

**The Lexington Fires of 1985:
The Tragedy and Triumph of a Community**

**An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County**

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Introduction

Lexington, originally called Jone's Mill, was laid out as Lexington in 1860. The town consisted of lumber yards, blacksmiths, a post office, hotel, wheel right, physician, an oil company, and eight neighboring sawmills. In 1952 both Lexington and Alma, it's neighbor to the south were forced out of existence when Lexington Dam was built. The water now backed up what used to be a thriving city. In 1985 a fire known as the Lexington Fire ravaged through the beautiful mountains wiping out hundreds of years of forest growth.

Around two o'clock p.m. on July 7, 1985 in the beautiful Los Gatos foothills on Alma Bridge Road, a fire of unknown origin was reported. At this time only eleven inches of rainfall out of the normal, annual twenty-six inches had fallen. Also an extreme heat wave was also on, with temperatures in the hundreds. The extreme temperatures caused most of what little moisture there was to be sucked from the plants and soil. The fire thrived on these conditions and spread extremally fast.

At first, fighting the fire was fairly routine. A few minutes later the fire was uncontrollable, burning on dry brush and aided by the one-hundred degree temperatures at an acre a minute towards Aldercroft Heights, a community of about 120 houses and 500 people. Although fires elsewhere in the state tied up personnal and resources, about 250 firefighters were dispatched to the Lexington blaze. Little or no progress went on and firefighters were beginning to realize the task they had ahead of them. At six o'clock p.m. residents of Aldercroft Heights and Soda Springs areas were evacuated. Predicting it was going to be a long battle, a base camp for firefighters was set up at Vasona Park. Red Crossofficials coordinated a station for people with no place to stay at Los Gatos High School. As night fell, 250 firefighters geared up for an all night battle. They quickly discovered that the rough terrain greatly complicated efforts, especially those involving helicopters carrying fire retardant chemicals that often failed to penetrate the dense vegetation.

During this first day of the fire the objectives were to protect structures on the southwest side of the reservoir, keep the fire east of Highway Seventeen, keep the fire west of Loma Prieta, Mount Umunhum Ridge, keep the fire north of Summit Road, and to keep it out of and or minimize damage to Redwood trees.

On day two of the fire, fire officials knew early containment of the fire would depend on weather conditions. Secondary fire lines were completed, as were twenty-five per cent of the primary fire lines. The blaze was fifty per cent contained and was close to being stopped just south of Lexington Reservoir.

The winds began to pick up in the afternoon, and the fire jumped the main fire line causing all hope for early containment to be lost. The fire then burned out of control to the southeast causing officials to evacuate the Chemeketa Park, Loma Prieta, and Summit areas.

The number of evacuees now increased to 3,000 people. The destruction of three structures, including two single-family homes, was confirmed. Reinforcements came bringing the number of firefighters to 430 from thirteen different agencies.

Almost immediately the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors declared a local state of emergency, while temperatures still hovered around a hundred degrees.

During these first two days, firefighters worked as many as forty-eight hours or more at a time. After reinforcements arrived, many were able to work twelve on, twelve off, etc.

On day three the fire quickly spread, particularly along Old Santa Cruz Highway and Summit Road. For the first time, the fire jumped Los Gatos Creek to the west. On the west side of Highway Seventeen, residents were advised to prepare to evacuate, and officials made a plan to close Highway Seventeen. The number of evacuees had now risen to 4,500. The base camp became a miniature city with 2000 firefighters from forty-five different agencies staying there.

The fire grew to about 13,000 acres, and the fire zone increased ten miles long and seven miles wide. The wind and high temperatures persisted and worried officials thought it might take two weeks before the fire could be controlled. Officials also came to a conclusion that the fire was started deliberately.

The number of houses destroyed rose to six, though firefighters saved hundreds more. However, the growing fire still posed a threat to about 2,500 homes.

On July 16, Governor George Deukmejian declared Santa Clara County a disaster area. He called President Ronald Reagan to proclaim five fire-ravaged counties including Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo, and Ventura Counties as federal disaster areas. This meant federal aid for victims of the fire.

On day four, the hopes and prayers of the mountain residents were answered, with a dramatic and unexpected change in the weather. Temperatures dropped from the hundreds to the seventies and overcast skies provided the badly needed humidity. In some places even rain fell!

Firefighters managed to contain fifty per cent of the fire. They kept the fire to the east side of Los Gatos Creek and away from Chemeketa Park. Six houses in Aldercroft Heights were confirmed destroyed.

On day five, favorable weather conditions that allowed dramatic strides on Wednesday continued on through the morning. Although temperatures returned to the nineties in the afternoon firefighters were able to contain seventy per cent of the fire and control thirty per cent of it. The wind was negligible all day. Three hundred of the 2,000 firefighters returned home. The big news for residents came in the afternoon when officials informed them that they could return home.

On day six firefighters were on the verge of conquering the fire, reporting ninety per cent containment and fifty per cent controlled.

However, news was released that twenty-three homes and five mobile homes had been destroyed in the blaze. Property damage totalled 4.2 million dollars.

The fire fighting force began to dismantle, though 1,400 firefighters remained on duty. The numbers of injuries among firefighters grew to six hundred.

On day seven firefighters achieved one hundred per cent containment, completely surrounding the fire zone with fire-breaks. The major tasks left to be done included mopping up and assessing damages.

The property and watershed damage total was updated to 7 million dollars and officials had spent 1.2 million dollars fighting the fire. Investigators in the meantime, had pinned the origin of the fire to a ten-foot circle and continued to search for suspects.

The Red Cross's final account recorded forty-two homes destroyed including mobile homes. Many houses not burnt but close to the fire had severe smoke damage and many acres of peoples yards were burned. Many houses not burnt but close to the fire had severe smoke damage, and many acres of peoples yards were burned.

People weren't the only ones effected by the fire, more than eighty-six dogs, cats, goats, chicken, and geese were saved. Many of these animals were from owners who had left on short notice

Terri Mc Kim, a volunteer with the Humane Society and two others, headed up rescue efforts for these animals. She transported more than thirty animals from scorched areas and also set up arranged temporary homes, distributed food, and compiled lists of missing animals. The community and

Ralston Purina Co. donated 4,000 water bowls which were placed at homes for lost animals thought to return. Many horses were also rescued. Volunteers with trailers brought horses to Graham Hill Showgrounds. There about one-hundred temporary stalls were filled. Also, a 600 pound sow was rescued, but the job took three men and a lot of coaxing.

In preparing for winter rains, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service helped instruct people in reseeding plants to stop erosion and showed them how to protect against flood damage.

Soil in the fire ravaged areas went through chemical make-up changes, due to extreme heat. This caused it to be water resistant and is called "hydrophobia." Estimates said because of this, ten to thirty times more than normal runoff might occur. Also, there were no plants or chaparral that would usually suck up some ground water before it reached the surface. Annalysts said it would take about one year or two before the soil became normal again.

Another big problem would be erosion. Depending on rainfall the erosion of the area could be slight or could be very tragic. Normal rainfall would fill five per cent of Lexington Reservoir's capacity with silt. Storms like the fierce storms of 1981 and 1982 would bring 3,100 acre feet of mud into the reservoir.

Rock dams were built at Silver Creek Canyon and at Lower Los Gatos Creek by the water district. Thes dams were to stem the flow of 12,000 cubic yards of silt from entering the reservoirs.

In the months following the fire, restoration efforts included 108,000 pounds of seed to be dropped by air, 55,000 pounds of seed to be planted by hand, 413 tons of straw, and 3,000 sandbags were to be applied to damaged

water sheds, according to the water districts memorandum. After stabilization of the soil began, massive efforts of restoration took place.

Ten-thousand Girl Scouts in Santa Clara County each got to adopt three to five trees in two inch containers and transplanted them to gallon containers. These were watered and nurtured them until late 1986 or early 1987. When finally planted, the one-year-old trees would stand a better chance of surviving the lack of water and foraging of animals.

In housing areas, redwoods, pines, and fir trees were planted. Monterey and ponderosa pines along with douglas firs were planted as wind-breaks. In wildlife areas, Christmas and coffee berries along with many varieties of trees all natural to the area were planted to improve the wildlife in the area.

Unfortunately the arsonist wasn't caught although a man was arrested but let free after a couple weeks.

Rebuilding after a great fire takes great amounts of time and energy, and in this area it took lots of coordination and effort to replenish the lush environment. Congratulations to the firefighters and the community who helped to save one of the last forested areas around Santa Clara County.

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