

1993 LAGUNA BEACH FIRE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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California State University, Fullerton

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Descriptive Summary

Title

1993 Laguna Beach Fire Oral History Project

Date(s)

1993, 1995

Creator

California State University, Fullerton

Extent

Five (5) oral histories

Repository

Center for Oral and Public History
California State University, Fullerton

Project Abstract

This project is a compilation of oral histories from Laguna Beach, California, residents of the 1993 Laguna Beach fire. Included in this project are five oral histories with interviews from six individuals, conducted in 1993 and 1995.

The 1993 arson-started fire began on October 27 and was contained five days later on October 31. Beginning as a brush fire, it grew in size with the help of hot, dry, 60-70 mph Mojave Desert winds. Notably, three key water reservoirs ran dry in the hardest-hit areas. At the fire's end, 366 homes and 16,000 acres were destroyed.

This oral history project encompasses the personal experiences of six Laguna Beach residents, one of whom was the city's fire chief, who gives his account and professional perspective of the fire. The remaining oral histories are personal experiences of escaping the fire; ensuring safety of loved ones; obstacles encountered; emotional state of themselves and those around them; community response to their needs, perception of officials' actions during and after the disaster. In doing so, these interviews address the sociological effects of the fire on Laguna Beach residents.

1993 Laguna Beach Fire Oral History Project Abstracts

OH 2359

Narrator Steinle, Dr. Pamela (Hunt), b. 1952
Interviewer Amanda Shuford
Date November 15, 1993
Language English
Project 1993 Laguna Beach, California, Fire
Format(s) Audio; Final Transcript (19 pp.)

Abstract

An oral history with Pamela Steinle, an Orange County native, resident of Laguna Beach since 1976, and Assistant Professor of American Studies at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). This interview was conducted for the CSUF Center for Oral and Public History. The purpose of this interview was to record one individual's account of her experiences regarding the Laguna Beach fire of October 27, 1993. Specifically, this interview recounts personal details of the first day of the fire, including harrowing events of blockages on her freeway drive into Laguna after teaching class in Mission Viejo; concerns for the safety of her nine-year-old daughter, Rory, that of her landscape architect husband, Larry Steinle, and his office in Village Laguna and their home in Arch Beach Heights; she comments on classic Santa Ana winds (her love of them as a child, yet their ominous nature on Oct. 27); acknowledges prior lingering concerns of Laguna residents because of a fire in the early 1970s--particularly regarding brush fires vis-à-vis topography (canyons, hillsides, open lands) and building construction (vulnerable roofs) especially in oldest section of Village Laguna (1930s and early 1940s); covers successful school evacuation; implementation of Martial Law; panic of neighbors, packing, mandatory home evacuation and routings out of neighborhood; citizens inching along Pacific Coast Highway (many with art works visible in their vehicles—a testimony to Lagunians' values); remarks on political and cultural divisions in Laguna (multi-generation “true Lagunians” vs “newcomers”); outpouring of community support, particularly her Laguna Beach Presbyterian Church; return to their house the following morning and surrounding eerie desolation; overall trauma to family; Gov. Pete Wilson's visit distracting from needed focus of officials. Finally, this account is marked by Steinle's long connection and affinity for the county, from her great-grandparents having resided in Laguna Beach to her own origins in Fullerton.

OH 2360

Narrator McGehee, Ardelias
Interviewer Amanda Shuford
Date November 15, 1993
Language English
Project 1993 Laguna Beach, California, Fire
Format(s) Audio

Abstract

An oral history with Ardelias McGehee, artist resident of Laguna Beach since 1966, who lost her home and nearly all of her artwork in the 1993 fire. The purpose of this interview was to gather information about her personal losses and that of her photographer husband's negatives from his studio in "the village" of Laguna Beach. Specifically, this interview details Ardelias' widely varied, strongly held, and vehemently-expressed views on the mishandling of the fire (from insufficient water supply to non-existent fire breaks to inadequate firefighters); the challenge of evacuating (barely breathing through dense smoke); the sadness of just having lost her mother and rebuilding their home (the latter complicated by frustratingly increased red tape and building codes); the tragedy of her husband's losing all of his negatives and \$100,000 worth of photographic equipment ("a life down the tubes"); the misplaced priorities of community leaders (funding a gnat-catching project over fire protection, for example); city officials' inability for handling taxes and sound long-range planning, coupled with their suspicious motives (presumed annexing of lands such as Canyon Acres); the dilemma of "only 20 percent running the town"; the marked anger of residents at the time of the fire; the city as an art capital and today's problems of entrenched "political correctness" at the expense of openness to art as marked in earlier decades; her views on the drastically changed and on-going deteriorating nature of Laguna as a community in general (present favoring of wealthy and "more polished" residents like those of Emerald Bay over "hippies"). Community outreach during the fire was fine, and the interview ends with Ms. Shuford commenting on the benefits of getting out one's anger.

OH 2450

Narrator Dewberry, Rich and Suzanne
Interviewer Joyce Ryan

Date October 7, 1995
Language English
Project 1993 Laguna Beach, California, Fire
Format(s) Audio; Partial Transcript (6 pp.)
Other Field Notes; Tape Log

Abstract

An oral history with Rich Dewberry, who retired in 1994 after twenty-four years as fire chief of Laguna Beach, CA; additional insights from wife Suzanne, historian at the National Archives in Laguna Niguel. This interview was conducted for the Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of this interview was to gather information primarily about Dewberry's professional handling and personal experiences regarding the two-day Laguna Beach fire of 1993, the largest in Orange County's history. Specifically, this interview assesses the sociological effects of the fire on Laguna Beach, from Dewberry's initial premonition and recognition of its extensive scope, through reactions of individual Laguna residents, media criticism and political aftershock, to initiation of corrective actions. Topics detail Dewberry's broad duties as fire chief; general progressiveness of chiefs throughout county; idea that there will always be--like LA riots--incidents that overwhelm resources and supersede any agency's preparedness (inadequacy of Laguna's reservoir in this case); prohibitive costs even when water sources are available; large numbers of personnel required by fire's end (2,000 firefighters) and personal circumstances (the need for sleep including Dewberry himself); extent of aid including units from other states, the Marine Corps and the National Guard; scope of establishing, staffing, and overseeing command posts; aftermath of fire including denuding of hillside, threat of rain, clean-up crews. Covers the good that came out of this fire: expanding prevention, exploring mitigation and automatic aid practices; adopting higher standards of building safety through AB 347; and finally-- despite Laguna's pride as a community of individualists--the extraordinary response and broad support of the community from teens to seniors, agencies such as the Red Cross and food chain distributors to dedicated local merchants.

OH 2451

Narrator Scanlon, Claudia
Interviewer Joyce Ryan
Date November 10, 1995
Language English
Project 1993 Laguna Beach, California, Fire
Format(s) Audio; Partial Transcript (6 pp.)
Other Tape Log

This oral history spans 1993-95. Bulk dates: 1993.

Abstract

An oral history with Claudia Scanlon of Laguna Beach, California, for the 1993 Laguna Beach Fire Oral History Project, Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of this interview was to gather information about the 1993 Laguna Beach fire. Specifically this interview gives an account of Scanlon's learning of the Laguna Beach fire; describes picking up children from school once the fire erupted; congestion leaving area; describes organized chaos at evacuation center; speaks about the 'angels of St. Anne's Street' and help of neighbors to save home; describes return to neighborhood and the atmosphere; explains presence of National Guard; experience at evacuation center; speaks about community rallying behind fire victims; cites opinion on local water tower debate; why she left Laguna Beach for Santa Ana following post-fire flood; speaks about her children's post-fire trauma; compares living with a natural disaster vs. gang infested neighborhood; effect of fire on friends and neighbors; compares fire aftermath with Chernobyl Atomic Accident; praises actions of fire department; saving downtown; how she found her house; describes organization of evacuation centers; and finally, why Laguna Beach is an idyllic place to live.

OH 2452

Narrator	Yecke, Brenda
Interviewer	Joyce Ryan
Date	November 12, 1995
Language	English
Project	1993 Laguna Beach, California, Fire
Format(s)	Audio; Partial Transcript (7 pp.)
Other	Tape Log

This oral history spans 1993. Bulk dates: 1993.

Abstract

An oral history with Brenda Yecke of Laguna Beach, California, for the 1993 Laguna Beach Fire Oral History Project, Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton. The purpose of this interview was to gather information about the 1993 Laguna Beach fire. Specifically, this interview gives an account of Yecke becoming aware of the Laguna Beach fire; describes the drive back to her home; remembers seeing fire cresting top of hill; describes what items she took when she left; recalls intense congestion and drive away; describes imagery of

people fleeing fire area; returning to Laguna Beach and how she found her home; cites opinion on local water tower debate; discusses actions of good Samaritans during and after the fire; and finally, explains why she still lives in Laguna Beach.