

23 March 2008

Dear Lillian,

Thanks again for the letters. To your request about the aftermath of the fires:

The hills around here mostly turned bright emerald green for a few weeks—with the brush burned off and fresh grass sprouting from the abundant rain that started soon after the fires. Then broad areas of yellow and purple as flowers erupted. Only now, finally, are brown spots beginning to appear as the grass begins to dry out, especially on the south and southwest slopes. Amazing how the land recovers from such disaster. If only we people could do as well!

I understand the stages of grief, and I know where I am now, and I know I'll make it through OK, it's just hard to live through the process, even knowing how it will come out in the end.

The school has been really good to us—gave us thousands of dollars, on top of our insurance, along with a nice 40-footer RV with popouts to live in rent free until they get the houses rebuilt, which probably will take another year. Meanwhile, we've put the insurance money in the bank, saving it to replace the grand piano, organ, major appliances, and household furniture while we continue to live poor. It's not easy trying to live and do my work in such a small space. Joan is lucky that she goes out to work. Then when she comes home she wants a neat orderly place to settle into, and I have my work spread all over the table and sofa and chairs and floor.

The really hard part is remembering what I don't have any more. But we go forward the best we can and recover from here and there whatever has happened to survive. Part of the process is to maintain as much continuity as possible. Part of that is salvaging what could be salvaged from the property, even when it might be easier or cheaper to start over with something new. Next to the trailer they put us in was a triangle of hopelessly sterile dirt. Joan's personal therapy was to landscape it as much as possible like what we had before. We dug up some plants from the property and brought them down, even ones that looked totally dead. A tree fern that was burned to a crisp is showing a bulge on top of the truncated stem that will soon burst out into a new frond. We had a large sago palm in a terra cotta vase, brought that down and watered it. For several months it looked totally dead, but about three weeks ago some fuzzies began to swell in the top center, then some green sprouts, and today three of the sprouts spread out into curly fronds. Soon it will be full green and spreading again.

The cactus I collected in the Barranca de Cobre in Mexico in 1980 looked like it might survive, but finally gave up the ghost. But I think I can get a starter back from a friend whom I gave a piece to some years ago. The Tiger Lilies are going to make it. The bulbs were far enough under ground to escape the heat. Likewise the Elephant Ears. And we are buying and planting duplicates of things we couldn't save. Today we planted a pair of Queen Palms to replace the ones that were in the driveway. We brought down the flagstones and other decorative rock and a fountain statuary and laid out a curved path through our dirt patch, and Joan's green thumb has made it into a little paradise. People come from all over campus to wonder. We even are getting our hummingbirds and hooded orioles back at the new feeders we put up. We used to feed between 700 and 800 hummers a day, extrapolating from the amount of nectar we put out. We're about 1/4 of that now.

My own therapy has been more oriented toward machines and personal history. My beloved old 1988 F-150, is gone, but I salvaged the rack. It just needs to be sandblasted and re-painted. I bought another truck almost like the one I lost—same year, straight six, five-speed, tach, cruise

control, etc., got it cheap because it needed some work, and have been bringing it back to life. (The fuel pump in the rear tank was a terror to replace.) My brother has a few photographs, and my cousin had a manuscript copy of a little book I wrote 30 years ago. I re-set the type and formatted it and had a copy bound where Joan works. I have to modify a few little things before I commit to a regular printing. I'll probably send it up to Amazon.com. That way I would only have to print a few at a time, if anyone orders any. Boutique publishing gets practical now with modern software and laser printing—and with an Internet outlet for print-on-demand. I was hoping to have some copies to show around at the reunion in April, but I probably won't get that far by then. There is an art teacher here on campus who wants to illustrate the book for me, and that will likely take half a year. I may print off a few copies without illustrations for early release. I don't expect to get any serious money out of it, but people have told me the story is worth a read. Most of my musical compositions are gone. Other than a hymn pasted in the back of our hymnals at church, I think I have nothing left of my various works. I bought a new Finale software package and will set about working out some re-creations when I get a bit farther along—see if I can recapture some of those complex progressions I struggled with. And I'm re-creating the airplane design I lost. Last week I finished the main outlines of the fuselage and surfaces. Now I'm starting to design and weigh out the internal parts. Today I did the spar box. I think I'm doing a better job the second time around.

Among my other “recovery” activities, I've renewed my flight medical (measured two inches shorter than I used to be—we do get older, don't we!) and hope to get back into an airplane left seat again soon. My brother will do my “Bi-Annual” for me next weekend on my way up to Placerville for my cousin Phyllis' 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party. And I've started playing the violin again. I bought a cheap one and have been sawing away on it in the absence of all the other instruments I lost. I never was a very good violinist, but this is the only thing I have left to play, and I have to do something musical to keep my head from exploding. I'm making some progress on replacing small physical things, such as my Carson J. Robison songbook from the sixth grade (in better condition than the one I lost) and my “Stars for Children” from the fourth grade. And I got an exact replacement of the Sons of the Pioneers “Cowboy Classics” boxed album on 45s that I bought my junior year at Lodi—the one Jim Scott was so excited about. Three things I thought I'd never see again. I wish other things were as easy. The Internet is a wonderful resource, but it can't do everything—like family photographs from the 1880s.

The theory around here is that the fire west of us is what caused the disaster. That is, the heat from that fire created a strong updraft, which sucked the wind down the canyon up east which destroyed us. That night I thought it was arson, the way it started and spread, but we're told it was ignited by a transformer which blew up on account of an electrical short when some wires blew down. At this point, looking back, it is not so important how it started, only that we received the “benefits” from whatever cause.

Last Thursday I took Dwight and Ruthie to the airport—on their way to Africa for three weeks. They've been down here in SoCal for several months fixing up one of their houses at Angeles Oaks, up the hill from Loma Linda, after it got damaged by water from a broken water pipe. They'll be back April 4 and are looking forward to joining us at the reunion—I think the first one ever for them. We've had a lot of fun reminiscing back to the eighth grade and to our wild times at Lodi in the strawberry patch, etc.

Looking forward to seeing everyone—just three more weeks (isn't it?)