



ALTADENA HERITAGE NEWSLETTER

Wildfire Issue

Protecting Altadena from Wildfire

by Mark Goldschmidt

Our scenic mountain backdrop is Altadena’s greatest amenity, yet also poses our greatest danger. The precipitous slopes of crumbly rock are covered with shrubs and grasses that have evolved to burn, and in the hot, dry conditions that prevail most of the year, a small blaze can rapidly become a raging fire storm. There are homes in our critical fire zones, La Viña, the Meadows, Alzada, Loma Alta, and people living there are always conscious of the possibility of fire. Fire professionals make a distinction between “interface” when the edge between wild land and structures is clearly defined by houses grouped together (think The Meadows), and “intermix” where houses are scattered (think Alzada and the streets off Chaney Trail) which are more difficult to protect.

Even we who live miles down the hill from the brush-covered mountains in flatter, more urbanized areas of Altadena, mustn’t be complacent. Persistent heavy rains following a fire can bring hillsides down as they did in 1938, when mud and rock flowed past Washington Boulevard. We are protected by debris basins at canyon mouths, but if they are overwhelmed by a prolonged storm event (as occurred in 1997 at Rubio Canyon), we will also see devastation. Nor are we immune to wildfire. Imagine a fire coinciding with one of the occasional mighty winds that roar down the mountain, burning embers can fly a mile or more and ignite multiple fires. When a fire gets out of control in a gale it is impossible to stop until the wind drops.



Photo Robert J Lang

Mopping up after the February 20, 2022 fire above the Cobb Estate.

Our first line of defense is the Los Angeles County Fire Department, the largest fire department in the US in terms of area covered, and second largest after New York city in personnel. It is a vast enterprise, with 176 stations, 3,300 fire suppression personnel, with the ability to call up many additional resources outside the department. Other cities will send engines and crews when needed. The Angeles National Forest has its own wildland fire specialists including seasonal crews, a critical component of Altadena’s fire protection. Prisoners who have received training in fighting wild fires may be drawn from Julius Klein Conservation Camp in Azusa Canyon when needed.

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Upcoming Events



Golden Poppy Awards & Garden Party
 Sunday, May 22, 2022 • 3 – 5 PM
 Sign up @ altadenaheritage.org



Golden Poppy Bike Ride
 Sunday, May 29th • 8am
 Sign up @ altadenaheritage.org

Letter from the Chair

Sharon Sand

We are dedicated to protecting, preserving, and raising awareness of our foothill community's rich architectural, environmental, and cultural heritage. How we do that is through public events, advocating for change with the County, gathering and distributing information (such as this in-depth newsletter), improving our public green spaces, and bringing our community together. We always have more exciting projects than we can possibly handle, which is one of the reasons we so appreciate the volunteers who step up to help; stopping by during a weeding morning at Old Marengo Park, regularly offering to help at events, or joining groups such as our Tree Committee.

It was great to be back together in person at a fabulous event we organized at the Mountain View Mausoleum, co-sponsored with Altadena Historical Society. Speakers Michele Zack, Paul Ayers, and Bill Deverell enlightened us about the history of Owen Brown and the decades of civic engagement it took to preserve and restore his gravesite. Michele spoke of plans being formulated for educational programming to share that history with local students. A week later board member Bill Stuart led a group of members on hike up to the gravesite on Little Round Top and then back down through El Prieto Canyon.

It's always exciting to see the new and established businesses thriving alongside each other in Altadena while reintroducing community members to the joys of shopping



local. The Farmers' Market at Loma Alta Park, two new nurseries on Lincoln, expanding restaurants and food along Fair Oaks, Mariposa, and Allen, and community events that center around these local businesses. The Night Market at Mariposa Junction on 1st Saturdays has become a popular event.

We're looking forward to our upcoming Golden Poppy Awards and hope to see you there! It's going to be in a beautiful garden, celebrating other beautiful gardens in Altadena; those that give to the street and incorporate native and drought-tolerant plants. Then just one week later we'll be celebrating bike month with Altadena Bicycle Club in our 2nd annual community bike ride that will ride us past the 2022 Golden Poppy winning gardens.

We continue to advocate for appropriate night lighting in Altadena and we are organizing a Third Thursday event with planning officials from LA County and So Cal Edison. These are the two entities putting in replacement lighting. If you see lighting that doesn't seem right, make sure to say something to LA County, So Cal Edison, your town council representative, and to us.

See you around town,
Sharon

A "Collection of Collections"

Altadena Heritage is known for its advocacy, preservation, and activism — things like helping to build parks, the Golden Poppy Awards, getting the Farmers Market started, planting trees. But we also maintain important paper and digital archives. Unlike our sister organization Altadena Historical Society (AHS), with its larger holdings documenting town history, our collections are quite concentrated. Architectural records and civic history are our two main interests. A consultant Altadena Heritage's board hired ten years ago to assess our archives said, "You have a collection of collections, not huge, but focussed on records and history no one else has collected and preserved."

If you are looking to find information on your home, or a structure built pre-war, (or later, if it is considered significant), we likely have a record of it in AHAD (Altadena Heritage Architectural Database) — which was the first such digitized database in California, now searchable from our website. We also have important paper-based holdings, including the William Wilson Real Estate Agency's files on homes sold here from 1919 through the 1940s, that you can research in our office. These archives were used last year to help a resident have his home listed as a historic landmark — among the first named after Los Angeles County finally created a Historic Designation Ordinance in 2015.

AHAD's path-breaking predecessor database was assembled as part of Heritage's founding mission in the mid-to-late-1980s: to document Altadena's diverse architectural stock at a time many significant structures were being torn down. The effort was led by our founding Chair Tim Gregory, who understood that to preserve anything, job number one is to take stock of and measure it. The "Windshield Survey" of every Altadena Street, compiled at a cost of over \$20,000, determined Altadena had the most significant concentration of architecturally significant homes and buildings in all of Los Angeles County — many indeed worth saving. Altadena Heritage raised consciousness of this important resource, and filled the void created by the then-lack of a historic preservation ordinance for Los Angeles County by designating seven Altadena Heritage Areas, or "AHAs!" to bring attention to architecturally interesting neighborhoods.

Board Roster

Sharon Sand, Chair
Kathleen McDonnell
Catherine Cadogan
Val Zavala
Bill Stuart
Rob Bruce
Anthony Parr
Mark Goldschmidt

Newsletter Editor:
Mark Goldschmidt

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Streetlight Update & Call to Action

By Mark Goldschmidt

You have probably noticed SoCal Edison's work crews doing a lot of work around town the past few years, replacing many power poles.

When a pole is replaced, or an old streetlight is beyond repair, Edison attaches a new streetlight. These are LEDs similar in color temperature to existing high pressure sodium vapor (HPSV) lamps, but far brighter. I became aware of this when a pole across the street from my home on Marengo was changed, and eye-piercing beams suddenly started coming through my front window. Recently we've heard complaints from folk up on East Loma Alta where poles have been replaced and new lights installed. They are very unhappy with the brightness, glare, and trespass of the new lighting.

In an article in AH's Fall/Winter 2019 Newsletter, "Change Coming to Nighttime Streets," we wondered what night time lighting would be like with the coming inevitable change to LEDs. When I contacted Inez Yeung, head of DPW's Street Lighting Division, she asked me to email our questions. One was: "Is Altadena covered by the Dark Sky Ordinance?" Erick Guzman from her office replied: "All new LED lamp fixtures are dark sky compliant, which minimize light pollution by directing the light downwards instead of allowing overspill above the lamp fixture as is common with HPSV lighting." I was happy to hear this — but did Edison get the same message?

SoCal Edison and LA County are bound by a long standing contract dating from the 1950s, which stipulates that Edison provide streetlights on their poles, and the County pays for the electricity. (The County does own about 10% of streetlights in Altadena, those on concrete or metal poles.) Having Edison take responsibility for Altadena's street-lighting makes it easier for county officials and public works. Edison does the electrical design and installation and uses the poles it owns, that is their area of expertise. But problems arise when citizens have strong objection to something they are doing. We did not elect Edison, and Edison is not eager to talk to us.

It is not as though we haven't tried. Over the past two years plus we met numerous times with engineers from Edison and the Dept. of Public works, experts in outdoor lighting, and representatives from our supervisor's office. We ZOOMed a well-attended public education program that drew on the experiences of experts and other communities transitioning to LEDs. We drafted a letter signed by a coalition we gathered of 10 community groups, (including Town Council, Rotary, Chamber, and others) with a few (we thought) reasonable requests. We gained a single concession, lowering the color temperature of lamps from a harsh, bluish 3000 Kelvin to a mellower 2700 K.

Other requests have been denied. We asked for a master plan for Altadena night lighting that would include information

such as how many lights we had before conversion, how many after, and what energy savings would be achieved.

We were told there would be no master plan, there had never been a master plan, there was no money for a master plan.

We asked for lights that could be dimmed if neighbors found the light annoyingly bright, and dimmed after midnight for the benefit of wildlife and to save energy. Ms Yeung recently

wrote: "Streetlights on local residential streets are designed to meet the minimum national lighting standards and cannot be dimmed."

We asked for an opportunity for public input, where we could see what new LED fixtures would look like at night, that glare be reduced with a diffuser, that fixtures conform to Dark Sky standards. This is important, we need a chance to see and comment on what Edison wants to give us before it is installed, with or without a masterplan. What is chosen will affect Altadena's quality of life for many years. We haven't given up, and ask that Altadena Heritage members concerned about our future night-time lighting to contact officials and agencies below about this situation and advocate for an appropriate amount of money be budgeted for the development of a Lighting Masterplan for incorporated Altadena. They need to hear from more people. Stress the five top priorities below:



1. Make certain that street lighting is "Dark Sky Compliant" as we were told all new LED fixtures would be by Erick Guzman three years ago. The County has a "Dark Sky Ordinance," but only a small area of Altadena in or adjacent to Angeles Forest is so designated. All Altadena should be a Dark Sky Area --- or at minimum have lighting that is truly "Dark Sky Compliant." We want to see more stars.
- 2) Fixtures should light the street, and have shields as necessary so light does not trespass into people's homes.
- 3) Street lighting should not be too bright. The brighter the light, the darker the shadows, which creates greater safety hazards for motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists.
- 4) Fixtures must have a diffusing cover to mitigate the piercing glare of tiny diode light sources. Efficiency may be lowered slightly, but a diffuser is critical for human comfort.
- 5) Give the community an opportunity to have a say in choosing what we will be living with for a generation, with test installations and opportunities for public comment.

Who to write to (and copy all!):

California PUC consumer-affairs@cpuc.ca.gov
Southern California Edison David.A.Ford@sce.com
Supervisor Kathryn Barger kathryrn@bos.lacounty.gov
Sussy Nemer snemer@lacbos.org
Anish Saraiya ASaraiya@bos.lacounty.gov

A Short History of Fire and Fire Protection in Altadena

By Mike Manning

The following story, somewhat abridged here, appeared in the January 1994 edition of "Peaks at Altadena", a monthly news magazine put out by the Manning family, Mike, Sean, Julie and Stacy. It had no byline, but we tracked down Sean who confirmed that Mike wrote this piece shortly after the October 1993 fire in the hills above Altadena. Mike Manning was a founding member of Altadena Heritage and active in community affairs for many years.

To see our hillsides ablaze as they were on October 27 [1993] was awesome yet frightening. It was no different over 100 years ago. Our forests and hillsides here in the San Gabriels have been the topic of fire discussion since the late 1880s. Fires raged out of control in those days and for the most part, except for occasional lightning strikes, humans were the cause. There were the careless homesteaders and reckless campers, but even sheep ranchers used to indiscriminately set wooded areas on fire in order to clear pasture land for grazing. What excess the blazes burned was of no concern to them.

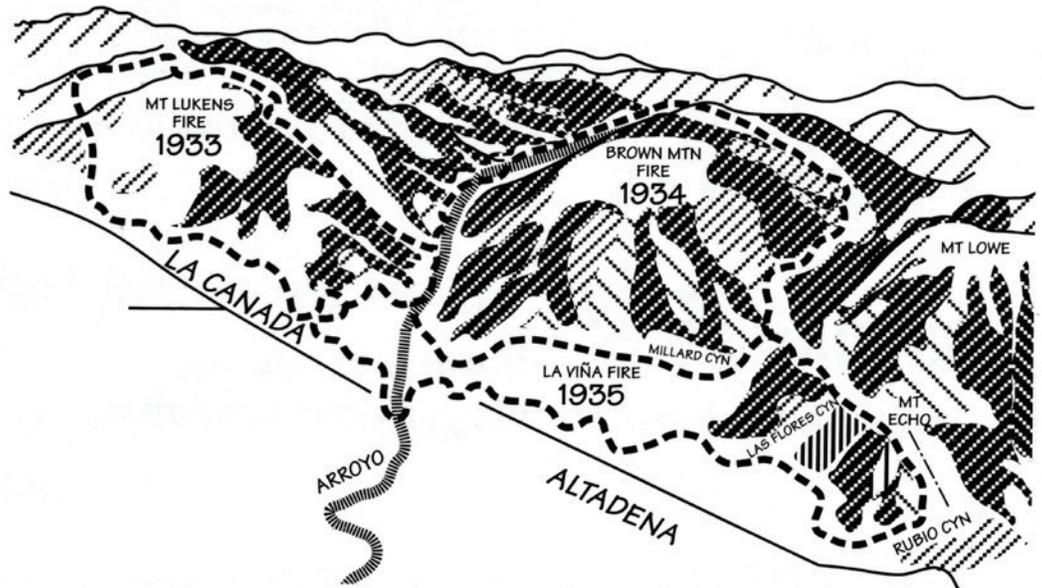
It did, however, concern civic leaders of major metropolitan Los Angeles and surrounding farm communities. Valuable watershed was either destroyed or badly polluted by forest fires. The forest lands of San Gabriel were public lands used on a first-come-first-served-anything-goes basis. It was an Altadena rancher, Abbott Kinney, who brought about the development of national forest reserves. Kinney was the first chairman of the California State Board of Forestry. He developed Kinneloa Estates, and as a naturalist and conservationist as well as a developer, he experimented with livestock, hillside forestation, and watershed management in an attempt to study how all these properties could be managed together.

Kinney helped to effect passage of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891. With this President Benjamin Harrison could create forest reserves under the auspices of the Department of the Interior, and the San Gabriel Timberland Reserve was established in 1892. In theory these forest reserves were protected by law. In actuality they were not policed and were subject to continued human abuse. But in 1896, devastating forest fires, blackened great areas of forest in the San Gabriels and San Bernardino and led to public outcry for a national policy of forest policing.

Colonel B.F. Allen helped establish a mounted patrol on the reserves, and in July of 1898 was allowed to hire temporary help during the fire season to help patrol the forests and prevent or suppress fires. The duties of these first rangers were burdensome and their patrol areas were vast. As years went by, the national Forest Service developed into a large supportive network of federal agents protecting our forest reserves.

To help with reforestation following forest fires, the government leased property in Henninger Flats above Altadena where experiments with reseeding a variety of pine trees was carried out by Pasadena conservationist Theodore P. Lukens, later referred to as the Father of Forestry.

For the first 40 years of Altadena's existence there was virtually no civil fire protection service, volunteer or otherwise. Burning structures waited for Pasadena units to arrive from miles away and invariably burned uncontrollably. By 1922, the Altadena Citizens Association began a campaign to develop a fire protection district with the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. A state law was passed in January 1923 providing funds to develop such districts in the unincorporated parts of the county, and Altadena voters passed its assessment district in March of that year.



A 20 man forestry unit was established in 1924 under direction of William D. Davies, for whom the Davies Building in Farnsworth park is named. With cooperation of the three Altadena water companies and the Forest Service, Altadena hillside protection was well in hand.

During 1925 one hundred fire hydrants were hooked up throughout Altadena, and insurance rates were dramatically reduced. By 1927 200 hydrants had been installed and in July of that year, Station No. 12 on Lincoln below Harriet was completed. At this point, Altadena has as good a fire department as any city.

In three successive years from 1933 adjacent sections of the foothills were blackened by fire. The 1933 Mt. Lukens fire destroyed watershed over the Tujunga and La Crescenta areas. In 1934, the Brown Mountain fire burned valuable watershed of the Millard Canyon and Arroyo Seco. Assistance from the CCC camps brought these fires under control. On October 23, 1935, fire broke out in the Las Flores Canyon above Altadena. Santa Ana winds blew the blaze over to La Viña Sanitarium and destroyed

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Left to right: Attorney Paul Ayers, Dr William Deverell, and Michele Zack

Owen Brown Event at Mountain View Mausoleum

We held our April Third Thursday event in the beautiful upstairs courtyard terrace at the Mountain View Mausoleum. Three panelists told the incredible story behind the restoration of Owen Brown’s gravesite in Altadena’s foothills.

Paul Ayers, who successfully litigated public access to the gravesite, gave an illustrated talk on its legal history, and how he used forensic photographic techniques to determine the correct spot to replace the gravestone that had gone missing (and put back in wrong places several times), before it was finally restored to its proper position last July.

Dr. William Deverell, Director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, painted a broad history of the Brown family’s abolitionist activities in the run up to the Civil War, drawing the arc of how John Brown’s children Owen, Jason, and Ruth Thompson Brown arrived in the Pasadena/

Altadena area. He spoke movingly about how the Brown’s actions at Harpers Ferry are relevant to issues in the news today, and provided cultural context on who decides what events and people involved in the Civil War are memorialized.

Michele Zack, Altadena historian and chair of the current LA County-sponsored Owen Brown Gravesite Committee overseeing its restoration, recounted the long and ultimately successful civic quest to preserve the site, involving years of effort and finally, a surprising grand bargain struck between LA County with the developer of the La Viña housing development.

The event was recorded and can be viewed under Past Events, “Restoring Owen Brown’s History and His Gravesite,” at altadenaheritage.org. You may also view a short video on Presidents Day Commemoration at the gravesite in February.

A Short History... Continued

it. This fire caused more loss of property than the fires of the two preceding years. Nevertheless, the fire fighting resources of Altadena were sufficient enough to deal with the conflagration and the fire was brought under control within a day.

Fire has long been referred to as the “Mother of Floods.” The secondary fear of fire-ravaged hillsides is flooding and mud slides. A prime example of flood following fire occurred after the Pin Canyon fire of September 1979. Rubio Canyon in particular was severely burned. As misfortune would have it, rains of the 1980 season, which measured upwards of 11 inches in 24 hours

at higher elevations, caused mud and debris to fill the flood basin at the mouth of Rubio within a matter of minutes. Several houses on Gooseberry Lane, Sunny Oaks Circle, Altadena Drive and Braeburn were flooded. Some homes were actually rocked loose from their foundations. Evidence of flooding was visible near the golf course at Winrock and Morada, and as far south as Washington Boulevard. For weeks on end, at a round-the-clock pace, the County Flood Control District trucked mud from the debris basin to avoid further catastrophe from the next rain storm.

Theo's View... Notes from the wild side of the urban Interface

By Michele Zack

"Almost like clockwork... I can count on it every 10 years," Theo says, sounding philosophical. He's referring to the wildfires that have forced him to evacuate his mountain home in Altadena four times since 1979. He moved out for three days for the Station Fire, and another three or four more recently. Theo Clarke, retired physicist and old friend who lives on 16 wild acres of a private inholding in the Angeles National Forest, is talking to AH News for our Wildfire Issue. He worked at JPL for 27 years, plays the violin, and appreciates every morning waking up to views spanning from Owen Brown's gravesite, to Altadena, Pasadena and beyond — all the way to the Pacific on clear days.

His rustic home sits at the end of the road on a shelf directly above La Vina, 272 homes built in the 1990s. Twenty-five years of landscape growth have softened and improved his down hill view, jarred for years by the shock of this development. His property includes land homesteaded in the 1880s by Owen and Jason Brown, sons of "John Brown the Liberator" of Harpers Ferry fame. Near the end of his driveway, the Brown's long-gone cabin site is marked by a 1953 half-buried Plymouth, now sprouting with greenery and melding into the landscape.



This is fire country, and Theo is fortunate that his home has never burned. "I was convinced it was GONE the time before last, it was terrifying," he said, referring to the 2009 Station Fire, when he watched from the bridge by Devil's Gate Dam as helicopters swarming like bees dumped flame retardant ("red stuff") on his property to protect it.

Theo's place was used as staging area and field headquarters in that fire — several engines parked there as firefighters quenched hotspots with water drawn from a nearby reservoir. "I found out two years later what saved it, when a fire captain brought his

crew up to show them the site," he says. The captain described a discussion in which several firefighters opined that abandoning the site was the best option. "But if they let my place burn, nothing could stop the fire from racing down the half-mile slope to La Vina and wiping it out." So instead, Theo explained, "they



Theo Clarke

lit a fire to burn down the hill directly west of my place to create a firebreak. That fire burned west, reaching up the north side of Little Round Top. When the Station Fire approached from the north and west across El Prieto Canyon, there was nothing left to burn on the hillside next to his house and it survived.

To be on the site on this day — a cool, misty April afternoon with surrounding hills cloaked in shades of green — the horror of that close call is difficult to conjure. A few hikers amble by, visible through Theo's living room window on the trail crossing his property. It is perhaps 20 feet from his home, atop the downslope where the intentional fire had been set to consume vegetation before it could feed the giant conflagration heading his way. Theo likes hikers: "They are my neighbors and my friends. In my experience they are good people, they have never bothered me. Just don't park up here and we're fine!"

Getting lost with a friend on a moonlit hike in 1977 first led him to this idyllic spot, which a month or so later he learned was for sale. He put \$1000 down, lived on the property and paid rent in the year it took to finalize the sale. Theo has enjoyed good relations with hikers ever since, and has been a great supporter of restoring Owen Brown's gravesite — on property adjacent to his.

Though Theo's house was saved, several of his 16 acres burned in the Station Fire. About 20 Altadena Heritage members might remember seeing a miracle of nature in Spring, 2010, when he hosted a program on fire safety and a hike through head-and-shoulder-high yellow and purple blooms of "fire followers." Pyrogenic flowering is defined as "the fire-adapted trait of an increase or a peak in flowering after a fire event," that allows plants to persist in fire-prone environments (such as our foothills.)

A “Collection of Collections” *Continued from Page 2*

Before Altadena Heritage gave it a name, for example, “Janes Village” (which now pops up on Google Maps) did not exist! Successive boards of Altadena Heritage have felt a keen sense of stewardship over the original, outdated Paradox database — “migrating” it at great expense to a more stable and user-friendly platform today. And LA County is looking at several of our AHAs! as potential candidates for its new “Historic District” designation. Without AHAD leading the way, this is unlikely to have happened.

Altadena Historical Society holds wonderful paper (and digitized) old Altadena newspapers in its collection, but sadly, newspapers ceased publication here in the 1970s. Altadena Heritage’s newsletters, although hardly comparable to a daily or even weekly newspaper, have covered major civic and preservation topics and events continuously since the 1990s. Because there is no other paper record, for the past 30 years

(for better or worse), our in-depth coverage of Altadena-centric topics has become Altadena’s “paper of record.” Altadena Blog was wonderful while it lasted — but that was only 6 or 7 years.

Do you want to learn about updating Altadena’s Community Standards District, creation of our Hillside Ordinance, the County’s Parks Assessment survey, arguments pro and anti-incorporation attempts? How about redevelopment, health history, or efforts to update our libraries? We’ve covered such civic topics in-depth more than any other publication. In fact, our newsletters have become an important part of our “collections of collections.”

A project now just starting up is creating an index of topics of 30-plus years of newsletters and digitizing them, to make our newsletter archive useful and searchable. If you are interested in helping or leading this effort, please get in touch!

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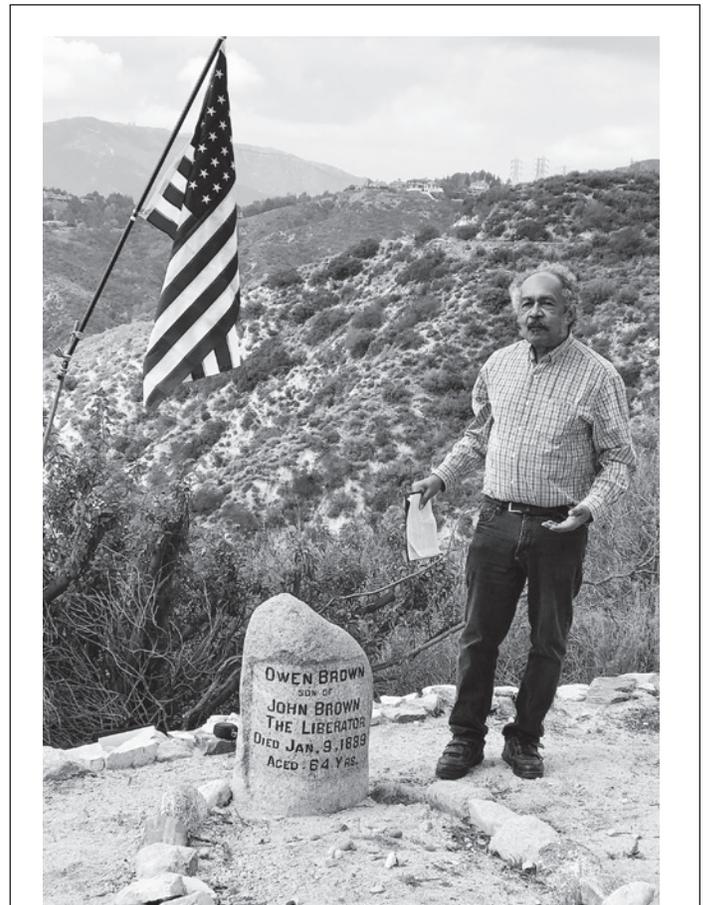
The program was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; most burned areas within Angeles National Forest were closed for a few years and we wouldn’t have experienced this phenomenon were we not invited to witness it on private land.

The temporary increase in size and rate of flowering in May, 2010, was astonishing! Theo generously shared the bounty of flowers with his fellow Altadena Heritage members, and the Altadena Fire Department sent a representative to school us on safety measures such as creating a “defensible area” around homes. This includes removing trees planted in very close proximity to your house. He described cypress trees within a foot of a structure as akin to “having roman candles next to your house” if they catch fire.



Little Round Top after 2009 Station Fire - Photo: Paul Ayers

Theo lives on happily in his fire-prone environment. Post-retirement he travelled the world for years, became an ordained Science of Mind minister, and mounted “poster papers” on JPL’s JUNO project to Jupiter at science conferences. Today he mostly stays closer to home, keeping an eye on the mountains and enjoying his views. He ventures out for shopping and weekly violin lessons, and we’re talking about a hike to Owen Brown’s restored gravesite, which he hasn’t yet seen — but wants to.



To commemorate Presidents Day 2022, a group gathered at Owen Brown’s gravesite on Little Round Top, Altadena. Nick Smith, leader of Pasadena Civil War Roundtable, reads John Brown’s last words before he was hanged for treason in 1859. See the video of this event at altadenaheritage.org.

Wildfire Insurance Heating Up

By Val Zavala

When my husband and I bought a home in Eagle Rock in 2004 we were unpleasantly surprised that our previous fire insurance company would not insure us, they said our home was in a high-risk wildfire area. So, we had to get our fire insurance through something called “Cal FAIR.” Our home was a fire risk because it was perched on a slope, required brush clearance and was on a winding narrow road that fire engines would find hard to navigate. So, we signed up for the FAIR Plan. It was far more expensive than standard insurance, and it covered less. Fortunately, once we moved to Altadena we were back on traditional home insurance.

What is Cal FAIR?

“FAIR” stands for Fair Access to Insurance Requirements, often called “the insurance coverage of last resort.” The California state legislature created this insurance program in 1969 for homeowners in high-risk areas who have been turned down by regular insurance companies. Although it was established by the California legislature it is not run by the state, nor does it cost taxpayers any money. It’s an independent insurance pool. All insurance companies licensed to do business in California contribute to the Cal FAIR pool, thus assuming a portion of the risk of Cal FAIR policy holders. So, if a house burns down the claim is covered by the “pooled funds.” This distributes the risk for wildfire damage among all insurance companies offering fire insurance in California, making it possible for homeowners and buyers to obtain a mortgage. The program has worked well in California and 33 other states that have similar programs.

Homeowners can buy coverage for up to \$3 million. It can include compensation for loss of the house and other structures, smoke damage, building code upgrades and even loss of trees and landscaping.

The not-good news is that FAIR plan policies cost more than traditional home insurance. The average traditional policy in California costs about \$1565 a year. The California Department of Insurance does not issue Cal FAIR policy prices, but one homeowner complained on the website “Consumer Affairs” that, “Homeowner’s insurance in my area covered fire at about \$1800 per year. Now with FAIR, it is \$4400 per year.

Challenges Ahead

Despite the cost, Cal FAIR is critical to property protection. “California will continue to experience longer wildfire seasons as a direct result of climate change. Continued dry conditions, with above normal temperatures through spring, will leave fuel moisture levels lower than normal, increasing the potential for wildland fire activity.” In California 775,000 homes are at extreme risk of fire. Their replacement value is estimated to be \$221 billion.

The slightly good news for us in Altadena, is that much of the fire risk is in northern California. The most destructive fire in California was in Butte County about 85 miles north of Sacramento. It was the Camp Fire of 2018 where 18,804 structures were destroyed costing insurance companies

an estimated \$16.5 billion in claims. Compare that to the Bobcat Fire that flared up near Altadena in September 2020. It destroyed “only” 170 structures. Also, the Kinneloa fire in October 1993 destroyed 193 homes. Comparatively, these are much smaller numbers.

More intense wildfire seasons are causing some insurers to pull back. California’s Department of Insurance reports that 235,250 home policies were cancelled in 2019, a 31% increase from the prior year. In ZIP codes with a moderate-to-very-high fire risk, non-renewals jumped 61%. This has resulted in 49,000 more homeowners having to sign up with Cal FAIR in 2020, raising the total to 241,466 policies. This is still less than 3% of all home policies written, but the California Department of Insurance that oversees Cal FAIR expects this number to rise as wildfire seasons get longer and more destructive.

Assessing Your Risk

So, how do you know if you’re in a high wildfire risk zone? It’s not rocket science. The closer you are to dry chaparral hillsides, or mountains the more likely wildfire will approach your property. If you live on narrow, winding roads the more difficult it is for fire fighters to access your property and the less defensible your home is.

There are many maps created by fire agencies that show wildfire hazard areas. The one I like is offered by the LA Times. You enter your address, then zoom out to see your proximity to high-risk fire areas. (See below for web address.) In general, the high-risk fire area in Altadena runs north of Loma Alta Avenue, Mount Curve, East Loma Alta Drive, Skyline Drive, parts of Altadena Drive and New York Drive. But each property is unique.

You can also evaluate your own property for fire resilience. Among the most important mitigations are to create a 5-foot ember-resistant zone around your home, install a class-A fire rated roof, have 6-inches of non-combustible area at the bottom exterior walls of your home, and install double paned windows. (See below for the “Safer from Wildfires” website.)

If your insurance company cancels your policy

Even if you think you are not in a hazard area, insurance companies can cancel your policy based on their own criteria that they don’t necessary share. That was the case with Daryl Webber and Gary Mendes whose home is perched up in the Rubio Crest neighborhood of Altadena. Their insurance company said they were at too much at risk and their policy would not be renewed. Neighbors who were also dropped told Gary and Daryl they would have to get insurance through Cal FAIR.

They pushed back, informing their insurance company there was a fire hydrant right in front of their property; they had cleared all combustible trees and grass from their property; they had double-paned windows and fire brand attic filters, as well as non-flammable facia. They sent their insurance company all relevant receipts. *Voila*. Their policy was renewed.

But not everyone is as fortunate. Ironically, California’s former insurance commissioner, Steve Poizner, was dropped by

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his insurance company. He wrote about it in an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times in April:

My insurance company assured me that if I took steps to protect my home, then my coverage would be renewed. I live in a hilly suburban area with lots of trees just 15 minutes from San Jose airport. At a cost of thousands of dollars, I put in state-of-the-art vents on all openings in my home where fire or wind-blown embers could enter; pruned trees to keep them away from a deck; and thinned foliage in my yard to create “defensible” space. No wildfire has ever threatened my home in the 25 years I have lived in Silicon Valley. Satisfied with my efforts, the company insured me year after year... Until this shocker hit my mailbox: My home is suddenly “ineligible due to the wildfire risk assessment of the dwelling location.”

“Safer from Wildfires”

In an effort to make fire risk evaluations more transparent, Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara has launched a program called “Safer from Wildfires.” It lists a core set of fire safety actions that homeowners can take to make their properties more resilient. It also requires insurance companies to consider these mitigating steps when pricing policies. In short, the “wildfire risk score” that insurance companies assign to properties will be more transparent. Right now, about 40% of insurance companies offer discounts to customers who make their home safer, and new regulations will require that all insurance companies do so. “With more Californians rolling up their sleeves and reaching into their own pockets to protect their homes and businesses, insurance pricing must reflect their efforts,” says Commissioner Lara. Moreover, policy holders will be able to appeal their scores, or other factors insurance companies use to assess wildfire risk.

“Safer from Wildfires” also explains to homeowners not only what they can do individually, but how neighborhoods can come together and reduce fire risks or establishing clear evacuation routes. So far 26 communities across the state have organized themselves using the “Safer from Wildfire” guidelines.

A Hotter and Riskier Future

The California Department of Forestry reports that California’s five largest recorded wildfires occurred in the last four years. The mega-drought that has parched the West has dried vegetation and drastically reduced water supplies. Altadena homeowners in high-risk areas would be wise to make their homes as resilient as possible, and to be sure they are adequately insured should the worst happen.

Resources:

For information on the Safer from Wildfire program go to: insurance.ca.gov/01-consumers/200-wrr/saferfromwildfires.cfm

LA Times fire hazard map
latimes.com/projects/wildfire-hazard-zone-lookup-map

Cal FAIR Plan
cfpnet.com

California Wildfires By the Numbers

Most Lives Lost

Camp-Paradise Fire in Butte County
2018
85 deaths

Most Area Burned

Complex Fire in north coastal California
2020
1,032,648 acres burned

Most Structures Destroyed

Camp Fire in Butte County
2018
18,804 structures burned

LA County’s Most Destructive Fire

Woolsey Fire from Westlake to Malibu
2018
1121 structures burned

Ca Homes at Extreme Risk of Fire

775,000
Replacement value \$221 billion
Source: Cal FIRE



Santa Rosa Suburb wiped out by Camp Fire.

Protecting Altadena from Wildfire *Continued from page 1*

The LACFD is a well-oiled machine, with a strict command structure, excellent communications, highly trained personnel, and protocols that facilitate quick decision making.

Fighting a wildfire is a lot like war. To prevail, combatants want to have the best weapons available, an established chain of command, and failsafe means of communication. Everyone knows that firefighters are gear-heads and equipment freaks. Just look at one of their magnificent engines, polished to a high shine. This kind of pride and attention to detail manifests itself throughout: tools and gear are meticulously maintained and carefully stowed, everything in its place to be retrieved in an instant. There are various kinds of gear for different kinds of fires, and methods for handling hoses. And communication, every firefighter has a radio. Great communication is essential as fires rage, smoke billows, and numerous crews work in rough terrain. That is why every firefighter carries a radio with multiple frequencies tuned to an administration channel, command channel, air to ground channel, tactical channel (for keeping in touch with their crew), and often channels for Forest Service and other agencies involved in the fight.

When a fire is spotted in the brush covered slopes above Altadena, possibly by a County fire department patrol (most likely a concerned citizen phoning it in), Altadena's two Stations, 11 and 12, spring into action. From training and experience firefighters are skilled at predicting fire behavior based on topography, wind, humidity and vegetation types, and are careful to maintain routes of escape and withdraw when things get too dicey. Still, in California some firefighters die every year.

One of the first decisions is to establish who "owns" the fire. If it's on Forest Service land it's an FRA (Federal Response Area), if state or local, it's SRA of LRA. Establishing ownership is important, it determines the agency that will lead suppression efforts and, very important, who will pay for it. It may belong to County, to Pasadena, or the the Forest Service. Chain of command is critical to mounting an organized and coordinated response. When a fire first starts, the local station captain may be lead, but if a major wildfire develops, it gets a name and command goes up the line and until an "Incident Management Team" of top brass takes charge. But the initial response is an organized scramble to get resources to the fire and contain it as quickly as possible. Calls are made to nearby stations to assemble at a staging point (often Farnsworth Park in Altadena), ready to deploy if needed.

A standard wildfire-fighting strategy is known to firefighters as AFP — Anchor, Flank, Pinch. To "anchor," a base is set up, generally near the origin of the fire and as close as feasible to water and a pumper. From the anchor point, fire lines are cut through

vegetation on right and left side to "flank" the fire and prevent it from spreading laterally, and hoses are run up the lines. These are usually deployed from Smokey Packs, backpacks containing lengths of light-weight hose laid down as a firefighter walks up the line. Smaller 1inch diameter "attack hoses" are attached to the smokey pack line at intervals providing water to fight the fire all along the flank. The goal is to get to the head of the fire and "pinch" it off, surround it, and extinguish it. This is where air support can

be extremely helpful. Aircraft can't put out a fire, but carefully dropping water or retardant at the head of a fire slows it down, giving crews time to mobilize, contain a fire, or protect structures.

Aircraft are an increasingly important and effective tool in fighting wildfires. Each year the county leases two fixed-wing Canadair Super Scooper aircraft from Canada, "Quebec 1" and Quebec 2", purpose-built planes that can scoop up 1500 gallons from any nearby body of water to drop on a fire. A variety of helicopters and other fixed-wing aircraft are available, including modified DC 10 that can drop 12,000 gallons of water or retardant. Cost is always a consideration, so jumbo jet tankers are saved for the most dire situations.

A back fire is a tool in the firefighters' arsenal that is occasionally used to great effect. A raging wildfire consumes an immense amount of oxygen thus creating a draft towards the fire. A fire set nearby will move towards the existing fire, thus eliminating fuel and limiting its spread. "Theo's View" on page 6 in this Newsletter is a dramatic illustration of how a backfire helped save La Viña in 2009.

In a wildfire, first priority is to save lives. Firefighters always check homes or other structures that might be in the path of a fire, encourage anyone they find to evacuate, and provide help as needed. In the LACFD, all firefighters are trained in Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs). (In fact, calls to the department for medical assistance far exceed calls to fires, and all firefighters are EMT certified.) They are always careful with their own, too, ensuring an escape route for personnel and equipment.

Second priority is to save structures; firefighters will make every effort to save homes unless they assess that doing so will be just too dangerous. This is where measure taken by the owners make a big difference. Is the house defensible? Are there flammable trees and wooden structures like decks or pergolas adjacent to a house that will ignite easily? One important service the County Fire Department offers to save homes, and make fire suppression easier, is yearly inspections in high fire-danger areas to make sure that



Flanking a fire above Altadena.

Continued on next page.



WHAT'S THIS? — A year ago this magnificent 1920's Spanish Revival style home at the corner of Mendocino and Santa Anita Avenue was stripped of its exterior stucco cladding, all of its interior plaster, all of its roof tiles (which went into a dumpster) and has sat as a naked skeleton ever since behind its construction fence and overgrown vegetation. We hear that interior decorative tiles were removed and sold, though we have no way of knowing if this is true. Occasional pick ups park outside and desultory work seems to be being done — we are

happy to see more workers there lately. Building sites such as this that remain open for extended periods of time do present increased fire risks, so we hope that this beauty, long time home of the Brooks family, is soon restored to something like its original glory. Altadena Heritage was formed in the early 1980s as a reaction to so many great old homes such as this being torn down, (see “Collection of Collections” story, page 2.) We are glad when new owners preserve, repair, and rebuild in ways that respect the original architecture.

Continued from previous page.

homeowners cut weeds and brush near their homes to create an environment that is defensible.

Natural vegetation is often allowed to burn until a situation arises where lives or structures are threatened, or conditions make it possible to fight and contain a fire. In many situations — like the rugged and precipitous terrain of the San Gabriels — there is often no choice but to let it burn. Fact is, fire is part of the natural cycle of the chaparral that cloaks our Front Range. Periodic burns clean out dead wood and rejuvenate the biome, destroy many plant pathogens, and the ash makes important soil nutrient available for new growth. Fire-following annuals sprout from long-buried seeds that grow only after exposure to fire or chemicals released by charred wood, and evergreen shrubs re-sprout from stumps and buried roots. In nature, fires in this vegetation type occur about three times a century, but human habitation increases frequency, which can lead to native flora eventually being replaced by shallow rooted grasses and annuals. Without deep-rooted shrubs, there is more erosion, and this is exacerbated by burned soil that tends to repel water, decrease infiltration and increase flooding. Mud slides and flooding frequently result.

Building on chaparral covered slopes is, and always has been, a bad idea, but many want to live in a natural environment, and everyone loves a view. Homeowners put their trust in firefighters to save their home, because they know they will always give it their



Opened in 1928, Station 12 on Lincoln Avenue is still active.

best effort.

I want to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Engineer Campbell and Firefighter Dan Carlson from Altadena Station 11, who spent over an hour filling me in on how the LACFD functions in wildfires. I am also grateful to Captain Daniel Clegg who has recently started his command at Station 12, who generously shared his knowledge and clarified a number of issues.



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Golden Poppy Awards & Garden Party

Sunday May 22nd from 3 to 5pm

Join us In Person

We invite you to join your fellow Altadena Heritage members to celebrate the beautiful front yards in our town.

Register and pay to attend at altadenaheritage.org to receive event address.

Members and guests tickets \$20 • Please register to attend.



BECOME A MEMBER

Choose one:

- New member Renewing member

Type of membership:

- \$25: Individual \$35: Household \$30: Senior Household
 \$15: Senior individual (65 and over) \$100: Patron/Business

Are you interested in volunteering?

- Yes! Contact me. Not at this time.

Name _____

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Telephone _____

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Make check payable to **Altadena Heritage** and mail to:

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