



Fire Comes to Tassajara

On September 8, 1999, a lightning storm in the Ventana Wilderness started at least ten small fires. The small fires grew slowly and joined to become two huge fires, named the Tassajara / Five Fire and the Kirk / Hare Fire. The Tassajara / Five Fire encroached on the Tassajara watershed. Here are some excerpts from notes kept by Gaelyn Godwin as the fire moved closer to Tassajara Zen Mountain Center.

ON WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, I drove up the road in the Tassajara pickup to make a quick trip to Salinas for building materials. I had just about reached the bathtub near the ridge when the first of a long phalanx of fire vehicles stopped me. Captain Jamie Copple, in command of the operation, asked me to pull over to let the wide engines proceed—they were on their way to evacuate Tassajara. I asked if I could turn my truck around and return to Tassajara. When I got back, far in advance of the slow parade of engines, most people were still at lunch but Leslie James, the director, and several others came outside to meet the fire chief before he entered the gate. Jamie informed us that fire was racing up the ridge to the southwest, behind the Tony Trail, and was expected to reach Tassajara within hours. They wanted all but a small group evacuated within half an hour. The huge engines waited outside the gates, engines thrumming, while we took this in. Then we went to work: a group of volunteers gathered in the courtyard and 28 people were allowed to stay. Most of them were sent to secure the buildings, some were sent to help the evacuees move and to make sure the activity in the parking lot proceeded smoothly.

By the time the evacuation was complete the fire had reached the ridge and was flaming over the top, backing down the steep sides of the ridge that looms high above the Tony Trail. The flames were large. Later we would be able to see that the entire east facing slope of the Tassajara watershed was burned to the ground, but for now just the crescent shaped piece of the ridge was clearly on fire.

The firefighters positioned their engines throughout Tassajara, in an array that Jamie had designed after his earlier inspection visit. Now 84 firefighters were spreading out through Tassajara: three engines in the flats, two near the bathhouse, two near the stone rooms, one next to the zendo, two near the dining room, two near the shop and the propane tanks. Long lines of fire hose snaked through Tassajara, all of it charged with water and ready to go.

Meanwhile, the remaining Tassajara residents, along with several work period volunteers, were taking care of Tassajara: closing down all the buildings, removing small wooden altars, bringing the wooden objects down from the memorial site, cutting fire lines around the stupas and the photovoltaic panels, setting the sprinkler systems going on the wood shingled kitchen and on the propane tanks, filling in ditches that had been dug for projects but which would now be hazardous for the fire fighters.

Once our tasks were completed, our job was to wait until the fire got close enough so that Tassajara could be set afire all around us. Since the fire was approaching so fast from so many directions the plan was to wait until it was approximately 100 feet above us and then set "back fires" at Tassajara that would be drawn up to the main fires, thus exhausting the fuel around Tassajara and allowing the main fire to move elsewhere. After this, the plan was to spend however much time it required to clean things up and to extinguish falling embers. The fire teams expected the road to be closed by fire immediately and were planning to spend many weeks at Tassajara if necessary.

We established teams to keep the fire pumps going to provide continuous water to the engines. As evening approached, we established a communications network because the fire was still hovering outside of the back fire border and would slow down as night fell. Next on our agenda, dinner. Kathy Egan and Linda Macalwee organized the kitchen and cooked for 112 people. The firefighters pretty much kept to themselves at first, remaining alert and eating in shifts so that the engines were all kept ready, but they were quite pleased and surprised that we provided food for them. As the evening wore on, we knew we needed to rest, so, as the fire teams kept watch, the Tassajara residents moved into rooms very close to the center and went to sleep.



Fire trucks crossing Tassajara's main bridge

September 17, 1999

We spent yesterday waiting for the fire on the ridge to reach us. We learned much more about fire behavior and about each other. Today, three days into the fire here, the captains in charge of the inmates team approach me to ask if the inmates can use the showers. As far as I can tell none of the firefighters have ventured into the bathhouse, and the inmates' captains are the first to ask. There are 32 inmates, and they use both the men's and women's sides. They haven't had a chance to bathe in days and they emerge looking good. They wear orange clothes while the regular fire fighters wear yellow fire shirts. They are camping out past the flats; they've discovered the free weights out there, and they are getting a little antsy with the lack of activity.

Actually all of the crews are beginning to notice that they have time on their hands and they begin to look around for ways to help. The afternoon kitchen is now staffed by Forest Service people in blue tee-shirts; they are strong, physically adept people, very calm in their movements. Engine Crew 27 takes on finishing up the repairs to Cabin 4 and then they move to help shop member Sarah Emerson finish installing the plywood to cover the insulation under the dining room. They are skilled and handy, accustomed to doing the repairs around their own station houses. Judith Keenan supervises firefighters all over the place: she has anybody with any time and moderate skill at work. They are beginning to show signs of merging with the Tassajara residents. There are often comments now about how special the place and the people are, about how unusually kind things seem here.

The Forest Service catering service insists on sending down meals for the firefighters, which they do not want, preferring our food. Jamie does everything he can to prevent this calamity. Nevertheless, buckets of heavy, meaty, high protein products arrive, and we do our best by putting out two long tables in the dining room with firefighter food on one and Tassajara cuisine on the other. One door is marked "Chicken"; the other door is

Two fire crews from Angeles National Forest with Tassajara resident Charlie Henkel, front far right. These crews were very helpful, not only protecting Tassajara from fire, but repairing, rebuilding and working in the kitchen, too.



JUDITH KEENAN

marked "Not Chicken." Most firefighters select from both tables; some firefighters remain vegetarian for their entire stay. We end up sending a truckload of fresh leftovers to the homeless shelter in Salinas.

The road remains closed except for accompanied trips. The fire has reached the road in several places; back burning is taking place in others. I drive up the road several days in a row, following Jamie, to keep up with developments. Some days it's like driving through a burning forest—it is driving through a burning forest; other days the fire is down in the valleys.

Someone suggests that we have an evening dharma event, a simple question and answer for the firefighters. I assume that there are only three or four who are interested in the practice we are doing, yet, surprisingly, when Luminous Owl Charlie Henkel and I arrive to do the Answer part of the Question and Answer, the room is full. About half of the firefighters have come, along with most of the Tassajara people. In the middle of it, Jeff, a firefighter from Los Angeles, asks how to start a meditation practice and we move casually into basic zazen instruction right there and then, on our dining room chairs. As the group sits upright, gathering their attention, straightening up, relaxing their shoulders, the whole room becomes gently quiet and still. The first stillness since the fire reached us.

The next day several of the firefighters seek out the ino for further instruction. When I walked through the upper garden and around the side of the zendo I glanced up to see that the zendo shoe rack was full of firefighter boots—large heavy leather boots with many hooks for laces. It was a wonderful sight, touching me somehow more than any other single impression during the fire. I have seen many wonderful things at Tassajara, and the rows of well-worn firefighter boots on the zendo racks will remain emblematic for me.

They've all fallen under the spell of Tassajara now. No hesitation now in going to the bathhouse. Some of them have made a few gentle bows as they leave the kitchen. They smile openly and explore the cookbooks, the bookstore, making themselves at home in the kitchen, in the shop, some even in the zendo.

They know they are the envy of other crews in the forest. Word is out that something curious is going on here. Reporters have begun to arrive. Teasing is happening after an article appeared describing the firefighters' proximity to the famous Tassajara Hot Springs and bathhouse.

The fire is still burning just out of reach and the valley fills with smoke each evening. The firefighters have fixed practically everything we were working on when work period came to its abrupt end; the inmate crews have even cleared a fire line along the length of the phone cable and an area 50 feet around the phone transmitter. This was a difficult task and they are justifiably proud of their work. We won't lose the phone after all. They have now begun to dig a new septic line for us.



JUDITH KERNAN

Inmates entering Tassajara

September 21, 1999

Tonight is quiet and we're all sensing that our paradise is coming to an end. The decision makers at the higher level won't let two strike teams (ten engine crews of five people each) stay to protect Tassajara forever. Besides, we've got 40 people outside, somewhere, wanting to come in to begin practice period. Tonight, heavy rain is predicted and the fire crews have accepted our offer of rooms; many of them sleep inside Tassajara guest rooms this night. Not a few choose to remain in tents near their engines.

Rain arrived, along with lightning. Not enough rain to douse fires lurking under trees. Rain and large flakes of ash fall at the same time. Ashes have been falling throughout the event, of course, some are incinerated leaves—exact shadows of their formerly green selves. It is more humid now, but once the humidity lifts and the day heats up as predicted it will be a dangerous situation again, they all say. But, in truth, they seem to want it to heat up; this is, after all, their chosen line of work. They like forest fires and they like Tassajara. At breakfast this morning one captain, when told that it might rain again reacts with disappointment, "They said it was going to be hot and dry today, not raining!"

September 22, 1999

Suddenly, at 11:30 am, Jamie returns to order all the engine crews to pack up and move. It is the moment we've all dreaded—the end of paradise. The bustle of activity masks the emotions and keeps the farewells

short and hurried. But we postpone the ending, and decide to have a final lunch together, spending one last boisterous half hour in the dining room. Then the parade begins. The residents line the road waving goodbye as each huge engine pulls toward the gate, all the lights flashing and swirling in farewell. Some firefighters put their hands in gassho as they drive out. The final two vehicles contain the inmate fire crews and they also smile their thanks to us and put up V for victory or, hopefully, for peace, as they leave.

The fires are still burning, but Tassajara is not in immediate danger. Jamie will return with two new crews tonight. The two crews had been stationed at Church Ranch and had protected it, enduring several days of heavy smoke in the valley, trapped by the fire on the Church Road before they could get out. Jamie leads the new crews around Tassajara himself, pointing out the important landmarks. The one feature of which he is most proud is our fire standpipe system. All the firefighters have been impressed with the prominent yellow standpipes lining Tassajara.

September 23, 1999

This morning the air is extremely humid and, even though there were lightning strikes last night, the fire in our area seems quiet. For the first time in two weeks we have permission to run on the trails and, from the top of the Horse Pasture Trail near the Tassajara cut-off, we can see how extensive the fire was in the Tassajara watershed. We were lucky, very lucky. Back at Tassajara we learn that the remaining two crews are being pulled out and assigned to duties on the northern end of the fire. Jamie returns to take his laundry off the line and to say goodbye; he will be transferred, helicoptered in to another hot situation on the other side of the forest but he is proud of the friendships that were nurtured here.

Later on in the afternoon another news crew drops in with Forest Service guides. The focus of their interest is the remarkable story of the bond that developed between the fire crews and the Tassajara monks. Apparently legends are growing about this event at Tassajara—on the one side, the legendary kindness and hospitality of the 28 Tassajara residents, and on the other, the legendary receptivity, professionalism and kindness of the 84 firefighters.



The fire is quiet around us but huge helicopters pass overhead throughout the following days, approaching the fire directly now that the perimeter has been established. Fires are still burning to the north and west, but the road is open and Tassajara residents have begun to return. Preparations for practice period are under way again. We are prepared to continue to live in this wilderness. As one fire captain said, "If you want to live here you'd better learn to live with fire." And we are learning.