

High Winds, Fire, Dry Grass: Black Thursday

By John Rico

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A DAY TO REMEMBER — The sun was shining brightly over Vacaville on that September 16th back in 1965, but it was barely visible. It was being blotted out by dense clouds of smoke. The Black Thursday fire was on a rampage, and men and machines were helpless to stop the fiery tongue as it worked its way south toward Vacaville.

Starting shortly before noon in dry grass about seven miles north of Vacaville, and aided by a north wind of above average velocity, it took only five hours for the blaze to blacken 8000 acres of lands, destroy 14 homes, 45 other buildings, miles of fences, telephone and power poles, farm machinery, automobiles, trucks, furnishings, personal possessions and a few animals.

Black Thursday should long be remembered because there is every possibility it could happen again. Despite the heavy damage inflicted during that September day, downtown Vacaville residents can consider themselves fortunate that the blaze veered to the east into an area where there were no cluster of homes. No one can give any reason why the blaze did not continue south, where it could have potentially wiped out hundreds of downtown homes.

An indication of the intensity of the fire and the velocity of the wind is reflected in the fact that the blaze jumped Monte Vista Avenue in the vicinity of the Stith Chevrolet Agency, then jumped Interstate 80 and continued south to orchard lands near Vaca Bowl where it burned itself out.

Fire Chief Warren Hughes had called in every available extra pieces of firefighting equipment in the surrounding areas, but this display of strength did not deter the vigorous fire which continued unabated. Firemen, and hundreds of volunteers were able to be of assistance in helping to save properties on the fringes of the inferno.

The irony of the blaze is reflected in the fact that the ranch home on the J. H. Burton ranch in the English Hills was a victim. But as the wind-swept fire traveled south it crept into Ulatis Creek on its rampage toward Vacaville. Burning cinders ignited the large barn on the R. E. Burton ranch and the home nearby also went up in flames. The descendants of these two pioneer Vacaville brothers, both fruit growers, were present to see how devastating uncontrollable fire can be.

The orchards had disappeared, having been replaced by open range lands covered with grass. Since that day in 1965, there have been hundreds of new homes constructed on those 8000 acres burned over on Black Thursday. There is no need to minimize the potential danger which exists. There can be precautions in anticipation of another Black Thursday, but unfortunately when you have a combination of tinder-dry grass, a high wind and a fire, all you can do is hope for the best.

Among the hundreds of fatigued men who went through that Black Thursday nightmare was the late Solano County Fire Warden Charles "Chuck" Green. It was Green who pulled the county fire-fighters together into a coordinated unit which many times proved its worth by rapidly extinguishing potentially damaging fires.

"Chuck" Green was the type of an individual who was of the opinion firefighters deserved special recognition; he was an individual who believed that the way to make a man follow, is to be their leader. It was agonizing for him to hear the fire sirens, but knowing his terminal illness forbid him from participating in his favorite chores.

Before illness forced "Chuck" Green to relinquish his firefighting activities, he championed a proposal for a county-wide rural fire protection district, in place of the nine now operating independently.

Unfortunately, the Vacaville Rural Fire Protection District is listed among the poorer in the county in secured assessments.

For the 1978-79 12-month period, the Vacaville district's assessments were at approximately \$10 million. This compares to \$46 million for the Dixon district, and \$30 million for Montezuma. The Suisun district was at \$22 million.

Proposals for a fire protection district for the contiguous lands around the City of Vacaville, place the area in a "Johnny Come Lately" predicament. In the hey-day of the fruit industry here, local area ranchers saw no need to assess themselves for a service which they could not use. It was not until 1946 that ranchers were asked to approve formation of such a district, and with much of the lands reverting from fruit to grazing, ranchers gave a unanimous 89 to 0 favorable vote.

The Vacaville Rural Fire Protection District has often been referred to as a "bitch," because of the terrain. Most of the lands in the district are rolling hills or mountains.

Perhaps "Chuck" Green may have been right in proposing the county-wide district. Under such a plan there would be no rich, nor poor, every district would be equally financed.

But, right now the grass is dry, the winds are beginning to blow a bit harder, and there is an ever-present alert for another Black Thursday. Let's keep our fingers crossed so that we may ward off such a catastrophe.

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