping in that regard. I think everyone started talking via NextDoor.

But it was crazy. I mean, we've always had great relationships with our neighbors, but there was kind of a privacy thing too. It's not like, knock-knock on your door, "How are you?" You're very neighborly. But this was us getting to know our neighbors in a very different way, like being in their homes, do whatever you need, take whatever you need. Like it's survival.

There was a lot of collaboration and I think gratefulness. "We're not there, but here are some resources; take this; do this."

So we set up these 90-minute walks. I borrowed Doni Bird's John Deere Gator that we didn't have at the time. Scott used to have one, but it burned. We would, in an organized patrol, drive around and check the structures that we knew of. Certainly, by Wednesday, but as the week went on, I knew where things were. It's like you can't put it all out completely. You've just got to mind those little areas.

So on that Wednesday when the winds started coming again, I don't know if it was my second shift. I think it was like 3:00 in the morning. I was coming back from, I think, Doni Bird's property towards ours. There was a property up to the left, Powell's at 1875 Trinity. Your eyes start playing games with you so I'm like, "Is that just a smoldering thing or is that a bigger deal?" It was; the side of their house started to go.

So I went back to our house and alerted everyone there. And then we immediately got the pump into their pool and started with garden hoses and a bucket brigade, putting water on their house. We have a video of it.

The winds were just ripping. I mean, it's the wind. You can't put it out. But the winds come, and it's mayhem again. And then we immediately got Scott's MVFD colleagues from Station 1. They got up there and were able to get on it so that house didn't burn.

And then there was just a week of kind of minding things. One thing that was crazy to me was just how it kept persisting. More resources got into the area during the days.

When I was out roaming around, I would meet the incident commanders of our immediate zone. They were very cooperative. There were guys from Santa Barbara. I helped them find where the water was that they could refuel their tanks.

But I would also get their cell phone numbers if something came up later. I was very sensitive not to be crying wolf. But what I realized is that as good as GPS and Google Maps and all that stuff is, the roads up here, if you're not from here, you don't know.

So on Saturday night, I was in our bedroom. And again, I thought my eyes were playing games with me. Looking out at our driveway,

there was a lot of fuel that hadn't burned between the end of our road, our driveway, and Trinity. The field that's right there started to flare up.

So Scott and I, again, got out there -- and I think it was Jesse Apgar, an MVFD firefithter. What I did is I called the cell number of the incident commander, and they said, "Yeah. I know what you're talking about, but we can't figure out how to get there." They were going up and down on another road, but they didn't know how to get out and around.

So we got them over there. It was just another thing where the fire was going in all directions, and so we got that under control as well.

Interviewer: Was Sean with you during the week?

Geoff Herrick: Sean was with me. Sean had a really hard time, having been there during the fire where it was almost paralysis. When we came back to the house and ran up to the other house, he couldn't leave the house.

Interviewer: It was just too much?

Geoff Herrick: Yeah.

Interviewer: So Saturday, that was nearly a week of non-stop and probably very little sleep if you were waking up every 90 minutes to do patrols?

Geoff Herrick: Well, there were multiple people in the shifts, and we didn't do the shifts when there was no wind.

Interviewer: Okay.

Geoff Herrick: When we knew the weather was coming, then we did that. Otherwise, we tried to sleep.

So, yeah. People had roles, and people started when they started.

Interviewer: You guys were super-organized.

Geoff Herrick: We felt like our role was to, in a lot of ways, support Scott, and if anyone up here needed anything. He was out and about all over.

His wife and a friend from Napa, they immediately organized a relief effort. I think they raised over \$20,000, and they were going to Costco and wherever, bringing supplies to folks. It was an amazing kind of it-takes-a-village mentality.

When she was at Costco in San Francisco using the money that people had donated to get supplies, someone in the line was from Trinity Road. The woman looked at Xanthie's shopping cart and was like, "This must be for relief." She was like, "Yeah," and told her the story.

They connected the dots that they were on Trinity. Xanthie was able to use that and connect someone here to go up to that property, and the fire was just lapping at it.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah. It was a lot of coincidence --

Interviewer: So there was a lot of happenstance.

Geoff Herrick: -- happenstance.

Interviewer: It just saved a lot.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah. It was a very long week.

I can only imagine. I mean, I was in a very small footprint and not doing the heavy lifting like the folks that were out there with the chainsaws. Scott says he can use a chainsaw like he never imagined; so he could use a chainsaw after that.

Everyone did their role whether it was making sure our kitchen dishes -- I mean, it felt like you were camping. You were in a very rough -- like you were surviving.

Interviewer: Yeah, a survivalist.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah.

Interviewer: And goodness knows, people up here are pretty independent anyway.

Geoff Herrick: Right.

Interviewer: But that brings it to a whole new level.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah.

Interviewer: So what are, obviously, some of your vivid memories? I guess you refer to the side of the house starting to take fire. Any other vivid memories from that week?

Geoff Herrick: When I first got back up here -- as a non-professional, experienced person with regard to fire, it was just some of the sounds. It was so foreign to what the fire was doing in those early days when it was still kind of close. You were hearing propane tanks going, and there was wind. You were like, "What's going on? Are we taking care of things the right way? Are we making good decisions here?"

But then I felt like -- and again, no expert at all -- you started to realize certain things. Like I didn't even know how to cut a fire line necessarily before, but I figured things out.

Interviewer: So how do you cut a fire line?

Geoff Herrick: I forgot the name of the tool, but there's a tool that you use. And you're not trying to put it out; you're just trying to break it. My mentality around fire was "put it out, and I can't do anything else." You can't necessarily put it out.

So you're raking back to dirt and making sure there's enough of a dirt line so that the fire is going to burn the fuel up to that line and then hopefully stop.

Interviewer: How wide of a line do you need then? I mean, obviously, there's luck in it. But what size lines were you raking?

Geoff Herrick: We were making like maybe two feet.

Interviewer: Wow.

Geoff Herrick: And again, we're talking about relative to what everyone was dealing with. It was just making sure like the field wasn't burning.
[Laughter]

Interviewer: It helped.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah.

Interviewer: When did you start ramping down? So you got as far as Saturday.

Geoff Herrick: I can't remember. I really can't. I don't really remember.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. When did you go back down the hill? Or have you not gone down since? [Laughter]

Geoff Herrick: No. I went down. Maybe it was in the middle of the following week where I had to go back to the office.

Interviewer: Ten days later?

Geoff Herrick: I mean, it was hard to go back to what I do, sitting in an office, when you felt like you had a different purpose. So to go back and run financial models and all that other stuff, it was very different.

But I remember one of the events. It was actually Scott's birthday. A group of us got together and had pizza in the city. It was like, "Yeah, I kind of remember that. But I don't remember the timeframes exactly." And then when I came back up, it was when things had been officially released, and you had to go get the paperwork and stuff at the regional park.

But I can't really remember for sure.

Interviewer: I think that was three weeks after.

Geoff Herrick: And then maybe I left and came back or I was able to figure out how to get back.

Interviewer: That's true because you couldn't get through.

Geoff Herrick: It got tougher and tougher and tougher. But I honestly didn't experience that because once I was here, I wasn't going to leave.

Interviewer: Yeah. So how were the people in your office?

Geoff Herrick: They were incredible.

Interviewer: They must have had some reaction.

Geoff Herrick: We heard from a lot of folks. Before we started being in our house all the time, we used to vacation rent it, very selectively. Folks that had experienced it and enjoyed it -- from New York, from all over the country -- they were reaching out. So we definitely heard from a lot of folks.

My company in the city, there was a lot of understanding and flexibility. I mean, it sounds crazy, but I would do some work; it got dark. We'd have dinner. The first two nights, we drank an incredible amount of wine, and then I had to tell the folks, "This is all well and good, but that's not the right budget." [Laughter]

It was like people would come back together. There was even community around the dinner table -- candlelight, no power or

generators. So it was like this craziness, but then there was routine to it as well.

And I was not necessarily plugged in completely. We did get our Internet back. Oh no, maybe we were using Verizon. Verizon freed up, and they gave free hotspots. So we were all using Verizon, and they waved all that. So we were connected that way.

Interviewer: Wow. So cell phones do have a big role.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah, for sure.

Interviewer: So talk a little bit about after things had calmed down. What actual damage did you have in your house?

Geoff Herrick: We were incredibly lucky. The well got wiped out, and then it was just minor, ancillary structures like landscaping and what not. But we had our home; not too terrible or really any personal property stuff that can't be replaced.

We have a pool, and that got wiped out. It took until just recently to get it fixed. But we don't like talking about that because it's minor in the scheme of things -- very, very minor. So we were incredibly, incredibly lucky.

Interviewer: So having gone through all of that, have you changed some of your behavior or changed some of the infrastructures you have around your place?

Geoff Herrick: The biggest thing we're doing is clearing trees. Even as recently as August of this year, we did a lot over the six months when it was still permissible to burn. We had never really burned before. We had chipped. We had brought chippers in but then learned from what we saw during the fire, that if you're not removing the fuel and you're just chipping it up and putting it in a pile somewhere, that's not always wonderful as well.

Interviewer: Because?

Geoff Herrick: Because it's flammable.

We used to use woodchips with our landscape. So seeing stuff here, that's where it was smoldering and smoldering and smoldering in the woodchips. Then it would get the wind, and that could turn into something else, into a blowing mass of burning embers.

So the biggest things that we've done in the last year are just taking down the fuel that's still there. A lot of people say, "Oh, we had this big fire. We're in the clear for a while." That's not so. With the rain we got, all the grass, and then all this unburned stuff, there's still a ton of fuel.

On our property right now -- my dad was just out here in August. He's retired now, and he wanted a project. So I said, "You can start taking those trees down." He probably took 200 trees down.

Interviewer: Wow.

Geoff Herrick: So they're on the ground now, which is good because they'll start to decompose. But our goal will be, when we're back in the burning season, to just continue to burn stuff on the property to get rid of it. We don't have that much acreage. But you look out, and the amount of just standing trees, it's really super-dangerous.

So I guess that's been our priority. Maybe we'll protect our well with something that's less flammable.

Interviewer: And how about organizing yourself on what thoughts you want to share with people now?

Geoff Herrick: Hmm. I think the community has gotten a lot closer. Not that this is something to share, but at the auction this year, many of us remarked that a year ago, we knew the people that we sat with at our table and maybe recognized a few people, but you didn't really know everyone.

I still think there's this independence. It's not like you show up at someone's house, but there's still privacy. That's what a lot of

people like up here. But there's also, for us, a much more connected community of people.

Some of that's through volunteer work that various folks are getting involved in. But it's just that you got to know each other. We've had dinner with people. I'd like to think that if there was ever another emergency, by knowing your neighbors, maybe that helps a bit.

Interviewer: You would feel more like calling people and saying -- because I know Doni, when I talked to her, she said that, apparently, somebody had gone up and down Trinity with a loud speaker.

Geoff Herrick: Yeah. She's way in off Trinity, and we're way in. Again, because I wasn't here in the wee hours of that day, I don't have my head around that. It seemed like people generally did pretty well to get out whether it was through some of the stuff that we were talking about with prevention on the fire safe council or whether it was some of the things that the volunteer firefighters were doing; there were more people involved.

Hopefully, it's not like fleeting like "Okay, here we are, 12 months out, and there's this momentum. But then 24, 36 months?" From talking to folks, I think that that's the way things go -- so just remaining vigilant.

Interviewer: We should probably start to wrap up.

Geoff Herrick: Sure.

Interviewer: Anything else you want to add or anything else that has struck and stayed with you?

Geoff Herrick: Trinity and the neighborhood have always been special. It's just to reinforce that. The reaction and the way that people are persevering and moving on, there's strength in that.

Interviewer: Great. Okay. Well, thank you.

Geoff Herrick: Thank you.

Interviewer: We'll stop this.

[End of recorded material]