

MVFD Fire History Project

Harry Saal, Cavedale Resident

Interviewed by Doni Bird

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Harry Saal

[Beginning of recorded material]

Interviewer: We're beginning recording at the office of Dr. Harry Saal. And I want to start off by thanking you on behalf of the Mayacamas Volunteer Fire Department for your time and your thoughts on this. So we can start, if you would just please identify yourself, tell me your name and your address, and let me know that I have your permission to interview you and you know it's being recorded. It's just a formality.

Harry Saal: Okay. My name is Harry Saal. And we have a home at 1211 Cavedale Road in Sonoma. And, yes, you have permission to record.

Interviewer: [Start].

Harry Saal: So one of the things that I recall in terms of surprises when getting to the property -- so I knew that the fire department had come, and I knew they had done whatever, protected the house and so on. But I was 100 percent confident that our gates had been broken down. I had talked to them, and I know they have a way. I have a key that's there for them to use to open the gate.

But I was sure in an emergency, I was told, look, they don't wait for that. They just drive through the gate, you fix it. Like, okay. So I was sure that that was the case. And then when I came up to the house, one of the first things I found out was, no, they had unlocked the gate. They have a master key. They don't need my key that I leave there. They have a master key.

They open the gates. They were fine. They worked. They came in. The generator actually had turned on, as I expected. Because the power lines were down for days. We have about five days worth of propane for the generator. And they came in, and they switched off the generator. They closed the taps on the propane tanks, the several propane tanks on the property. And they had closed those.

We had cleared that. That's one of the things we had done this year. It particularly was an extra good clear around the propane tanks. But, again, that was one of these things that never occurred to me. I just have this image of firefighters standing there with their hoses.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Harry Saal: But, no, they were doing all these other tasks at the same time on behalf of your property. We civilians don't know that.

Interviewer: We don't know it.

Harry Saal: Till something like this happens, what they do for your house. Pretty cool.

Interviewer: It's amazing.

Harry Saal: Yeah.

Interviewer: Great. Thank you. Before the fire on October 8th, had you had any concerns or an action plan in case of a fire?

Harry Saal: Absolutely. First, let me just preface the comment just to point out as we discussed, that we are not a permanent resident at that address. It's basically a weekend home. So we are there several weekends a month and weeks during the holiday seasons and so on. But on that particular day we were not present. We have a home in Palo Alto. And we were at our home in Palo Alto. So that gives a little bit of context.

Interviewer: Thanks for putting that in.

Harry Saal: Yeah. So we certainly had concerns for several reasons. We had an experience with a fire that was quite nearby. I think it was around 1995. There was a fire that started maybe half a mile from our house just up the road from us. It was an electrical fire caused by PG&E. That actually burned quite a bit of the hillside and over into Napa, some wineries.

And it came to within a quarter of a mile of our house. The fire line was at the next house up the road. So we were very aware of the reality of this and had an action plan in the sense that we actually purchased some—I'll call it fire suppressing equipment -- not fire fighting equipment. But I had gotten advice from the volunteer fire department and other people that we weren't firefighters but we could help protect our house.

So we purchased a gasoline-powered pump and a hose which could suck water out of our swimming pool or our water tank and 300 feet of hose and a system that would spray foam on the house to help reduce the possibility that if embers were flying perhaps by wetting the house down, we could reduce the possibility of it catching from an ember that was coming from a mile away.

Had a plan in the sense of testing that equipment, making sure it was functional once a year. The other thing was that we actually -- I think we try to be very cautious about removing brush from around the house. This year in particular -- I guess it was on behalf of the county, they actually were more strict, I guess, about their expectations about how far back to clear than they had been in the past.

So there was a regular inspection. We had just done a big major clearing around the house several weeks before this fire broke out, which was --

Interviewer: You were well prepared. Congratulations.

Harry Saal: -- very fortunate. Yeah. So, yeah, we're definitely aware of the risks of living in that area.

Interviewer: Did you believe your property would be safe in the event of a fire?

Harry Saal: Well, yes and no. I think that on a scale of 1 to 10 we were kind of more prepared. And the house has pretty good clearance, which in hindsight was really important. There's a lot of flat, concrete areas or other paved areas that separate the brush, let's say, from the house. But at the end of the day, nothing is perfectly safe.

Interviewer: You sound well prepared.

Harry Saal: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you find out first that there was a fire?

Harry Saal: So I think it was just through the news, I believe, television report, something like that. We were aware of. I don't remember getting the kind of heads-up that this was particularly dangerous in terms of the wind conditions and how dry it was and so on, which happened now. So now I regularly get Tweets and other messages about the fact from the county and from the volunteer fire department that all of this is going to be a very dry weekend, the winds are 25 miles an hour, and so on.

The only notice that in those days I remember getting was if I drove up Cavedale, there was this little sign that points to the fire danger level, which we pass by on our way up the hill. So at that time back in October I don't remember anything other than that sign. And we were not there to see the sign.

Interviewer: This one was asking about your evacuation, but you weren't in that area --

Harry Saal: We did not have to evacuate, but we were aware of the fact that Cavedale was evacuating very quickly. I believe it was like the next day, as I recall. Again, we weren't there. So it didn't affect us per se, although we do have a caretaker who lives on the property. They had to get out and stay with relatives off the hill. It didn't affect us.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you were thinking when you first saw the property when you first went back? Or the devastation around it.

Harry Saal: Yeah. Well, before we get to that maybe I could say a word about how we knew kind of what was going on --

Interviewer: Sure.

Harry Saal: -- and information even though we were technically not evacuated, it was as if we were evacuated. We were not there. So it was very stressful to try and find out what was happening. There were general reports. We got a lot of local news from the Nextdoor website, which was extremely helpful and people like Allison Ash and Marc Schwager posted regularly. That was very critical.

We were also getting alerts from the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office through mostly other sites, county sites. There were a lot of maps. It took a couple days for that really to kind of get going. I must say the first day, the only news really was from the TV stations, and that was not very precise. Then after a couple days I recall then the maps came up, and there were more satellite images and other things.

And you tried to figure out precisely where the fire lines were, and the fires were moving around. It was hard to be precise. And because everyone was evacuated, it was very hard to get detailed news. So there were people who were in contact with firefighters, and they had more information. So there was kind of word-of-mouth. This one told this one, told this one.

And we got information. But it was very unclear, just what was happening on a detail level. We certainly were aware that the lower part of Cavedale that we're at was not in the direct line of the fires for the first several days. There were a lot of fires we were aware of up on Trinity and upper Cavedale, but the lower part seemed to be unaffected. One of the things that I hadn't planned on but it turned out to be very useful was that several years ago I had set up a webcam in my office at the house in order to see what the weather was like.

And it was pointing out the window of my office so we could see if it snowed or something crazy like that. And even though this fire was going on, we still had electricity, which I was surprised we did with a generator. I thought maybe it's running on the generator. The phone lines were still working. This was several days into the fire. So I could connect remotely to my computer there.

And at someone else's suggestion, who said, "Well, maybe you could talk to your Web cam," I actually was able to from Palo Alto connect to this camera and look out the window. That was kind of interesting and also kind of distressing because things seemed to be fine. We had some reports from people that our house had been okay. Then on Wednesday, the Wednesday after the fire started I was looking out, using the camera to see what was happening.

It was pointed to the north, toward Glen Ellen from where the house is. And suddenly I could see puffs of white smoke coming over the ridge. Basically all day long Wednesday was able to actually see this smoke getting closer and closer and closer, these sort of spot fires. It wasn't a wildfire. But clearly it was advancing from spot to spot to spot, going south along 12, let's say, but a few miles up off of 12.

I could see this smoke getting closer and closer and closer. Then finally approaching sundown, it must've been -- I don't know -- 6:00 or so in the evening then, the smoke had gotten to the edge of our parking lot next to the house where it then goes down into a ravine. I could see the smoke coming up right at the edge of that part of the property. And then everything went black.

It was like, what's happening? The house is on fire. I was quite concerned that it had come right up to the house. There was no real way for me to communicate back to the fire department or CalFire or anyone what was going on. I passed it along to friends on the hill, but I didn't know what was happening until the next day. So the next day I was able to get the word from people like Marc and some other people that were hiking on the hill that the house was okay.

And the fire department . . . They were on the property when it hit, they had controlled the fire. It was interesting. We knew that basically -- got some pictures -- the house . . . [Crying] I didn't think I'd be so emotional.

Interviewer: Harry, I did the same thing. [Unintelligible].

Harry Saal: Crazy.

Interviewer: No, it's not crazy. I think it's going to go on for us like this for a long time.

Harry Saal: Yeah.

Interviewer: It hits you when you don't know. You're not alone.

Harry Saal: So we learned from friends that the house appeared to be okay. But it was still evacuated, and we really didn't know specific details. As I recall there was all this smoke and people had to wear masks. I don't remember -- I could check, but I think it was like at least another week and a half before we were able to go back, before they allowed people up on Cavedale.

We went up to see what happened. And it was very strange, I will say, because it wasn't until we got quite close to that point that we could actually see effects of the fire. I was surprised. Certainly driving up Highway 12 from the south, coming from Sonoma toward Glen Ellen there was no strong evidence of fire. There are lots of "thank you" signs. And there was some evidence of fire down on 37, some hills had been burned and so on, grass fires.

But it was finally we got right close to our house. At that point we could then see lots and lots of trees and brush had burned and all the black and so on was evident. We came on the property. We could see how much had burned. We could see that the fires in our case came up right to the house, 10 feet away, 20 feet away. Part of the surprise was the houses were fully protected, but the fires came up very close.

And one of the things that I hadn't visualized really was that the firemen, not only were they putting water on these fires, but we had lots of trees apparently that were on fire that they cut down with their chainsaws and they cut up into pieces so we could actually get in and clear the roads and so on. So it was kind of a shock to see just what they had done. Go on.

Interviewer: Okay. So you pretty much explained the damage that happened to your property and fortunately not your home --

Harry Saal: Well, let me say a few things about that --

Interviewer: Yeah, please do.

Harry Saal: So the remarkable thing was that there were -- for instance, the property is 40 acres. We live on a tiny portion of the actual property. But even on the portion that we live on, I would just say there were hundreds of trees that were burned. Some burned totally down. Some just charred. All the brush was pretty much burned down to the ground. It was a pretty devastating scene.

What was remarkable -- and I still don't understand exactly how this quite happened -- is that not just the house but all the other systems survived, okay? I mean there's a generator, and there's this pool equipment. There are solar panels. All these things, the fires burned around but kind of were put out or went out because either there was no grass that grew up right to the edge of them -- so fire --

My impression was at this point -- again, where we were, it wasn't a wildfire in the usual sense. It was ground fires that were spreading. So things seemed to burn along the grass and the fields, but then when they came to an area that was relatively clear, because it was like under the solar panels where no grass goes, the fire stopped. And somehow the solar system worked. And the pool equipment worked, and the generator worked.

To this day, I don't quite understand that. Not one of those things got damaged. Irrigation systems melted. I mean clearly things burned on the ground. But what's amazing is what did not burn. Okay.

Interviewer: Obviously the experience has changed your life. Has it changed your beliefs, your values? Has it or has it not?

Harry Saal: I don't think so. I think we had experienced this kind of thing before. We were aware of it. I think that the fire has built a lot stronger sense of community on Cavedale and nearby. There was a lot more communication and interactions. I hope that continues, and it's not just happening. We're definitely getting a lot more information now in advance of potential dangers and things like that.

I will say we called up PG&E and pointed out that they needed to be a lot more diligent. We have high-voltage lines that cross our property, go to our transformer. And we had them come in and look at all the trees under those power lines. I guess the good news is they have marked a large amount of trees that have to be taken down that are growing into our right near the high-voltage lines or the high-voltage lines could be damaged if those trees fell.

The bad news is that the company Davies, which is scheduled to actually do the work, hasn't shown up now for months. That's disappointing. I think PG&E again is being rather irresponsible about their culpability in this whole thing. And while I'm on the subject, the other vendor which I will criticize very heavily is AT&T. It took between two and three months after the fire was over for them to replace and repair the telephone lines going to the property.

It's inexcusable in my book. People -- it's their lifeline. For us it's not a crisis. People have cell phones and kind of you get by. But it was three months when the security system was down. It was three months when we had visitors to the house, the gates couldn't be opened because they depended on the phone lines. Something needs to be done. They're a public utility.

PG&E may have direct responsibility for somehow being involved in the creation of these fires, but AT&T is quite irresponsible in picking up the pieces afterward. Other vendors, haven't had any issues with. But I understand other people who do have to rebuild and things like that are certainly having their problems finding labor and equipment and stuff like that.

Interviewer: What are your feelings about the prospect of another fire?

Harry Saal: It's --

Interviewer: Inevitable?

Harry Saal: -- when, not whether. It's when. I think that I certainly recognize that we're invading nature there and that the price you pay for being more rural and not in the middle of a city and not having the fire department down the street is the risks of doing this. But, on the other hand, we need to do our part to minimize that, but so does PG&E.

Interviewer: It sounds like you've done a wonderful job on your property.

Harry Saal: I think to a lot of people we did well.

Interviewer: You did very well.

Harry Saal: Yeah.

Interviewer: So do you have plans to change anything on your property?

Harry Saal: No. I'd say we don't have plans to move away.

Interviewer: Good.

Harry Saal: I mean we didn't lose the house and so on. And we kind of accept this as part and parcel of, like I said, living up there. So I can't think of any plans. I'm thinking of buying some different kind of firefighting equipment. People suggest that maybe there's something better than the foam that we have that we should look at. So there are little things like that.

But on the whole, I think we've done as much as we can do as just a resident, I think. And I'd be very disappointed if -- I understand the pressures of why other people who lost their homes -- and lots were lost on Cavedale -- why people would find it emotionally and economically and for a variety of reasons very hard to go back and rebuild and why for many people it makes more sense for them to take what insurance money they can and sell the property to a developer and move to lower-cost communities and things like that.

I kind of understand that. It's very sad. I don't know how much of that will happen on Cavedale, but certainly I think people in Santa Rosa, maybe people will simply leave. And that's a shame. I'm pretty pessimistic about what the outcome of that will be, but time will tell.

Interviewer: This was great, Harry. It was excellent.

Harry Saal: You did fine, Doni. You can go on to another one.

Interviewer: No, you were just --

Harry Saal: Can we stop this?

[End of recorded material]