



Wildfires spark crisis, courage & kindness from fire-weary California equestrians.

by Kim F. Miller

The death toll in Northern California's Camp fire neared 80, with 1,200 still missing, at presstime, and the Woolsey fire had laid waste to most of Malibu and many homes and stables in a wide swath of the surrounding area. Once again, stories of the equestrian community's preparedness and willingness to risk all for horses and their people bring some solace to heartbreaking tales of lost lives, property and worldly possessions.

Here are a few of their stories from both ends of the state. This reporting was done the week of Nov. 12, and mostly refers to events during the fires' immediate outbreaks. The status of evacuations, stables, etc., has likely changed since then.

For suggestions on helping those affected, see story in this issue.

Amelie Kovac: How You Would Picture Hell

December 2018 - Fires Everywhere

Written by by Kim F. Miller

Tuesday, 27 November 2018 21:47

When calls to six different fire departments went unanswered, dressage trainer Amelie Kovac had her first clue about the severity of the smoke rising behind a hill near her in Ventura County's Somis. She eventually reached the fire department, through a call to the police department, confirming her fears that it was bad indeed. Though farther from her than it appeared, it was only just beginning.

The wind direction was favorable toward her Somis base, yet the next several hours were tense. What became the unimaginably devastating Woolsey fire was close to fellow dressage trainer and close friend Carly Taylor Smith, located at the Vista Pacifica Equestrian Center in Malibu. Amelie was ready to drive to Malibu on a moment's notice. That moment came two days later, when her fears for Carly and her horses became all too real. Amelie knew Carly would not have time to make more than one trip out with her three-horse trailer, so she hit the phones requesting help of several friends who were also standing by. "We gunned it for Malibu."

They were just in time. "Police were already not letting people in," Amelie recounts. She and her hauler friends were cleared to go with the understanding that they were on their own.

"It was like nothing I've ever seen before," she says of entering the Malibu area. "It's hard to explain. It was literally how you would picture hell. Black smoke all around us. It felt like it was midnight, except there was red light all over."

Thanks to the whole crew's help, they were able to evacuate all of Carly's horses, including an older horse and two mini ponies. Most are staying at the private farm in Somis where Amelie is based. As with every evacuation story, Amelie emphasizes that the rescue was a total team effort.

At presstime, Carly's barn was still standing.

Connie Andrusaitis: Somnolent Horses

The math was bad from the beginning. Butte Creek Horse Club owner Connie Andrusaitis had one three-horse trailer and 25 horses on her property. The Camp fire line was approximately a mile away on Thursday, Nov. 8, and the area was under a recommended, not yet mandatory, evacuation status. Even if they had more trailers, the escape routes were clogged with "a steady stream of slow traffic," Connie explains.

At that point, Connie and her team decided to stay put. They were prepared. At the first spark, they used orchard hoses to wet down every inch of the stabling areas and surrounding property, anticipating that electricity might cease, which would cut off their water pump. They turned on electric sprinklers, too, and filled up every water bucket on the property.

By that point, some boarders had hauled their horses out and a few other people had hauled their horses in for safe-keeping. In past fires, Connie and many others in the Butte Valley area had taken horses to Camelot Equestrian Park nearby. That wasn't an option this time. The grass fire moved so fast, it trapped horses at the stables and closed roads prevented anyone for getting in to help or evacuate them. Connie is in regular touch with Camelot and happily reported at presstime that all the horses there are safe, with plenty of hay and water. She confirmed ongoing reports that the majority of structures at the 1600-acre boarding and event venue are intact.

Connie is a DC emeritus for the Butte Valley Pony Club, which mobilized immediately to gather donated funds, gear and other supplies for the many horses and owners affected by the Camp fire. Pony Clubs from throughout the state and beyond are gathering donations. "It's coming in from all over," Connie reports. "I've got a trailer full of stuff. Just waiting for the roads to clear so I can get it over to Camelot."

Several days after she no longer felt at immediate risk of the fire, the smoke hung thick at her property. Connie is wearing a mask full-time and acknowledged that it's hard to protect the horses from it. "It's interesting watching the horses. Normally when it's as cool as it's been, they'd get frisky. But they are almost somnolent. They feel just like we do." Exercise is out of the question, of course, and their horses' odd moods seem well suited for that. "Everybody is just standing in their stalls eating."

Kim Stevens & Lorie Fee: A Family Affair

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