

Waterfall fire — 5 years later: When your city goes up in smoke

BY BARRY SMITH
FOR THE NEVADA APPEAL,

Carson City is a dog-walking kind of town, so a lot of people were doing the same thing I was on that Wednesday morning five years ago when they noticed the stream of smoke rising from behind C Hill.

"Looks like a wildfire," I said to a neighbor as we passed on the sidewalk.

He turned and looked to the west. "Sure enough," he replied.

The Waterfall fire, as it came to be known, didn't look like much at the time. We'd all been watching the hills for weeks as lightning ignited fires here and there. We knew that any of them could turn into a big one if the wind came up.

I assumed somebody already had called in the smoke, which they had, and that firefighters already were on their way, which they were. I took the dog home and went to my office at the Nevada Appeal, where I was editor at the time, to make sure photographer Cathleen Allison and reporter F.T. Norton were covering the fire. They were.

It all seemed rather routine, a natural part of the four seasons of Northern Nevada — fire, flood, avalanche and wind. In the newspaper business, we expect there will be news every day. We just don't know what it'll be, or how big it will blow up.

I do remember wondering, though, how the fire started. I couldn't remember a lightning storm in the past couple of days. Had something come up during the night? Had somebody let a campfire get away?

By noon, at least for us watching from town, the Waterfall fire still didn't appear to be too serious. All that would change in the next hour. The wind came up, then it shifted, and pastoral Kings Canyon became an inferno.

Firefighters battled neighborhood by neighborhood to save homes. Eagle Valley filled with smoke. Everybody at the Appeal was covering the fire by then, and Kelli Du Fresne was posting on the Appeal Web site every detail we could confirm.

Houses were being lost. The fire might cross Curry Street, and then what? Flames were creeping toward Western Nevada College. What if the Governor's Mansion caught fire?

No place is safe from disaster. You can be prepared, and you can take the necessary steps to minimize damage. But thousands of wildfires break out all over the West every year. And, like I said, if it's not fire then it's flood. I haven't even mentioned earthquakes (knock on wood).

There's really no irony in the fact that the Waterfall fire started a few hundred yards from a memorial marker for three people killed on July 5, 1976, when a helicopter crashed while fighting a wildfire. What's remarkable, looking back, is that nobody died five years ago.

Last week, I took a walk up to the waterfall to see the blackened tree trunks along the road standing next to new growth that's already a dozen feet tall. I saw the new houses, and the ones that somehow escaped the fire.

It reminded me of a comment made by an out-of-towner a couple of weeks after the Waterfall fire. "I drove through Carson City the other day," he said at the time, "and I couldn't really tell where the fire had been."

I was aghast, of course. People's homes had been reduced to rubble. It was easy — to me, anyway — to trace the swath the fire had cut across the forest. You could drive down streets on the west side and still catch a whiff of charred wood.

But it's not the same, I guess, when it isn't your town that's threatened. When it isn't your neighbors who needed a place to stay, when it isn't your pets you drove across town to get — just in case. When it isn't your house that you drive around the corner and hope to see still standing.

Eventually, though, we all move on. I lost nothing in the fire except some sleep. The people who did lose homes and heirlooms and treasures and money have found a way to cope, I suppose, and get on with their lives.

I do wonder about one thing, though. I still don't know how that fire started.

But somebody does. Five years have passed, and somebody has been living with that secret. I'm fairly certain that somebody, if they wanted to, could lead us to the spark that did so much damage and frightened so many people.

I'm not sure how that person is coping. I'm not sure how they're moving on with their lives.

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