

San Diego Wildfires 2007

The Evacuation of the Schmidt and Teravainen Families

Allan Schmidt has lived all but his first five years in the rural area of San Diego County, known as Highland Valley. This agricultural preserve is located on the southern bank of the San Pasqual Valley, directly south of the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Beth, Allan's bride of 27 years, very much enjoys the slow country pace of life the area offers, and it is her dream to have all of her four children and nine grandchildren live in this little pocket where doors don't have locks and car keys can always be found, in the car.

The first of Beth's children to move back home was Andee, her eldest daughter, with her husband Tony Teravainen. Six years ago, Andee and Tony managed to get into a fixer-upper ranch only one-quarter of a mile down the road from her parents. This ranch is where Baby Grace was born, number seven in the series of grandchildren.

Since Andee moved back home (to the valley), she and Beth have become inseparable, as they strengthen their mother-daughter bond with their near constant company and interests. Tony and Allan have also forged a strong relationship, revolving around their love for hands-on work, building, and old cars. Their identical work ethics and ideals have made them a very efficient team, as they always know what the other is thinking.

Most of Sunday, October 21, 2007, was spent with a weary eye toward the southern skies. When it is late in an excessively dry fire season, the Santa Ana winds command much respect. The forecast for this day called for strong, dry winds. At 2p.m. the winds were gusting up to 60 mph toward the west, humidity was down to 8% and the temperature was hovering around 75°. With these conditions, rural folk hate to smell or get a hint of smoke, but that day the acrid smoke smell was everywhere, and the entire southern sky was black. A distinct line in the sky existed directly overhead, separating the normal cloudless blue in the north from the ash filled smoke blanket that covered the southern sky.

When considering an evacuation for a fire, we ask the question "how soon do you go and how far?" It is easy to just leave, but it is a considerable task to pack important belongings, move animals, and juggle cars and trailers. How soon is too soon? And how late is too late?

On this windy Sunday, Allan Schmidt was busy working away at his weekend project. He had recently acquired his late parent's house and was busily working away at a remodel. Soon, Beth and Allan would move there to enjoy their golden years. Allan had seen the smoke in the skies, but after 50 years of living on the mountain he has seen many fires. Allan is not one to evacuate too soon.

While Allan was practicing his construction skills, Tony Teravainen, having returned two days earlier from his annual Hershey Swap Meet Trip, was returning from an overnight camping trip with Grace. Upon their arrival home, Tony began the long task of unloading four weeks worth of dirty clothes and junk accumulation from the meet trip.

Tony was just a short time into the unpacking, when Andee approached him concerning the now very apparent smoke and associated fire. The two broke out their Thomas Brothers' map and found the last location of the fire, based on the television reporting on street crossings. They chuckled as they realized that the fire's current location was within a mile of the 2003 Cedar Fire that had burned thousands of acres and 2500 or more homes. "It is right here at this intersection," surmised Tony, "If it gets in this southerly canyon, it will follow the path of the Cedar Fire and pass us to the south, but if it gets into the more northerly canyon, well, this one leads to the San Pasqual Valley, and we will have some company. And, unfortunately, it looks like the wind is going to bring it down the San Pasqual Valley."

Around 4 p.m., Tony grabbed the map book and headed up to see Allan. There, Tony and Allan discussed the fire's location and direction. Not easily scared by fire, Allan chose to work on the house a bit longer prior to making a decision. Tony discussed making Allan's motor home ready for evacuation, but they noted that the Restoration Supply Company trailer, half unloaded from the Hershey meet, sat blocking the path of the motor home.

At this point, Tony went down and started the unloading process and soon Allan came down to assist, as the smoke started to get a bit thicker. With the path cleared for the motor home, both men set to their respective homes to catch some updated news coverage, around 6 p.m.

The town of Ramona, which lays directly East of Highland Valley, had just been given a mandatory evacuation order. "How do you evacuate a whole town?" Tony wondered, "You can not do that!" Since the only direction the Ramonians could evacuate was westward, they all had to drive through Highland Valley, and the two-lane Highland Valley Road soon became a bumper-to-bumper symbol of why people have moved to the rural areas. With the quickly forming traffic jam on the escape route and the reports of the fire starting down the San Pasqual Valley, there was sufficient evidence to warrant evacuation. It was time to get serious about evacuating.

Beth started loading the car as she always does with her hundreds of picture albums. All the while, she was complaining that she is just going to have to put all of this stuff back tomorrow. Allan's response was optimistic, "Let's hope you have somewhere to put them back at."

Meanwhile, Andee was at her house, following Tony's directions to take pictures of the inside of the house. All the while she was denying the fact that the fire was fast approaching and questioning exactly why she had to take the pictures. Tony's response was pragmatic, "Just pretend you have to make a list of the entire contents of your house, and you will do it from those pictures." Andee ended up taking 50 pictures, a quantity that may seem excessive, but later proved to be inadequate.

While the women were packing cars and snapping pictures, they were both wondering what to do with Beth's 90-year old, dementia-stricken mother who lived with her caretaker in Tony's guest cottage. Neither of them wanted to truly address this issue.

As darkness approached, Allan drove his motor home down the hill to another daughter's, Aimee's, house, in an urban part of Escondido. During this transit, Allan became very worried that he was not going to be able to get back home up the hill to help the rest of his family. During many emergencies, such as this, officials want to limit traffic in the backcountry and roadblocks are put in place. But luckily, there were no roadblocks at that time, and Aimee was able to drive him back to his home to continue to assist in the evacuation.

At 11:30 p.m., Beth's car was loaded to the gills with all of her pictures and important papers. She had gotten so carried away with loading that she forgot to leave room for a passenger, and those who know Beth know that she goes nowhere in a car alone. But, however loaded her Tahoe was, some things that she did not load were two pictures drawn by Dick Teague of their 1910 Pierce and their 1903 Winton, as well as her extensive antique clothes collection with which she regularly adorned herself during car tours.

Around midnight, Beth, Andee, Grace, Grandma and her caretaker, would evacuate to Aimee's house in town. Allan and Tony would stay until such time that it was all clear, or fire was eminent. Prior to her departure, Andee turned to Tony and told him that she did not want him to try to fight the fire. Everybody immediately got silent; everybody's mind was working on preparing responses and opinions.

At times such as these, a wife's knowledge of her husband gave her the upper hand. The women knew that it was not in the heart of their men to run from a fire like this, for it is moments like this that their men are in their prime. However, Tony's daughter was two-years old, and he now had family responsibilities, one of which is to not get killed doing stupid things. Allan and Beth were also listening to this conversation, and as Beth stared at Allan, he knew she was saying the same thing to him.

Tony broke the silence as he assured his bride of 6 years, "If the fire is coming right at us, I will not stay, for Grace's sake--I can not do that to her." Even though this was a truthful statement, it was not a commitment to leave. There was still enough leeway to stay if it was deemed safe to do so, however safe 200 foot flames can be moving at 70+ mph.

Although the men had been packing and moving stuff for six hours, once the women headed into town, the chess match really heated up. Since almost everything that could go was packed up, now it was time to hedge fate. What building was safest? What car should go where? Turn on the back sprinklers or the side sprinklers? Park the trailers on the east side of the dirt lot or the west side? There is only room in front of the barn for one truck, which one should it be? Move the backhoe away from the horse corral or position it where it can shield the horse from the flames?

With a fast moving fire, the news stations cannot afford to put out erroneous information so they are very cautious about reporting fire location, and this leads to great delay. So at intervals of about 30 minutes or so, Allan and Tony would try to find a good vantage point to see the approaching fire. This was the best means to follow the fire; however, as thick as the smoke was, it proved very difficult to see flames.

About 1 a.m., Allan went home and opened his garage door. He loaded his 1910 Pierce Arrow onto his flatbed tow truck. Before he closed the door, he looked back at the three remaining cars and shook his head. Left in the garage were a '61 Impala, '85 Wagoneer and a '95 Mustang. And next to the garage sat three restoration candidates; '68 Pony Edition Mustang, '65 Mustang, '58 Chevy four light pick-up. These cars all had to stay. Allan pulled out of his driveway for the last time that day and returned to Tony's house.

Allan parked the tow truck at the top of Tony's drive on the beginning of the down slope, since the tow truck starter solenoid has a habit of sticking on when you least need it to. Also at the head of the drive was Tony's get-away car, his motor home.

They then ran off again to try to see if they could identify any flames from the back yard, and this time they could see them, still several miles away, but they were coming.

Allan asked if he could put the Pierce Arrow in Tony's metal barn, so he could put one of his customer's cars on the tow truck and bring that car into town. At the time Tony thought this to be a very whacked decision. If Allan was going to bring any car into town, it should be Allan's Pierce. But Allan insisted and he got his wish, to leave his Pierce Arrow in Tony's metal barn with its well being in the hands of fate and take a customer's 1915 Marmon into town for sure safety.

After they got the Pierce Arrow unloaded and Allan left in the tow truck to drive the one-quarter mile to his shop to pick up the Marmon, Tony got to thinking. He now had enough room to put one more car in his metal building. The odds were much higher for the metal building to make it through the flames as compared to a wooden garage structure. The jeep is irreplaceable.

Tony had decided to move his pride and joy, built-up, roll-over king CJ7 Jeep, from his wooden garage to his metal barn. Although it had not moved in nine months, Tony knew the Jeep had heart, and if it were meant to move, it would run. He opened all the garage doors and the door to the barn, cleared the junk accumulation from the seats, hooked up a spare gel-cell battery with vice-grips for battery cable clamps, and climbed in the driver's seat. He took a deep breath and turned the key slowly. As the key went to the ON position the fuel pump kicked on, a good sign, and as the key continued, the Jeep sprang alive after several cranks. But there was no time for celebration, and no time to diddle with the throttle or test out idle. It was full throttle reverse from the garage across the yard, back into the barn, shut it down, and disconnect the vice-grips from the battery. Now in the metal barn, the Jeep was in good company: along with the Pierce Arrow,

there was also Tony's 1908 Tourist and his 1909 Rambler. Both Tony and Allan had stacked a lot of chips on this metal barn making it through the fire.

Quickly Tony was off again into the house to make more rounds collecting any missed valuables, even though the motor home was getting quite full. While grabbing pictures in Grace's room, it clicked in his head, that all of these little pictures were stored on the computer. Two minutes later the computer was in the motor home.

Meanwhile, Allan got to his shop and quickly loaded the Marmon onto the tow truck. The Marmon was not inside Allan's 5000 square foot restoration shop; it was being stored in a trailer out front, waiting for the owner to pick up his finished collectable. With the Marmon on the tow truck, Allan went into his shop for one last look. While standing inside the front door, he ran an inventory of his customer's cars: 1912 Pope Hartford, 1907 Oldsmobile, 1907 Great Arrow, 1908 Winton, 1914 National, 1903 White Steamer. Allan and Beth Schmidt are Horseless Carriage Restoration, and with the help of Paul and Arnulfo, this restoration shop has had the privilege to work on some of the finest horseless carriages. His shop is full of his tools as all his work is done in house: a full fabrication shop, welding room, buffing room, body and paint rooms, upholstery shop, wood shop, machine shop, thousands of hand tools and just as many spare parts and pieces. A lifetime of collecting. To Allan, tools are not possessions, but extensions

The rear section of his building also houses Restoration Supply Company, including the entire inventory, computers, records and files. Beth and Tony toil away their days here with some dedicated helpers, Chuck and Jessica.

Everything for both businesses is housed in this metal building. Both Allan and Tony were also betting heavy that this building would not be overrun by the fire and their businesses will survive.

When Allan arrived back at Tony's house, it was almost 2:30 a.m. He again parked his tow truck with the sticky starter pointing downhill on the slight downgrade. As he looked over to the garage, he expected to see Tony elbow deep under the hood of the Jeep and needing assistance. But a good Jeep will never let you down. He did, however, find Tony in the kitchen, brewing a pot of coffee. Every good sailor, even a retired one, needs a big coffee cup at crunch time.

Allan, not being a big coffee drinker, just shook his head, and they both headed off to try to get a new bearing on the fire.

As part of the staging, the two dogs were tied up out front by the motor home. Each time somebody walked by them, you could see in their eyes that they knew what was happening. The dogs, Max and Liz, who had been calm all evening started barking, ferociously. Allan and Tony came running over to the front yard to see San Diego's Finest driving a patrol car up the driveway ; lights flashing, siren whaling and strobes pulsing. It was 2:30 a.m. A quick glance at the neighbor's driveways revealed flashing lights everywhere; there were at least ten police car lights visible. Two officers, geared

up complete with goggles and facemasks, came out of the car and toward the men. A male with a female officer riding shotgun, and she did all the talking: “Who lives here? How many houses up this driveway? Have you been told to evacuate? Do you have some ID?”

At this point many things became clear. The wind had severely picked up, the air was full of debris and tasted of smoke, and everything was loud, so loud you had to yell all the time. The San Diego City Police were out in the unincorporated areas of the county trying to warn citizens, well outside of their jurisdiction and their element of row houses with numbers painted on the curbs and one-quarter acre lots. “This is a mandatory evacuation, sir,” stated the officer as she recorded Tony’s address, name, and driver’s license number in her little book. “However, I can not force you to leave.” We asked her if the fire we saw in the valley was a backfire. Her expression was enough, and we knew the answer, but she said it anyway, “The fire department has not set a backfire or pulled out a hose yet. Everybody is working on evacuating residents.” And at this point the fire had been burning for well over 12 hours, and all responders were still just trying to stay ahead of it and get people out of the way. Her eyes scanned the property and the poised get-away vehicles as she asked who else was here. After she was informed that the womenfolk had been evacuated earlier and that the men were “ready to leave” she, too, must have seen the fight in Allan’s and Tony’s eyes, and she ended the conversation as she stated very clearly through her mask, “As I said, sir, this is a mandatory evacuation, but I can not force you to leave. Good luck and God Bless You.” With that both officers climbed back into the patrol car and departed. Allan and Tony stood watching the flashing lights going down the driveway until they disappeared into the smoke, and they all seemed to disappear from the neighbor’s houses at the same time too. An eerie feeling filled the men as they looked at each other, as if silently asking one another, ‘Now what?’

After going out back to track the fire once again, both men went down to see Tony’s horse. Earlier in the day, Tony had decided that his horse would stay, in a 24 x 48 foot corral. This was much safer than setting him free, as he was sure to break a leg or run his hoofs down to nubs or, worse yet, be hit by a car. Furthermore, all of the horse evacuation centers had been full since 6 p.m. All of the hay and other flammable items had been dragged out from inside and around the stall. Four bails of hay, along with four barrels of feed and assorted supplements had been moved out of his stall, twenty feet toward the south, so if they did catch fire it would be well away from the horse. And since the horse corral is fronted by one hundred feet of dirt on the east side, there was surely no way fire would burn through there anyway.

As soon as the horse was tended to, the dogs began to bark ferociously again. There was a lone San Diego police car coming up the driveway. This time the occupants were not nearly as calm. “You guys need to get out of here now! This is a Mandatory Evacuation. Are these your vehicles here? You need to load those dogs up and get out, the fire is extremely close! Get out Now!” screamed the officer. Tony informed the officer that this was our second warning and that we were prepared to leave. This reply set the officer at ease enough to leave, but his message was loud and clear. There was a big fire coming.

The fire now was very visible in the San Pasqual Valley at about 3 a.m. Tony and Allan could get a clear view of the fire now coming down the valley, as it ran along the riverbed. They were being pelted with ash and debris driven by the strong winds. A large gust of wind blew up from the east, and the men knew it was time to either man the fire hoses or leave. That last gust of wind nearly knocked them over and forced them to cover their faces from the heat and ash. And in that single gust, they could see the fire in the valley advance no less than one-half a mile with flame heights well over 100 feet. Furthermore, the wind direction was a straight line from the fire to them; the flames were coming straight for them across the valley.

Neither man wanted to run from the fire, but Tony had to stay true to his family, "I have a two-year old daughter; she does not deserve to lose me this way." And with that, both Allan and Tony turned to start their exit from the mountain.

Staying true to his Submariner tradition, Tony headed for that coffee pot to pour himself an oversized travel mug full; yes it was going to be a long night. And with a click he turned off the pot, "I would hate for this to burn the house down," he muttered jokingly under his breath. With that he turned to leave, only to see Allan in his living room holding a patio chair. At the same time both men asked each other, "what are you doing?" "Are you trying to make off with my chairs?" Tony asked. "Why in the heck are you getting coffee now? Anyway, I am moving them in so they won't catch fire on the back patio," replied Allan. They shrugged it off, went out front, loaded the dogs in the vehicles, and drove down the driveway to leave.

To get down the mountain from Tony's house you have to drive by Allan's shop, about one-quarter mile down the road to the west. As the men were leaving, they passed no less than 20 fire trucks all lined up between Tony's house and Allan's shop. By some strange twist of fate or divine intervention, Allan turned into his shop instead of just driving by. Tony pulled his motor home up and double-parked next to a running fire truck, not recommended under normal circumstances, and ran in to see what he was doing. "Just taking one last look," replied Allan in a somber tone.

Tony ran back to the street and jumped into his motor home and got to driving. But he only made it 200 yards when he had a thought. He again pulled the motor home over and jumped out. Running back toward the shop he could see Allan talking to one of the firemen as he was leaving. Tony stopped and waited as he approached. "Did you talk to them about protecting the shop?" Tony asked. "Yes, they commented that I need to get out of here with this car on the tow truck, and I told him that my shop is full of them. Then the fireman told me that he would pull two engines into the yard." Allan's words were cut short as he looked past Tony, in a northerly direction, and saw flames in the field behind him. "Look over there, Boyd's field is burning! Let's go." In the 5 minutes since they left Tony's house, the fire had traveled the rest of the way down and across the San Pasqual Valley, up into Highland Valley and had physically passed them.

Allan led the way down the hill with the bright tow truck lights to cut the smoke. About half way down the two-mile hill, Allan took a look back only to see the hillside and road fully engulfed in flames. They just kept driving, knowing that they needed to get their get-away vehicles to safety: down Highland Valley Road, jog across Pomerodo Dr to I-15 Northbound, and across the lake bed area at the end of San Pasqual Valley. As they were crossing the lake bed, the flames were again coming right at them, and it was only a few minutes until the fire jumped the I-15.

At this time that Tony called his parents in Virginia to inform them of his family's situation. The message was very simple, "No time to talk now, but when you turn on the news of the fire in the morning, just know we all evacuated and that we are safe. Love you."

At 3:45 a.m. Tony and Allan arrived at Aimee's house. They brought the total number of guests to 6 adults, 1 child, 3 dogs and 2 cats; add that to Aimee, her husband Tyson and their 4 kids. They were one big happy family in a 2-bedroom, 1-bath house.

The air in the town of Escondido at Aimee's house was also too thick to breathe. Ash was falling all over and the radio now was reporting evacuations of parts of Escondido as well as two towns to the west.

The rest of the morning and the ensuing day were spent talking on the phone with friends, relatives and telling stories between the houseguests about the previous night. A good bit of time was also spent trying to get closer to, or even back in to Highland Valley, but each turn was blocked by either fires still burning or roadblocks manned by city officials. The fear that roadblocks would keep Allan and Tony out of their homes had come true, but they decided that they would give it one day and make a serious attempt at getting home tomorrow after a good night sleep.

As darkness approached that evening and dinner was ending, Arnulfo called. There are two operating dairy farms in the San Pasqual Valley and neither of these dairies burned; cow manure and milk are not flammable. Arnulfo used to work and live at one of the dairies and his driver's license still bears the dairy's address. All of the road block attendants were instructed to allow the dairy workers free access so the cows can be tended to. This was how Arnulfo got through the road blocks, but he skipped a visit to the dairy and went up the hill to Highland Valley. He called us from his house in Highland Valley and gave us a report of the buildings' status.

The reception was bad, the background noise was high, and emotions were even higher. At the end of the conversation, everybody stood staring at each other. He had reported that 'everything was gone'. 'All of the houses and all of the garages are all gone.' Everybody felt like puking and crying all at once. But, what was he considering a garage? Was he considering Tony's metal barn a garage? Or was Allan's metal shop a garage? Or did he just mean the regular garages were gone? But he said nothing about the metal buildings, and he also said that he did not go all the way up to Tony's house.

No one spoke as Tony and Allan began to systematically walk around the house. They were grabbing clean socks, t-shirts, sweatshirts, cell phone chargers, flashlights, shovels, water and then they headed outside toward the now unloaded tow truck. The women knew what was going to happen; the men were going home, and this time they were going to get home. Now that the 100+foot flames were gone, it was safe enough to return.

The trip back in was much like the tries earlier in the day, except now the north side of the valley was burning heavily and the flames were burning on three sides of the San Diego Wild Animal Park, so emergency vehicles had the major roads blocked. Some back roads were navigated, a few roadblocks negotiated, a short jog through the sod field around the burned out wooden bridge and the men were home. First to Andee's and Tony's house, then to Beth's and Allan's, then to Allan's shop, then to Arnulfo's house, then to Chuck's house, and last up to Allan's parent's old house. The damage assessment had been completed and now it was time to call the women.

The conversation again was loud, lots of background noise, emotion, dust masks, and poor cell phone reception. "Tony's house is gone, Grandma's cottage is gone, Tony's garage is gone, and Tony's barn is okay." "The horse is okay, all the feed and hay is gone." "Allan's house is gone, Allan's garage is gone." "Arnulfo's house is gone, Arnulfo's garage is gone, Allan's shop is okay." "Chuck's house is gone, Chuck's garage is gone, Allan's dad's garage is gone, and Allan's dad's house is okay."

Power lines were lying in the road. Electrical transformers, poles, trees, fences, and cars were blocking the road while still burning. Avocado groves were pumping out flames and embers. Olson's Firewood's 12-acre lot was a huge bonfire which ended up burning for over two weeks. Thousands of small fires were burning everywhere, lighting up the night like oversized Tiki torches covering the landscape. The road through the bamboo swamp had its asphalt burned off. Propane was burning from tanks like 5-foot pilot lights; water was running everywhere from melted water pipes. The air could be tasted even through the mask. The scene could have been from any good war movie, just after the Napalm burned off. Everything was black and smoking, everything.

In the fire our family and friends lost 5 homes, 4 garages, 3 trailers, 13 cars, 1 forklift, 1 dump truck, 1 cow and 1 chicken. Allan and Beth lost 12 cars, along with four horseless carriages: 1905 2-cylinder Knox, 1912 International Harvester High wheeler Wagon, 1908 International Harvester air cooled buggy, and 1910 Brush. Additionally, they lost an all original 1961 Impala that burned in the garage with the 1985 Wagonner and the 1995 Mustang. This garage had one empty space, left empty when Allan had moved his 1910 Pierce to put it into Tony's metal barn. Other cars lost were 1965 Mustang, 1968 Mustang, 58 Chevy four-light pick up, 2004 Tahoe. Chuck lost his 1966 Mercury Cyclone big-block, which was almost ready for paint, and a customer's 1958 Chevy Wagon on which he has just installed new floor pan in and had chopped 3-inches off the top. And it turned out to be a wise decision to take the 1915 Marmon out of the trailer and into town, as that trailer had burned so hot all the aluminum skin had melted off.

After 2 days, Allan and Tony found some neighbors who had stayed on the mountain through the fires and slowly other neighbors started arriving. Resources began getting pooled and the rebuilding had begun. One of these neighbors had a wind speed meter affixed to their house, and he reported that the last wind speed recorded, prior to the mechanism being ripped from his house, was 110 mph.

After 3 days, they got water working at several neighbors' houses, and after 4 days they had the fixings for hot showers. After 5 days, the first of the insurance adjusters arrived and got to work wearing his steel-toe boots and dust mask. After 6 days the women came up to see the damage, and after 10 days all of these displaced parties moved into a local rental house together. After 18 days electricity was restored, and after 23 days the phone service was restored to the shop. As the days have continued to click by more things return to normal, but it will never be the same.

The decisions we made that night were, for the most part, good ones, and somehow seemed to be guided by the hands of God. All of the affected families are thankful for the outcome and the overwhelming support from friends, family and others. Everybody wishes that the outcome had turned out a little better than it did, but everybody also knows that the outcome could have been a lot worse. It is what it is, and everybody is already moving forward.

After 12 days, two-year old Grace asked if Disneyland also burned down and if all the Princesses' houses were broken too. For the six months leading up to the fire, Grace knew of the plans to take her on her first trip to Disneyland to see all of the Princesses for her birthday celebration.

On the 31st day after the fire, six adults and four children from the Schmidt and Teravainen families, with the birthday-girl Grace leading the way, walked through the gates of The Happiest Place on Earth.