

Pat Krier of Englewood, Kansas, writes an intermittent column. This time she writes about her Starbuck Fire experience.

April 8, 2017

News from the Home Eighty

Pat Krier

We have had many changes in our life since I last wrote a column. On March 6 we were in the worst wildfire ever recorded in Kansas history. That fire burned off over a million acres including 85% of Clark County, our place, and all the country around us.

Our experience with the fire started out with a phone call from neighbor Denice McCarty warning us there was a large fire coming our way. When we looked, it was just a speck of smoke on the horizon, so we didn't get too concerned about it. Now we can say that we should have hooked up the fifth wheel right then and got out of the line of fire, but how were we to know that this was no ordinary fire; it was a monster fire was moving over 70 miles an hour. We might not be here to write about it, but Englewood Fire Chief Bernie Smith pounded on our door and insisted that we leave and he stayed until we did.

As we left, I contacted our family group site on Facebook and told them what was happening and asked them all to pray for us. I was so afraid that I forgot how to pray. All I could think of was, "God Help Us."

We watched the fire from highway 283 west of our house. We saw it jump the highway south of Sand Creek and had hopes that it wouldn't get to our place. Then it jumped Sand Creek on the north side and spread its fiery fingers out and jumped the highway again and again. It was a terrifying thing to watch. All along the line of fire, there were tremendous fire tornadoes. It consumed everything. We saw the abandoned Mahieu house burn and figured we had lost our house too.

After the worst of the fire went through, we could see Travis McCarty driving down our road. We told ourselves that if he didn't come right back out, we were going home to see what we had left. As we drove in, there were electric poles burning all along the road and the trees in the shelter belts were still ablaze. We could barely see the road in front of us for the smoke.

We were very blessed to find our 100-year-old house still standing intact. Prayers were answered. The fire burned right up to the foundations of the house and the big metal barn. It ruined the vinyl siding on the house and we had smoke damage inside, but the buildings did not burn. We are so very thankful that we still have a home to go to. Many friends and neighbors lost not only their house but much of their cow herd, their horses, and their means of making a living. Many of the cattle that weren't killed by the fire had to be shot, they were so badly burned. For several days after the fire, we could hear the constant sound of gunfire as neighbors destroyed their cattle that needed to be put down. It was heartbreaking. Every fence for miles around was destroyed; it sort of seemed like we were down to nothing but hope and a strong will to survive.

Our fire departments fought hard to save the people and the towns that were in the path of this monster fire. The fire covered such a large area that all the fire departments that usually come to each other's aid had their hands full at home. Help did get here, but it took a while because some of those who came to the rescue were from faraway places like Carbondale, Colorado. The school kids got an extra week of spring break. They put the firemen up in the gym and served lunches from the cafeteria.

The next few days, friends and neighbors began posting pictures of the devastation and telling the stories of their losses and how they escaped the fire on Facebook. It was heartbreaking. There were stories of people who lost everything they had worked for all their lives. Everything was black everywhere we looked, and the wind

blew the dust and ashes from the fire till it looked worse than the pictures we saw from the Dirty Thirties. It was hard to find a reason to smile.

Then a miracle happened. Area 4-H clubs offered to take care of all the orphaned baby calves that would need bottle-fed and help came from all over the heartland. Farm people got together in the rural areas of Missouri, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, Iowa, Nebraska and Illinois. Small towns pooled their resources. They sent convoys of trucks loaded with hay, milk-saver for calves, money, fencing supplies... The bunch from Michigan brought new household goods for those who lost their homes. They paid for fuel for the transportation, volunteered their trucks and pickups for the hauling and some of them came to stay and help rebuild. I have never in my life seen such a great outpouring of generosity. Some of the trucks had banners that said, "Farmers helping farmers" and most of them had Old Glory somewhere in the convoy. But there was still nothing on the National news about the devastation.

We live in the sandhills where every little breeze has the hills blowing. The countryside is the same in the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas. We had several nice slow rains right after the fires and that started the grass (and weeds), but it will be a long time before we get enough growth on the tops of the hills to hold the ground. Mother Earth will remember this fire. Future generations will find the remains of the ashes and soot every time they dig a hole. Tree rows that have been here since the days of the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) are gone and places like Clark County State Lake lost many of those magnificent old cottonwood trees. Nothing will ever be the same.

Like everyone else who was affected by that fire, we are still in the process of cleaning up and trying to get back to whatever will now be normal. The trees around our house that we watered and babied for forty five years are mostly gone, we have little drifts of sand, ashes, and soot where the grass in our backyard used to be. Our pastures and fences are gone, but we're very thankful for what we have. Our family came right after the fire and helped when they were needed and we are both okay.

I have read that it will take a lifetime for the ranchers and farmers in our area to recover from the fire. I believe that to be true. Some of our neighbors lost 50% of their herd, most of their equipment, and all the surplus feed they had stored. Farmers and ranchers traditionally operate on credit. We are retired and have no cattle, so our loss is small compared to many of our neighbors.

A wise friend told me that everyone who was affected by the fire could have post-traumatic stress. It was a traumatic experience that I know I will never forget. I went with a group of friends for a girl's day out birthday celebration last Wednesday. It was a good day. We talked a bit of how this disaster has forever changed our lives. It's good to get out of the daily routine and do something fun. Spending time together with friends and family have been times of healing

"Always and Everywhere," the phrase From the Ashes We Rise has been heard often in these parts. Our lives are measured not by years but by the events that happen in between. Jerry planted 50 red cedar seedlings last week north of the house. Pretty optimistic for a person that has celebrated his 80th birthday.