

# MVFD Fire History Project

**Gene Reed, Trinity Resident**

*Interviewed by Doni Bird*

**April 19, 2018**



Transcription service provided by



**Tigerfish**  
Transcribing-Editing

[www.tigerfish.com](http://www.tigerfish.com)

## Gene Reed

[Start of recorded material]

Interviewer: Okay, Gene. Thank you, again, so much for giving your time to the Mayacamas Volunteer Fire Department.

Like I just mentioned, you're a perfect person with your background on the fire department, on the mountain. And as a firefighter resident, your perspective is really valuable.

So I want to hear your story. To keep us on time, I'll keep the questions coming. They don't want just the facts. They want how you felt, what you saw, what you heard, what you were thinking, what you're thinking now about the whole experience.

To identify you on the recording, please give me your name and say you understand that I have your permission to record you.

Gene Reed: Yep. Okay. Gene Reid, and you have my permission to record me.

Do you want me to do a little background?

Interviewer: That would be good.

Gene Reed: My family, they immigrated from France in 1907 because there was a big depression and all the mines closed down. My grandfather was a coal miner. They came over here because there was no work, thinking that San Francisco needed to be rebuilt. They got here in 1907. That was a year

after the earthquake, and there were no jobs. The city had completely been rebuilt by then, all, including Santa Rosa. They worked menial jobs so they could find better jobs.

Then they made contact with other French family friends from their area in France. There were a lot of them here in Glen Ellen. Glen Ellen was a big enclave of French, obviously, going way back. Chauvet Hotel, Chauvet family was one of the bigger ones. But there were a lot of them that owned a lot of property in Glen Ellen.

The train from Sonoma Valley Railroad came up to Glen Ellen from Sausalito to Glen Ellen. My grandparents, on Friday night, after work, they'd take the train on Railroad, which is now Third Street in San Francisco. The Hunters Point area was all French.

So they'd go from there to the ferry building, take the ferry to Sausalito, take the Sonoma Valley Railroad, and took it all the way to the end to Glen Ellen. That's how they came up here, made friends, and had lots of friends up here.

On Trinity Road, they were very good friends with the Marty family, which originally was the Cabral family. That's actually the grandfather of a Marty who lives there. They found that they had 20 acres across the road for sale. So they bought the original 20 acres, and that's 701 Trinity. That's the one that has a big steel gate now.

The current owners just lost their house. It was a new house when they bought it eight years ago from the Williams'. They had, in the last two-and-a-half years, been remodeling the house and expanding it. It was just

about completed when the fire burned the house that they just got through remodeling.

The barns were fine. The garage was fine. But the two houses they had done over did burn. That was originally my grandparent's place. They sold it after my grandfather had died.

Interviewer: That was Frank "Pappa" Joulie?

Gene Reed: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Yeah. I remember him.

Gene Reed: Yeah. That's Frank and Marie Joulie. So a little history there.

Interviewer: That's great.

Gene Reed: Back in 1964, I worked for the Division of Forestry. I was working out of the Napa Station as a fire truck driver. Just prior to the fire starting here in Nuns Canyon on Nelligan Road, a fire occurred up on the top of Mount St. Helena. I was sent up Mount St. Helena and one other person with me.

We went up to the top, and I worked with the fire crews. We just about had it surrounded. The fire wasn't big, a Christmas tree fire right at the very top before it would go into the downhill side where the park is at the top.

Well, about an hour or so after we were there, fighting the fire, the wind came up from the North. The North wind went from practically nothing to

50, 60 mile-an-hour winds. The fire just completely took off like a blow torch and headed towards Calistoga.

I jumped in my truck with my man. We took off as fast as we could drive down Highway 29. The fire took out Calistoga. Drove east. Houses on each side of the road were burning, and I ended up spending a week on that. It burned all the way up to Chanate Road and Santa Rosa before the wind stopped.

So I had a little experience, of course, fighting all the fire there. I also found out, on the radio -- we didn't have good communications back then because of the amount of fires that were occurring at the time -- that the fire jumped Trinity Road. Here I was fighting a fire, so I couldn't leave there to come over here. I was stuck fighting that fire.

So I knew that it was burning. It took a week before our fire pretty much slowed down enough where I could actually get off, get to a phone, and find out what happened. In fact, it did burn a considerable amount around here.

But my family houses, the Joulie Ranch, and my folks who had built at 901, their houses were fine. My dad was retired from the Forestry so he was also aware of all the fires. He built his house with concrete block, which is still down here at 901. It's been remodeled, but his basic house is still there. It survived the '64 fire, and it did survive this fire.

So that's a little background on how I knew about the fire and was fighting fire at the time.

So when I was in the Service, I had a dream of building a house up here, somewhere. When I got back from overseas, I was looking for property. I found this piece here. I didn't know the size. But I noticed that this little outcropping, right here -- it's at 1201 Trinity -- the trees right at the outcropping didn't burn like everything else on our property like it did last time.

So I decided, if I was going to buy a piece of property, I didn't want it to burn again. I bought this property, and I built right on the knoll here where the trees didn't burn. I took out one tree in the middle of the knoll and built my house there. So that was one thing that helped on why it was saved on this last fire.

During the course of building the house, I changed my career from being a paid-fireman in Marin County to becoming a police officer. I changed my career, but my heart was always with the police work and fire service.

So as time was getting on, every year made it closer to the next fire, I felt. And having a history -- my mom living through the 1923 fire, which burned exactly the same as the '64 fire -- because we have North winds every year, it was just a matter of time until it happened.

So I talked to a lot of my neighbors on Cavedale and Trinity. We formed Mayacamas Volunteer Fire Department in 1980. One of my primary goals was to have a fire department up here on the hill in case a fire starts, and maybe we could do some good to save some houses.

In those days, when I was a child living up here at 901, there were no other kids up here for most of my childhood. There were only about three

families that actually lived full-time up here. The Rasmussen family lived halfway. The Frazier family lived at the very top where Cavedale and Trinity was. Those were the only full-time people that lived up here from Trinity at 901.

So when the fire went through in '64, it didn't burn many houses because there weren't many houses up here. Some of the older houses that were unoccupied at 750 Trinity, that belonged to Reverend Youngman. His house burned.

It was originally his father's property. He had built a house up on his 100 acres. In the 1923 fire, that house burned. It's a really hot area, south-facing, upslope, a couple of draws to funnel up the fire. So he had lost that house in '23. The Reverend Youngman rebuilt the house. Then in '64, it burned down again.

John Palmer, who's now the Reverend, he's been up there for 40 years. He rebuilt the house and his shops and stuff right where the old houses were. Unfortunately, the fire went through and burned everything. Actually, if you look at a satellite map of his 100 acres, almost every square inch got decimated.

So I knew the history. I knew it was going to come. We started a fire department. Once our main station was built, we set up a meeting room. My brother, Ken, got two maps and blew them up. One was the '23 fire showing where it was in the story of that fire and one on the '64 fire. I had them hung at the station all of the time I was chief until I retired, which was 2005. The fire department started in '80, and I retired after 25 years in 2005.

So I was aware. I preached it all the time about "we have to expect, with the North winds, that there's going to be another fire here." I didn't know it would take 53 years, but Mother Nature can choose the date and time. It's irrelevant to Mother Nature when it's going to burn. It's just going to burn.

So when this happened, this particular windy night -- I worry every year when the North winds come up. I had done some things in the last three years. In fact, four years ago when Lake County started having some massive fires, I noticed a lot of changes in fire behavior.

I said, "Well, I think I'm pretty prepared. My house is all concrete outside. I have a fireproof roof. My main garage, three-car garage, also has all concrete board on the exterior and a fireproof roof. I also have steel doors that are insulated." So that made it pretty good on chances of surviving a fire.

But, about that time, when those fires were going, I decided that I needed to get a little more clearance around my house, even though I mowed the whole two acres below me and all the way around; any grass gets mowed on my property. Along the road, particularly, below my house, I had that sprayed with Roundup to kill any grass so there was nothing. It didn't look good, but it gave me some sense of protection.

Four years ago, I also hired a guy to come in and remove 12 trees right around my house that was too close to the house. Also, I trimmed, which I did every four or five years, all the branches of the oak trees that were overgrowing on my roof. I had to keep the branches away from the roof. So I was preparing.

As time went on, I'd see more types of fires doing really weird behavior for wind conditions. I had a house up in Lake County, in Cobb. I had sold it when I became ill and couldn't go up there anymore. It burned, and I thought it would never burn. My whole neighborhood, the guy that lived right behind my house -- he was a paid fireman and paramedic -- and his wife and daughter lost their house.

Anyhow, 50 of my neighbors, including some retired firemen, lost everything on that fire. So another eye-opener that things were acting very different nowadays.

The fires, normally, even the high winds, the winds settle down at night. The fire slows down. The fuel moisture comes up, and that's when you fight fire. I did that for 32 years. That's what you do.

Interviewer: What do you attribute those changes to, Gene?

Gene Reed: I don't know. I know weather changes. There are weather patterns. Our earth has gone through very dry periods and very cold periods. We had the Ice Ages. Lots of things contribute to it. I don't know what. But I know it was changing because of the fires and the size of the fires. So that was another eye-opener.

So I said, "I have to increase my protection here at this house if I'm going to keep it." And not knowing when the fire was going to occur, it just was a matter of time. Because we do have North winds every year.

So I went a step further. One of the things that happened up at Cobb, even the houses that were all fireproofed exterior and roof and cleaned with not a blade of grass on their property, which I did, I thought mine would never burn. It was an A-frame but was, basically, fireproofed, I thought. But it burned along with 50 of my neighbors.

So I realized that the only way the fire could have gotten in there, burned the house, is just radiant heat going through the windows. That's the only thing left. When you have fireproof-siding, fireproof-roof, and all cleared around, you got the radiant heat. It goes through the windows. So that goes back three years now. After that, seeing my whole house burn and all of my neighbors up there at Cobb, I decided I needed to do something with my windows.

Now, I was pretty careful when I built this. I had no windows on the north side of my house. In fact, when you drive in, it looks kind of weird because there are no really big windows there. But that was for a reason. I didn't want windows on the north side because that's where the winds are going to come.

All my windows are on the other side, the west side, the valley side. They are six-foot windows. And just in my living room, I got four. So I decided then that I would put in metal shutters. I checked around, and nobody was selling fire shutters unless you're a big commercial hospital or whatever.

So I went and bought hurricane shutters from Florida. They are two-thickness of metal with insulation in the middle. They have different degrees of toughness, from a 60-mile-an-hour gale all the way up to 120 mile-an-hour hurricane. I didn't think I was worried about 120 mile-an-

hour winds. I was more worried about a 60. So I bought the smallest one they had. It's rated at 60 miles an hour.

Because my house is basically round, I mounted them on the inside where the windows are straight across. The windows all inset from my exterior wall, and they're flat for the windows. Each six-foot window has a hurricane shutter on the inside that can be done electrically and also manually with a crank. So I put those in.

I thought, the downstairs and upstairs, all the big windows are covered. If any of the trees burned right around the house, I would have all the radiation cut off because I had double-thick windows. And with these on the inside, they're very tight-fitting and insulated also. So a double-layer metal with insulation, that was a little bit better.

The last thing I worried about was the fact that I have redwood decking. It's a one-by-four on edge. It's 50 years old. I built the house in 1968. I bought the property in '67. So I was concerned about the fact that I did have pieces on the outside of my house of redwood decking and my front stairs.

So I researched and found a chemical called Firestop. It's clear. It's odorless. I spent \$200 for five gallons and had it sprayed on all the wood. I even painted the wood inside my sunroom because there's one natural redwood wall that was original. We painted all that. I tested it. It seemed to work great. I sprayed it on with a garden sprayer.

As time went on, that year, three years ago, more fires were occurring. I thought, "You know, it's 50-year-old redwood. I'm going to go ahead and

buy more." So I bought another five gallons for \$200 and resprayed it. It had a double-coat. So I thought, the night of the fire, that was going to be my last defense if the fire came right up there.

But, as the wind came up from the north, the erratic behaviors of the wind was going every which direction. It was coming from the north. It was heading to the east. I can't exit. It came right across my road.

After it burned across Trinity Road and headed south, it split into all these different ways. One continued to go south, burned in the hills. Part of it went up the canyon and burned all the houses up on Manzanita. The other part turned and came across the road, up towards me, burning due north against the North wind. I don't know how it did that, but it jumped around and burned all my trees, south of me.

After the fire went through, we had the burning embers coming first. Everything on the ground, my deck, was covered with burning embers. Then, when the fire came up out of the canyon to the north of me, it came up and hit the North wind.

It rolled like a giant tidal wave down on my neighbor's house, directly above me, Rusty Dillon. It completely engulfed his whole house. And in the process, it was blowing fire out of every window. So there was no way anybody could have survived that one.

Interviewer: So you were here while that was going on?

Gene Reed: Oh yes.

Interviewer: Were you evacuated at all?

Gene Reed: No. The sheriff came by a couple times, and I just said, "No. I'm not leaving." And then CAL FIRE, Will Horne and Ted Meyer, came down in one of my old trucks from Mayacamas. With the three of us set up, they sat on one end of the house with their truck. I was up on the north end of my house with an engine and a firehose prepared. I was wearing fire gear. And like I said, I had been through this before so I knew what to expect.

But as the fire embers covered everything, then a big huge wave of flame, like a tidal wave, came down from the north side after it consumed Dillon's house and property. It came down and completely engulfed my separate garage. I have a three-car garage.

And, of course, this is in the middle of the night. I could see the flames completely engulf the garage and saying, "Well, I did the best I could with that. But I'm going to save the house." That was my primary. And then, of course, my other parts that did burn were all on fire because the burning embers set all the tires on fire in my vehicles.

So the fire came here. The redwood trees helped. I had cut all the pine trees that died from bark beetles and replaced them with redwoods. They have a lot of water retention, and they're disease-resistant.

So the fire slowed a little bit and it actually went up high. As it took over the garage, it went over my house. At the same time, Will Horne and Ted Meyer were fighting the fire coming from the south, towards them. So we were in the middle because it's a natural point where my house is. I don't know what happened, but the wind all went up and then disappeared. So

then all we had was burning embers left over. So we mopped up all around the house.

When daybreak occurred, I couldn't believe, looking through the smoke, that my garage was still there. My house, my decks, everything was fine. It singed all the trees around, but all the major trees near my house were not burned. We were really very lucky. Because all it takes is one little burning ember to get its way inside the house or under the house or whatever, and it could have burned everything.

Interviewer: You were so well-prepared.

Gene Reed: Well, you can only prepare so much. I was hoping we were good, and we were. I was very lucky. Because when I built my garage, I decided to go ahead and coat the whole exterior. In fact, Bill Byrd did his house up there. And Mike Hudson said, "I just did Bill Byrd's. All the siding now is Hardie plank, concrete board." So I went up to see the guy's siding I looked at it, and I said, "This stuff is great."

So I came back down here. When my garage was rebuilt, I decided to go ahead and Hardie-plank all the exterior. So with the insulated steel doors, no windows into the garage, I have a three-stall garage that is completely sheetrock inside, double-thick on the roof, and then filled the attic with blown fiberglass so it was non-burnable. And that's in case any of those sparks got through the vents into the attic. It worked great. It didn't burn anything.

Interviewer: That's amazing.

Gene Reed: In fact, I was amazed. It was fine out there. It needs a pressure wash and a coat of paint. But the garage is fine.

My house had no particular damage except I didn't see it before, but the inspectors from the insurance came up. They spent two days. They said that the flames were so hot on my roof of the garage and my house that even though they're fireproof shingles, the sand embedded in the shingles and melded into glass. So all the roofs had to be stripped of shingles and redone, which we just did recently.

So we were lucky. It was hot enough to do that. And, of course, light fixtures, anything exterior to the garage was melted. So it was pretty hot there. But we're very lucky.

Interviewer: How much is luck and how much is your luck of preparation?

Gene Reed: Well, we tried and we were lucky this time. Next time, we may not be lucky. But we're going to try.

I've decided to replace no more wood buildings. We bought a metal building. That's pretty much fireproof. And then the interior -- that people won't think about -- is that metal buildings get hot as the flames and fire come. So I had the whole inside of my metal building sprayed with open-cell foam, which is naturally fireproof, and then painted on all the surfaces with fireproof paint. So the interior is fully insulated and fireproof, both the foam and the paint.

Interviewer: That's smart.

Gene Reed: So we're trying, and I'm going to continue to spray around my property. We're going to replant as many trees as we can. The upper side of my property, only three trees survived. We're going to replant a lot more, probably some more manzanita, live oak, and maybe some other trees too to kind of get some growth going.

Just for general information, a lot of the brush, we call them Christmasberry but they're toyon berry bushes, even they were really burned. Their roots survived so I've got a lot of new ones growing up from there, which is good. I'm really happy to see a lot of those coming up.

Some of the live oaks, even though they were really burned bad, I had tree trimmers come in and cut the trees off, chip out all the burned stuff. I notice now, maybe a dozen trees that were burned, we cut them and chipped everything. One stump out of all those was putting new shoots out. So we do have some of those trees coming back too.

Interviewer: That's good. That's neat. How did you learn about the fire?

Gene Reed: I went to bed, my wife and I, about midnight. Everything looked good at that time. I lowered all my steel shades, hurricane shades. We do that every night because if something happens while we are asleep, we have our protection. So we went to bed, 12 midnight.

Then I got woken up by a siren and a banging on my door. It was Will Horne. He came down and said, "There's a fire right down in Nuns Canyon." So I said, "Thank you." He said, "I'll be back." He took off. I got up and looked. I took one look at it, with the wind blowing like it was, and

I said, "This is 1964 exactly." So I immediately got my wife to start packing up her stuff and my dog.

I had switched into my fire jacket and pants, went out, got my fire hose out, hooked it up to my fire hydrant. At that time, I had three tanks, one tank with 5,000 gallons just for the fire hydrant.

So I felt that I was going to have to stay and try to protect my property. I knew the dangers of it because I've been through it so many times in my 32 years. This is the fourth time where I call it burnover. You're in a position where the fire is so huge, it burns right over the top of you. It looks like a tidal wave. It sounds like a train engine when it goes over you. Extremely noisy.

Interviewer: That gives me goose pimples hearing that. I can just picture that. It gives me goose pimples listening to this.

Gene Reed: It gives me goose pimples too.

But just the fact that I had been through them and survived all the other ones, I felt I was going to do it. I also had backup plans.

One is the second that the fire got too bad in front of me, I would just step inside my house. My walls are concrete. It's fully insulated. My floors are three inches thick. My roof is three inches thick. I had all these fire shutters on. So I got double-metal insulated shutters. My doors are all really thick and metal. So I felt that if the fire got so close on the outside, I would just step inside.

If for some reason, a spark got inside, into the house, anywhere, starting a fire inside, I would immediately leave. I parked my car in the middle of my yard, facing outwards. I have a really old Mercedes that has what I call an insulation package. The windows are double-thick including the windshield and the side windows. It has heavy insulation all through it. So I felt it had the most chance of surviving through fire. That was my last thing.

But my wife and I watched the fire as it approached Trinity. I had her leave, go down Trinity and out before the fire took over and closed Trinity Road.

I spent a lot of time watching how the fire was burning. It was just unbelievable, the change in directions all the time, which in my experience, never happens. When the North wind blows here, normally, it's going to blow the fire to the south. This didn't. It did everything differently.

Part of it went south. Part of it went east. Part of it went directly north and then burned all the way around and up into Sugarloaf through Kenwood. Then I had seen the fire start over on Bennett Peak. So the fire went through there.

During the next day, I watched a lot of it, how it went all the way over to Bennett Valley that I could see. Then it came back over through the park, and it burned over Oakmont. So it was really strange, very strange in how that wind would carry it in different directions. That is a very different thing I've never seen.

Interviewer: It sounds so scary. So we talked about the damage. What were you thinking when you first saw your property after the fire? When all the drama was pretty much over, what were you thinking when you saw what this left?

Gene Reed: Well, when I left, everything was done that was going to be done. We had pretty much every spot of fire out. Ted was the last one to leave from the fire department. He took 34 and 80 back up to help keep his place from burning. Because in his situation, the fire went over to Napa County and then came from the east side, back over Cavedale, and burned up to his property. So he had to fight the fire to save his place.

A lot of the fire came really different than anyone expected. When you'd think the fire would be coming from the north or coming up the hill, which normally would happen -- the fire would burn towards the east -- the fire came from the opposite direction. It burned from the east, over the hills, towards the west.

Quite a few of the homes up on Cavedale didn't burn from the west as expected, which would have been normal. It was coming from Napa, up over the line to the west. So it came from the east. It was a very strange fire -- very, very strange.

I left the next night. My well was off because of the power. Since I lost some of my water tanks, I had no extra water at all. Since I had everything put out around my house and it had already all burned, I left. When I left, I could see everything burned. It's the way it's going to be.

What really upset me was it took three weeks before I could get back on my property. I got a generator that I tried to get on my property to hook my well up. But they wouldn't let me. Law enforcement closed everything out. So it took three weeks to get back. Obviously, everything I had seen when I left was exactly the way it was when I came back in this area.

Interviewer: The firefighters from up here, that you know, were they able to -- well, obviously, not -- get you up there to look at your property?

Gene Reed: I did when they opened it up for the first time for residents. I had a fireman I knew for many years. He's a battalion chief I believe now. He came up and let me go with him to check the house. The power was on so I got the water going and then locked everything up and left. Then it took two days before they finally opened it up to everybody.

But the fire department, I'm very grateful of Will Horne -- he had a tough decision on what houses he was going to try to protect -- and, of course, Ted Meyer, being by himself on one truck. Also, they worried about their own property.

Of course, Will had good reason because his house burned. By the time he got up to his place, the fire went all around, got over on the east side, and came through and burned his place, which is unusual. Because none of the big fires we've ever had here in the last 100 years ever burned where Will Horne was on Wall Road. It has just never been burned. So it was extremely strange.

Interviewer: A strange fire.

Gene Reed: Yeah.

Interviewer: Has the experiences with the fire changed your life, your beliefs or your values?

Gene Reed: No. I think you always have to be prepared. I've been taught lessons where I counted too much on the fact that I had my own big water tanks. I thought it would be fine. They worked to a point, but then after they burned, I had no water.

Now, my next thing is I just bought a generator just to run my well because I have a big pump in the bottom of my well, two-horsepower. I got a big generator. It's going to run separately. And I'm replacing the tanks. We're going to put 20,000 gallons of water up there. That's as much as I can afford.

Interviewer: You sound very well-prepared.

Gene Reed: No. I'm not going to leave. I know everything will grow back. I may not be here to see it, but my wife will. So we're never planning on leaving. We just figure this is part of nature.

Interviewer: Yeah, I agree. So your plans, as you move forward, you're going to be right here, local?

Gene Reed: Yes.

Interviewer: Good. I'll be up on the hill prepared, not as well-prepared.

Gene Reed: I need to mention this, I feel so sorry for my neighbor who thought he had plenty of insurance and could rebuild, but he can't. Many of my neighbors that I've talked to are not going to rebuild because they just can't. They cannot physically do it.

By the way, I checked my insurance. I had the same as my neighbor. If I used every bit of my policy, I can come up with maybe \$1,200,000. And for my house to be rebuilt, the type of construction, it wouldn't even pay for half of my house. So, fortunately, I don't have to raise my limits up high.

And then another thing we've done, not so much the fire but the smoke damage, we had to get all the estimates and tell them what we had to our insurance so we could have cleaners come in and clean stuff.

No one knows how much stuff you have until you have to inventory it. I swear, you need to inventory. I didn't believe how much stuff I had because my thing is I like to wear Hawaiian shirts. I had like 120 Hawaiian shirts. You know, I'd say, "Oh, I got 20 or 30." Wrong. We did an inventory of everything in our house. It was amazing how much we really had.

In fact, we have a lot of works of art, and you're not insured for that. One of the reasons we even had that inventoried was because we had to have them cleaned. But Jack up on Manzanita is an artist. He had hundreds of paintings of his, a storage in his house. He had no insurance. He lost a huge amount of money.

Interviewer: Oh, God. They all burned.

Gene Reed: Yeah. He is just an excellent artist. I felt so bad for him.

So that made me look at what we had and so much of what Kim has done. But a lot of this is art we bought because we know so many artists in Kim's work. I think we've got somewhere around 50 original works of art.

Just the cost alone, if you don't have them insured, because the price of art goes up on most of the things, we found we had three paintings in here, in the living room, worth over \$20,000. So we immediately added them to our insurance policy because they were not covered under the normal insurance. So I advise everybody to inventory everything you have, document it, and use your insurance at a level that you're comfortable with.

Interviewer: Good advice.

Gene Reed: This is an extreme situation when you have 6,000 homes burned, and you don't have enough contractors, builders, supplies or anything to do that. So you know there's only a small portion. It's going to be difficult.

A lot of our friends have lost their places. One of my friends had an antique car. He was away on business with the wife, and they lost 60 acres of land, all of their houses, their garages, and a huge car collection. They didn't have anything left.

It has just been over and over, all our friends and people we've met. My wife's doctor, he lost his. He lived in Wikiup. He had a stucco house with a concrete tower roof. He thought he was fine. No, it burned to the ground like many other ones. I think that's the radiation to the windows. Because

we have concrete walls and a concrete tower roof, you would think that was pretty good.

Interviewer: I would have thought that.

Gene Reed: But, no. You've got to figure radiation.

Interviewer: I learn something every day, Gene.

Gene Reed: Well, fire always goes three ways: convection -- wind; conduction -- that's where it has wood, burning trees burning right up to a house. So that's why you want to keep it clear away from the house. And the other thing is radiation. Fire gets so hot that it radiates out.

Interviewer: Let's see, you've done a wonderful job with this, Gene. Thank you. I can't thank you enough.

I think you made it clear, but what are your feelings about the prospect of another fire in the future?

Gene Reed: It will happen. I don't know when. I hope it's more than 50 years.

I was doing some research while I was waiting the three weeks to get back to my house. I was reading a lot of stuff about some of the fires and studies they've had on the Northern California coast.

And many, many years ago, probably, somewhere after the '64 fire, they did a study. They predicted every 22 years, there would be a major fire. But they were wrong. It took 53 years.

But they were counting the whole area. Roughly, every 22 years, somewhere on the Northern California coastal area -- Napa, Sonoma, Lake County, Mendocino, Humboldt -- there's going to be a major fire. And that was a study done a long time ago. I think if you look, this one was particularly unusual, strange. Weather conditions were completely different than normal so it was weird.

In fact, I think the heavy rains that we had, the winter before last, which in my place, I measured, it was 64 inches of rain here. It's normally between 20 and 25 inches. Because we're on the west-facing side of the mountain, we get a lot of heat but not much rain. Where if you're on the east side, that's where you get all the rain. It seems like Sonoma gets so much more rain, twice than my rain. But here it has always been low.

I used to keep records all the time. The winter before last, we had 43 inches. I keep saying 60. It's 43 inches, which is unheard of. But that also had tremendous growth in all the trees and leaves, and everything that could grow grew. So everything in the area was just jam-packed with fuel. And, come the fire in October, everything was bone-dry. Everything -- so whether it's a drought or not.

One of my main concerns at that point, as soon as I could get up here, I got some people to come out and cut all the dead, burned trees down and chip it all. One is that chips help keep the hillside up, and the other thing is if another fire occurred, if the wind came up, it would re-burn everything. When you've got already partial-burned trees and leaves, it's going to be even worse. So that was one of my concerns was to get it cleared as much as possible.

I had guys go through and trim all the branches and cleared all the brush around the other trees that weren't already cleared because I was always pretty good about that. But I just went even higher there.

We finally got enough rain. We're almost up to 20 inches here. So that's almost the normal.

But the thing you don't realize is all it takes is about four days of a hot, dry North wind, and you have fire conditions. We had a fire up here. My cousin built the house up above the old Bee Ranch. The property up above that did some burning stumps and stuff. This was in March, and we got heavy North winds. The third day, it rekindled the burning stumps. It caused a fire up there and burned a considerable amount. That was in March.

But we were lucky. The wind died down. We got up and got the fire out. Unfortunately, Mike Hudson had a heart attack on that fire. And then a company came in and cleared all the burned trees there. One of the guys rolled a tractor and got killed up there. That's quite a few years ago now, about 20 years ago.

But you just can't figure on even those wet winters. My in-laws live in Tennessee. About three years ago, Tennessee rained every day, all summer long. Over near Dollywood, an area, which is right at the end of the west side of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a fire started after three days of a hot, dry South wind.

In the middle of summer where everything normally rains every day, it burned almost two or three towns up but stopped before it got to Dollywood and that whole area. It was very interesting to read about it and see that on TV because here is an area that you would never think would burn.

Then I think back about other trips that I've taken. One was, almost 20 years ago, I went down to Florida and wanted to go see the Everglades. I headed south of Miami and headed into the Everglades. It was all burned, the Everglades. Some fire started in some way. They had hot winds, and it dried all the Everglades. It burned right down to the water. We went through like 50 miles of burned Everglades.

Interviewer: I couldn't even imagine that the Everglades would burn.

Gene Reed: So it just doesn't matter where you're at. When hot winds occur, if they're high enough and dry enough, it's going to burn.

Interviewer: Yeah. I think I overshot my time. But, Gene, thank you so much. I've learned so much from me sitting here, listening to you. It's been great.

Gene Reed: I probably missed a lot of stuff, but that's the basics, I guess.

Interviewer: No, this was a great interview, my best one yet.

[End of recorded material]