

by Susan Edmonston

Monday, March 6, 2017, at the newspaper office in Protection, I was told there was a fire near Englewood. It later spread to the Clark County Lake area and was also headed toward Ashland.

As I walked out of the Press office at 4:30 p.m. to go to Bible study at the Methodist church, the smell of smoke was strong in the air. We ladies decided to go into the sanctuary and pray for the safety of others and for the winds to be calmed. We left the church at 5.

The town was being evacuated and I headed west toward my home. I couldn't believe it when I pulled away from the Y at the city limits of Protection that visibility was almost nil. I could see a couple of utility poles down the road and then within a half mile from town, I was driving in blackness with only the lines on the highway visible to me. I turned on the car's hazard lights and kept going, meeting vehicles coming from Ashland; that town also was being evacuated to the gymnasium at Coldwater.

Then what amazed me six miles from town (and a mile from our house) was instant awareness of the whole countryside. I stopped to take a picture of the sun and sky and went into our house. I grabbed two suitcases and threw in a couple of changes of clothing for me and my husband, took all of his medicine and mine, and some paperwork. I carried some things downstairs to the "storm cellar" but as I came up the stairs I looked out the window and saw fire a mile south of the house.

My husband Myron was on the tractor north of the house and in Steve Hazen's pasture to try to prevent the fire from our house. It was moving over the Wilson land west of our house and coming our way. He would not go with me.

As I drove down the lane to the highway, the fire was traveling toward Sugarloaf (high point south of Koehn's house). I took another photo then headed for Coldwater, 20 miles away. It was strange that I didn't have to drive in the blackness like I had earlier.

People from Ashland and Protection were gathered in the high school cafeteria and food was available (lots and lots of pizza, but I didn't eat anything). I walked into the gymnasium thinking it would be packed but no one was there. The residents and staff from Protection Valley Manor were clustered in the band room and I spent my

time in there until 8 p.m. (I am an ombudsman for that facility.) I realized I had all of Myron's diabetic medicine so I left Coldwater to return home.

A phone call told me to pick up son-in-law Clint in Protection and grab a shovel. The fire was now among our machinery at the farm. Clint and I did not see anything until we topped the hill west of Steve Hazen's. Our stack of hay bales and the tall poles were all on fire and everywhere we looked were spots of flames. Our oat bales scattered over 200 acres north and east of our home were all burning. The fire blaze was going across the highway in front of us and as I drove by Koehns their house was on fire. I told Clint I wanted to quickly take a photo out the car window. Then we headed up our lane, but there was no mercury light. Embers were along the lane and in the grass and trees north of our home. I let Clint out and he went over to the machinery to help Greg Vanderree, Stephen Bryant, and Bryce Drussel fight the fire with shovels.

At the house, I was afraid to go in as there were flames of fire around our propane tank and east of there in the trees and around another fuel tank. I did not realize the guys had already put out the fire that had come up to the sidewalk around our house.

I was told the propane was all gone and to go in the house and light candles. Myron planned to stay the night at the house, but I headed back to town and went to bed in Sheri and Clint's home.

Tuesday morning there was not much I could do at the Press office so I drove around the country to see the devastation and take more photos. I saw where the fire had been to the sidewalk at our home. The whole countryside was blackened. Over the hill along the highway, both Wilson houses were gone. Past Sitka Hill our first piece of land bought in 1970 and the house all four of our daughters had lived in was leveled as well as the next house west that Don Edmonston and his son Mark had lived in back in the 1960s.

I drove over to the Haydock and Thrall places and watched the fire burning off the pastures there. Unfortunately, my cell phone had to be charged and it wouldn't take any more photos. The wind whipped the smoke from a burning haybale across my vision and as I drove through it, I became scared because I could see nothing. It was like a dense fog or flying through the clouds. I drove around the section instead of going back through the smoke for fear I would crash into another vehicle in the smoke.

Myron had worried about the survival of our livestock in pastures northwest and northeast of Sitka. He had just purchased 200 bred cows a couple of weeks earlier to add to those already there. He couldn't believe Tuesday morning they were still alive with burned ground all around them. He did find dead cows and calves but our losses were minimal compared to the hundreds that other ranchers encountered. Of course, we did not know that in the weeks to follow, more cows and calves would die from the smoke in their lungs. Baby calves would die because their mother's udders were burned and others died because their mother died in the fire and we didn't know which calf belonged to which cow.

Even though Protection was being evacuated again on Tuesday, I spent my time at the Press office that evening to type and do page layout. I stayed there until Thursday morning. We ended up not having electricity at our farm for three days.

On Wednesday I was in the car again driving north of Sitka to the Lexington community and saw the burned remains of the former Corey and Debbie Filson home (the shed now owned by Steven McCuiston was saved). I was told the Filson cabin burned also. I drove by the Lexington schoolhouse toward Protection and saw all the fire damage to the land north and south of the highway — as far as the eye could see.

Smoke was still in the air as fire was being fought again in Comanche County on the Huck Ranch and the Lohrding's acreage. I drove into the yard of Warren and Judy Moore north of Protection and saw that the fire had come within a fourth mile of their home.

Then it was back to the newspaper office to write more about the fire and put in more fire photos before exporting the pages to Spearville for that week's issue of the Protection Press. It surprised me Thursday morning when I entered our house that the furnace was putting out heat. I thought our propane tank was a goner. I welcomed sleep!

We had 7,000 acres of land burned off and a total of 40 miles of fence to replace. Myron was a busy farmer/rancher before March 6, and the wildfire created many additional problems for us. Our first reaction after Monday's fire was that we were thankful we were alive.