

## Too Close for Comfort—2007

Yesterday (April 18), we in University Hills came close to partaking in our own California disaster.

It had been a dry winter and for several days had been windy—a potentially lethal combination for fire. It was 6:00 PM and I was watching TV. As usual the late afternoon sun was showing through the curtains, but this time something kept interrupting the brightness, almost like a branch of a tree swinging such that it occasionally blocked the sunlight. I noticed this for several minutes, just about deciding to check it out as there were no branches in that locale in my yard. Suddenly I smelled smoke and turned around to look out the front door. Terror gripped my heart as I saw that the smoke was so thick and black as to block out most of my normally panoramic view.

I ran to the front door and stepped out onto the porch, but I couldn't determine the source from that location. Ven Tan was at my house busily preparing for the art show in which he would be participating the coming weekend. Most of the art that he would be exhibiting was also at my house. As I moved quickly through the house to the back door I told him he should start getting ready in case we had to evacuate. I knew that fires in hilly areas during high winds get out of control quickly.

I still couldn't determine the source from the back yard, but at least I knew it wasn't my house. I donned my shoes, grabbed my keys and cell phone and headed up Farquhar Street in search of the source. Other people had left their houses and were doing likewise—everybody asking everybody else if they knew what was going on. The heavy smoke made breathing difficult.

At the upper end of Farquhar Street we went left down O'Sullivan Drive. We could see that the smoke was boiling over the houses where O'Sullivan made a sharp turn to the left. Some walked, others ran to that location, where there happened to be an area that overlooked the valley below. Somebody said the tire factory on Marianna Street was on fire. Sure enough, a long, relatively narrow building along that street was billowing rich, black smoke from every opening. Directly across the street, on our side of the road, was a large apartment complex, and directly above that was where we were standing—with strong, gusty winds blowing directly toward the houses to our left. Emergency equipment had already arrived on the scene. I took some pictures, but since my cell phone was new to me, I occasionally erased pictures instead of saving them. By now fire could be seen through gaping holes in the side of the tire factory—either created by the fire or by firemen needing to gain access for fire hoses and water.

Walking back home I called Mike Roy and asked him to contact our friend Eric Villafranca, as I wasn't sure which phone number was best to contact him, and I was too involved with thinking about the current situation to track him down personally. Mike said that he would contact Eric—who owns a few houses on Farquhar Street—and we were welcome to stay with him (Mike) should evacuation become necessary.

As it turned out Eric was already on the freeway heading home when Mike reached him. Eric could see the smoke from the freeway. However, the streets leading into University Hills had been blocked to stop incoming traffic, so he had to park his car and walk home, which was a grueling effort considering all the hills between it and where he parked. By the time he got home several of his relatives living in the area were already heading up Farquhar to check out the situation.

Ven packed what he could fit in his car and I packed some important papers and other things in my car. I also downloaded important information from my desktop computer, knowing it would have to stay behind should we have to evacuate. Meanwhile several fire department vehicles drove past on Farquhar Street, some proceeding down O'Sullivan and the rest parking along where Farquhar met O'Sullivan. It was in

this area that the fire department was planning to take its stand against any incursions by the fire into University Hills housing.

I was about to walk back to the lookout when I saw some of Eric's relatives coming up the hill. They told me that he had arrived home, so I waited for him to reach my house. Soon he and I walked over toward the lookout. Several helicopters swooped around overhead, some dropping water on the side of the hill between the apartment complex and University Hills. A police car drove around telling everybody to remove their parked cars from the street to make room for emergency vehicles, but most of the car owners were not home.

Eric and I were startled to see that one of the houses near the lookout was on fire, and smoke was rising from the roof of the house next door to it. That meant fire had already made it into our neighborhood. However, there were several fire trucks nearby, and the firemen seemed to have the fire under control. The one house was completely gutted. (Later I learned that two dogs had been inside the house that was destroyed, but firemen had let them out before they were injured. Eric and I saw the Saint Bernard, and I saw the owners catching the yellow Labrador retriever later in the evening. It had been hiding in the yard across the street from my house—no doubt traumatized by the fire.) The other house may have suffered more damage from water than fire. We couldn't get close enough to view down into the valley, but apparently that fire was under control, also, as now the smoke was mostly white and becoming less voluminous. When Eric and I left the scene to return to our homes we were sad for the people whose houses were destroyed/damaged yet felt somewhat assured that the most dangerous part of the emergency had passed, and that our homes probably would be safe. It was also reassuring to see the sun's light arriving again unimpeded.

Farquhar Street continued to be blocked all night at the O'Sullivan end as the fire crews kept vigil to make sure there were no flare-ups. In the morning I returned to the lookout. A camera crew was interviewing a woman at the house that was damaged but not destroyed. I took more pictures with my cell phone as my regular digital camera's batteries needed recharging. An onlooker said that the fire had started from an ember blown in from the tire factory fire. The other house had been damaged mostly by heat from the fire next door. Viewing down into the valley from the lookout it appeared that the apartment complex was unharmed—certainly some kind of miracle considering its proximity to the hot, tire factory fire.

Well, there it is—fortunately an untypical day in the life of Farquhar Street and the University Hills community.

Charlie Paige

P.S. You'll notice the pictures taken 04-18 tended to be affected by the sun's early evening location. All the pictures are fuzzy due to the cell phone camera.



Billowing Smoke and Embers Blown by Fresh Ocean Breezes 04/18/2007



Fire Department Trucks Parked on Farquhar Street 04/18/2007





TV News Crew Interviews Owners of Damaged House 04/19/2007



Gutted House where Two Dogs Freed by Firemen 04/19/2007