



NEWS



News Headlines 07/16/2019

- Fire of '79 remembered

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Posted: July 15, 2019, 5:44 PM



A burned out VW is one of the 19 vehicles burned in the 1079 Hesperia fire. [Daily Press file photo by Brad Mosher]

HESPERIA — This year marks the 40th anniversary of the fire of 1979, a fast-moving blaze that swept through one local city, scorching over a thousand acres, destroying more than a dozen homes and taking the life of one resident.

As flames devoured brush and homes, heavy smoke filled the air as frightened animals ran through parts of Hesperia seeking to escape the blaze that began on June 14, 1979.

“It seemed like it was pure chaos, with people trying to flee the scene, others trying to get to their homes and firefighters trying to get to the fire,” said Carol Alves Hearn, a longtime resident of Hesperia who was a teenager during that time.

The blaze that began as two fires took nearly 250 fire personnel from 19 different fire agencies all day and most of the night to contain. The enormous fire also required the help of the San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department and the California Highway Patrol.

“In my neighborhood, we’ve been evacuated about three times over the last 15 years and everyone asks if this fire is going to be like the one in 1979,” Mayor Larry Bird said. “It was a scary fire and it affected a lot of people. Let’s hope we don’t have another one like that.”

Wind fueled the flames, with the fire jumping from house to house and from empty lot to empty lot as if the blaze was deciding what to burn next, Hearn said.

For most of the day, the sound of sirens on the road and air tankers in the sky filled the air. Many residents picked up shovels and water hoses to fight the fire, residents told the Daily Press this week.

The fire stretched mainly from Rancho Road to the south and Main Street to the north, and between “I” Avenue and the railroad tracks. The blaze also moved east past “I” Avenue and toward the Hesperia Golf Course, between Buckthorne and Danbury avenues.

One of the fire’s origin points was at Santa Fe Avenue and Rancho Road, with the other near the corner of “E” and Chase avenues. The two fires eventually combined at Mesquite Street between C and E avenues.

Most of the blaze was contained at Main Street, with a small fire breaking out north of the roadway, which was congested in both directions.

When the smoke cleared, more than 1,600 acres were burned, nearly 50 structures, including homes, sheds and out-buildings were destroyed; and nearly \$2 million in damage was tallied in the city of nearly 13,000, according to the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**.

Investigators later discovered that a 14-year-old boy set the fire at about 2:45 p.m. that day on the corner of “E” and Chase avenues.

Hearn and her mother, Aileen Alves, were returning home from shopping at Hesperia Village Market when firefighters on “I” Avenue stopped them, she said.

“I still remember my mom screaming that our house was near the fire,” Hearn told the Daily Press. “My mom turned the car around and skirted up one of the back roads until we got home.”

One of Hearn’s friends, whose family’s home was on Cholla Street and in the line of fire, opened their corral gate and let their horse run free before they sought shelter with the Hearn.

“My friend, Alice, and her family stayed with us as the fire continued to burn through the area,” Hearn said. “To keep their minds off the fire, my mom decided to put them all to work by having them cut a fire line to protect our house.”

After the fire, Carol and Alice looked for the family’s missing horse as they walked through smoldering embers, standing homes and those destroyed by the fire.

“I still remember seeing that horse standing in the middle of someone’s front lawn,” Hearn said. “We saw that horse and start running toward him. It was the best feeling.”

Alice’s family lost its fence and freestanding shed, but their house was untouched, said Hearn, who told another story of a friend who grabbed her filing cabinet and young children, and drove away from their property as flames “licked” at their vehicle.

During the fire, Walter Hughes, 67, suffered a heart attack while trying to protect the Desert Manor Apartments on Olive Street and G Avenue. News reports were unclear as to whether Hughes was the fire’s single fatality.

Southern California Edison employee, Richard Dickerson, 34 of Barstow was injured when he was overcome by smoke and fell from a power pole, the San Bernardino County Sun reported.

Several residents told the Daily Press that many Apple Valley High School graduates, who had returned from Grad Night at Disneyland that morning, were still asleep when the blaze broke out.

Others said smoke from the fire moved into Victorville and affected those attending the Victor Valley High School graduation ceremony at Ray Moore Stadium.

The owner of Hesperia Towing and Storage lost 16 vehicles in the fire, nine of them classic cars. Their business office and all its records were also destroyed, the Daily Press reported.

“That was a fire that I won’t soon forget,” Hearn said. “It really was the great fire of 1979.”

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