

20 November 2007

Dear Lillian,

Thanks for bugging me for a letter. I was waiting to respond until I got a project finished to write about, but events have rather overtaken that prospect—so here's some news.

By now you have probably seen the note in the Pacific Union Recorder about our house burning at San Pasqual Academy. As usual, they got things about 2/3 wrong. An old saying of mine since I was graduate student association president at University of California in the 1970s—I used to believe what I read in the newspapers until they started writing about me. But one true fact in this story is that our house did burn. (I did teach German at the University of California, but I didn't retire as a professor from that position.) We watched the fire and the wind closely throughout the afternoon and into the night, and I wrote sort of a journal of events to family and friends as the events of the evening progressed. I'll copy and paste my notes here.

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Fire 1 – 5:45 p.m.

We had a knock on the door a few minutes ago announcing a voluntary evacuation. But I think we'll stay here. The fire is still on the other side of Ramona, at least more than 10 miles from us, with a lot of obstacles in between. Mostly the problem is just smoke. But we've been through this before. I think it's less serious than the last time they tried to evacuate everybody several years ago. There have been several burns in the past few years which took most of the fuel between here and Ramona, and we have a goodly number of acres of oranges around us, and the first thing we see out the living room window is the fire station, so I think we're in pretty good shape. I don't know how I would save all my important things if the burn took us. I'll keep in touch with you by cell phone if it gets suddenly worse.

Fire 2 -- 6 p.m.

Ramona and points east are now under mandatory evacuation orders, more than 10,000 households, and Escondido and Poway have been warned. I still think we're OK here because of the fuel taken in recent burns and the direction the fire is burning. I think Poway is in more danger than we are.

Fire 3 – 6:30 p.m.

A few minutes ago the fire marshal came by and said he didn't think the fire would be coming down here, but we should have a suitcase packed just in case, then just now a fire truck came by with lights blazing and said we were under mandatory evacuation orders. I'm not sure yet we will comply. I'm going to turn all the lights out, and if I see the fire come over the ridge, then I'll start taking action. We still have clear blue sky overhead, and the winds, though variable, are mostly out of the north and north east, blowing the plume well to the south of us. Poway must be choking. Highway 78 is choked with bumper to bumper traffic coming down from Ramona---maximum average speed looks to be about 3 mph. Joan is packing up some of the essential things just in case. If the wind shifts and starts pushing the fire down from the ridge, I'll grab my computer and external hard drive and file folders and head out.

Fire 4 – 7:00 p.m.

The wind is now completely quiet. If it stays this way we are out of danger. The last thing, if we have to go, is to grab the computer and the external hard drive. But I don't think it will come to that. We have about another hour before they start enforcing the evacuation order, and I'm hoping by that time the wind will have remained quiet enough that they will relax. Or I may just hide in the shadows, ready to spray the roof with a hose. I've turned the water on in the back yard already, so that will be good and wet. In any case, no matter what happens, I won't get much sleep tonight.

Fire 5 – 8:30 p.m.

The wind has been blowing intermittently from the ocean, clearing the air somewhat. Only a mild gust now and then from the east, the direction of the major fire, so the real danger is passed. The sky is mostly covered with smoke by now, though it's not thick enough to cause any trouble breathing. Less than sitting downwind from a

small campfire. We can still clearly see the outlines of the hills to the north. About 15 minutes ago a fire broke out along side Highway 78 down past the Pinery nursery, about a mile from our house. Had to be another arson thing because there is absolutely no ash in the air. It flared up pretty good for a few minutes, but the local fire crew was on it right away and it's mostly knocked down by now. But the traffic through the valley down from Ramona is completely stopped down by the bridge. Bandy Canyon to Highland Valley is still open. But I feel safer here than on any of the roads in the area. So cheer up, everybody. I'll post you again as things move along here.

Fire 6 – 2:30 a.m.

About a quarter past two. The wind has picked up again pretty strongly, but mostly from the north and north east. Which is both good and bad. It's good because we can now see stars again to the north and we are almost completely free of smoke, and the fire will be blown away from us to the south. Bad because it is whipping up the fires again. The new one down by the highway seems to have been burning through the dry river bottom south of the road. Several times there was a huge burst of flame upward, possibly propane tanks exploding by the two or three structures down there. And we saw one pine tree go up like a torch. The branches were silhouetted in the flames as they flared up like a giant torch. But the wind is blowing that fire obliquely away from us, and there is a half-mile worth of orange groves between here and there anyhow. Judging by the reflections in the sky, it appears that the area around the Ramona airport and Ramona Highlands may be getting hit pretty hard. The town of Ramona surely was under severe assault. The fire crews must have had their hands full there. I'll check in again in another hour.

Next Day:

We lost the house. What we have left is what we could stuff in one car. The other car and my truck burned. About three o'clock the wind began blowing very hard from due north, which was pushing the fire over the ridge to the south, and we thought we were safe in spite of the stronger wind. Then about a quarter past three the wind suddenly turned 90 degrees to the east with gusts over 80 mph. The fire turned and lurched down Schoolhouse Canyon, and within a few minutes the whole upper campus was on fire. The dormitories and classrooms down on the flat were saved, but most of the houses on the hill are gone. We drove through fire getting out past the old dairy, and going down the aisle of Palo Verde trees to the west we met some limbs blocking the road, had broken off in the wind. They were almost too much for Joan and me together to move, and I could envision us getting fried right there. We finally moved the limbs enough to squeeze through and parked between the rows of orange trees down on Bandy Canyon Road. It was plain that all the roads out were blocked by fire, and we were safe in the oranges. Several times I walked back up the hill to watch our house burn. The propane tank went off like a torch, sending a Roman candle into the sky. I saved the external hard drive from my computer, so I have nearly all my data from the most recent projects. In the rush to get out I forgot my cell phone, so until I get that replaced, please call me on my wife's phone--760-443-6998. We spent most of the morning with the insurance agent, and he advanced us almost \$5000 against the pending claim, which will help a lot.

The whole county is up in flames. Joan's parents were evacuated this afternoon, and they are with us here in Temecula. Many roads are blocked by fire, and it is hard to get around. It took us nearly three hours this evening to get from Fallbrook to Temecula via Sandia Creek Road. I'm hoping I can do a bit of cruising tomorrow to see all the damage. There is a lot of wind damage besides the fires. In the Escondido Auto Park lamp posts broke off and smashed into brand new cars parked in sales lots on the west side of the street.

My pulse was racing over 100 for most of the day. Lots of adrenaline. It is settled down somewhat now. We are with church friends in Temecula (Brownlow) and will sleep well tonight. We are told to give thanks in all things. So far this is a bit hard to give thanks for, but I trust things will finally work out in the end.

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November 23:

Now, a month later, it's time to reflect and find some perspective. The insurance paid off promptly and completely. We now have more money in the bank than I ever had at one time in my life. But money can't begin to compensate for the losses. The grand piano and the organ and the french horn and the violin and the Moeck Rothenberg fipple flutes can be replaced. That's only money. Gone are the musical instruments I collected in my travels—several Andean flutes and pan pipes, a 21-string Mandinka Kora, a Thai breath organ, etc. I'm not likely to travel to those places again in my life. What hurts more is the loss of the family history. A Swedish tapestry,

snow scene and verse in a regional dialect, embroidered by my mother's great aunt in the 1860s; books from my grandfather's library published before 1900; photographs of my family going back to my great great grandparents in the 1880s; my mother's teenage scrapbook of friends and family from the period 1910 to 1920; photos of my parents at their homestead in Alberta, Canada, when they were first married; a family portrait the only time all seven of us were together at the same time—1943—when Danny was barely a year old and George and Willis were home on leave from the Army; genealogical work (about nine lateral feet) on both sides of the extended family going back several hundred years; a pair of wooden kitchen chairs from my parents' first housekeeping after they married in 1924. Not to mention my own lifelong collection of photographs and my life bird list.

And the library. Erasmus once said, "When I have some money, I buy a book. If I have any left over, I buy food." I have lived my life that way, extending the principle to musical recordings—and I kept everything, including many rarities and oddities. I had about 4000 items, counting books and music. Some can be replaced. At a thrift store this week I found a nice clean copy of Winston Churchill's six-volume memoirs of the Second World War, a good replacement for the one I bought when I was in college. I may someday be able to find another copy of "The Stars for Children" which I loved and studied the heavens from when I was in the fourth grade and still kept on the shelf by the bed. I'm not likely to see again the Carson J. Robison song book I learned guitar from in the sixth grade—"Ridin' Down the Canyon," "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," etc. Nor a copy of the Rubayat translated into the South American Guarani Indian language. I had my text and study books beginning from Lodi all the way through graduate school, including grammars and literary texts from all of the historic Germanic languages and some in the old Romance dialects. Also grammars and lexicons in Russian, Czech, Italian, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Catalan, classical Latin, medieval church Latin, New Testament Greek, Attic Greek (the German Kaegi set), Thai, Japanese, Korean, Yiddish, and others. A large number of reference works and technical dictionaries and programming language manuals. Maps and city plans from around the world, wherever I had traveled. And my limited edition portfolios by the great photographers—Ansel Adams, Fred Picker, Edward Weston, Brett Weston, and others. And the personal autograph: "To my friend Ben," by Isaac Asimov in his Empire trilogy. My notes and source materials for my Ph.D. dissertation are gone, never to be seen again. And original poems and stories, beginning with a poem I wrote in the sixth grade which was published in a national anthology, and a book of "bedtime" fairy tales I did for the girls when they were little. A personal handwritten letter from Robert Graves in response to a poem I sent him. And an autograph on a Community Concerts program by Yehudi Menuhin from late 1952 in Lodi.

And the musical recordings. About 350 CDs, from hard classical and ancient recreations to country, most of which can probably be replaced. But many older recordings I will never see again, such as a pristine copy on 78s of the La Sierra Collegians, the set recorded in the late 1940s that Fred Waring praised. And my precious copy of Anna Maria Alberghetti singing "Cara Nome" on a 45 LP that I bought in Lodi in 1952. I thought it was the most wonderful recording ever made of any opera aria. And the red 10-inch vinyl record of the Lodi Academy band from 1952. And that wonderful recording by Ernst Levy of Beethoven's great Hammerklavier Sonata, from a recital on a college campus. All other recordings by any other artist pale by comparison. And my collection of folk music from around the world, nearly the entire Monitor label catalog recorded in the early 1950's, before stereo, and a stack of Mexican and Iberian stuff—Portuguese fados, Los Churumbeles de Espana, Trio Los Panchos, Aires del Mayab, Las Hermanas de Alba, and more. A quirky rendition of the Messiah by the Handel and Hayden Society of Boston in a style long since abandoned. The wonderful vinyl set of Beethoven's nine symphonies by Herbert von Karajan around 1979, better (I thought) than his later CD set.

And the technical work—more than fifteen years of design engineering, including an active suspension system Ford Motor Company paid us to develop for them but never used. I was saving all the schematics for the electronic control, expecting to renew the proposal. And several other patent applications in process. Those I could re-create, but the notes and drawings will have to be done all over again. Maybe the several years worth of concentrated work would be shortened the second time around, skipping the mistakes and blind alleys and getting directly to the solutions.

So now I am in a grieving mode, going over in my mind all the wonderful things I will never in my life see again, never be able to finish. But the hardest of all is reflecting on that awful night, believing that I could have saved the house and everything in it, blaming myself for not using better judgment and foresight. I really did not believe we would get taken by the fire until the wind started driving it down Schoolhouse Canyon. By then it was too late to do anything effective. We have been through a number of fires in this valley over the past fifteen years, and I was just

too complacent with the history to take effective preventive action. Looking back I can think of a number of things I could have done better—more water better placed, active removal of the dry palm fronds blowing against the walls of the house, etc. There were about 15 critical minutes. The wind was moving the fire so fast that the crisis would have quickly passed if I had been better prepared and more active.

I still have the memories, the visual mental store. I was about halfway through writing the story of my early life. I'd finished up through the eighth grade and started on my freshman year at Lodi—tentative title, "An American Boy"—intending to take it through my second year of college (about 150 pages so far). That is on the external hard drive that I grabbed as I ran out of the house ahead of the fire. As soon as I get a proper computer configured again, I'll continue working on that. (This laptop with Windows Vista is functionally challenged—a worse operating system than even Windows ME.) I won't be able to include the photos I intended unless I can find a cousin who has some copies, but maybe I can stretch the word pictures to suffice. I was doing it for the grandchildren, to give them a glimpse of the world I grew up in. But now I will also be doing it for myself. And maybe even some people outside the family will find some value in it. I'm printing it to PDF format so I can send it out electronically without going to a printer and bindery.

And along with everything else, Joan's father died last Sabbath. He was ninety years old and not very strong, and the evacuation from their home in Fallbrook during the fires was apparently just too much stress on him. He began declining rapidly over the next couple weeks until he just couldn't handle any more.

So life moves on. The past is past. We have to look forward with what we still have. In the Sabbath School not long ago we studied about Job. But Job got all his stuff back after the test was over. My test will continue. Joan keeps remarking on the significance of the date—October 22—when it seems we have entered our own personal time of the end. The Sabbath School lesson for this week discusses praise: "It is one thing to rejoice when everything is going well, but Paul exhorts us to rejoice **always.**" So I buck myself up and rejoice, in spite of everything.

On a lighter note: Kim and Matt talked us into hiking with them down to the Havasupai village in the Grand Canyon in early September. Cindi and Joel flew down from Washington to join us. I quickly discovered that I can no longer do some of the things I used to enjoy forty years ago. That 40-pound pack going down the staircase trail on the first mile down from the parking lot beat my poor hip and knee joints to a pulp. (They never fully recovered from a car accident several years ago.) And I ran out of water in the heat of the afternoon and struggled into the village after dark, collapsed on the porch of the first building I came to and was taken care of overnight by a delightful Indian family (they moved their mattress out into the back yard so I could be comfortable while they slept on the floor), joining the kids at the campground the next morning, and I lay on my back for a day and a half trying to get some strength back in my joints. Finally took the helicopter out. My joints are still suffering more than two months later. I hope I can heal them enough to do some serious hiking again—but no more 40-pound packs down steep rocky trails! Joan had the ambition for years to do the Pacific Crest Trail with me in sections, but I think this trek down into the Grand Canyon cured her of that. Other than my joints my general health is better than it was five years ago. I've taken off more than thirty pounds (I can wear fitted shirts again), my blood pressure is good, and my resting pulse is in the mid fifties. Now if I could get my joints back in shape.....!! I have to acknowledge that age does bring its limitations. I used to throw a hundred pounds. Now I have to wrestle with 50, but as long as the brain keeps working properly and the heart keeps pumping, life will still be interesting and productive.

I still have the same email and snail mail addresses: tuppben@cts.com and Box 337, Ramona, CA 92065; and I do want to stay in touch with everyone.