

BY THE GRACE OF GOD

By Michael McGhee¹

Seneca was sitting in the middle of a tinderbox that dry summer of 1956. Dry grasses of the grazing pastures surrounding the big cattle ranches that dotted Bear Valley, and the sagebrush and juniper trees of the rangelands circumventing our town on three sides, were tragedies waiting to happen. Within walking distance behind town were stands of pine and fir. Our natural water sources, the Silvies River and Bear Creek, were mere trickles and were drying up more with each passing hot day.

In my tenth year on the Saturday that my story takes place, my family was having an all-day clean-up and fix-it day on the house, in the yard and outside the fence surrounding our property. We had several of these clean-up days in August to prepare for the coming harsh winters that usually began in late September. All day the atmosphere had been heavy with smoke. Word was out that there were several big forest fires “out in the woods” sixty to seventy miles east of Seneca. Winds swept the smoke in our direction making our eyes water and our noses burn. With the number of fires reported burning, the smoke drifting into town made the day somewhat spooky. The atmosphere was dim and murky, and the sun was as red as red could be.

Dad and I had been on the roof repairing places that might leak during the first big snowfall. Mom had spent most of the day pulling debris out of the garden plot and inside and outside of the fence. It was around 3:30 in the afternoon when we all finished our jobs. As Dad and I approached the edge of the roof for our dismount, we looked out to the panorama beyond the west

ridge that was only visible from the top of the roof. Even through the smoky atmosphere, we noticed a faint puff of grayish smoke curling above the ridge. It appeared to be 20 to 30 miles away from town, nothing to be too concerned about.

Dad and I helped Mom finish her project, and about an hour later she wiped the sweat from her brow, took off her garden gloves, and, breathing a sigh of relief, she said she was going indoors to start preparing dinner. Since we had worked so hard all day, she warned us that we were going to have an early “cold” supper of cold fried chicken, potato and green salads, pickled cucumbers, fresh tomatoes, and tall, icy glasses of iced tea. As Mom was putting our evening meal together, Dad and I washed our family car. I look back to that afternoon and remember that we were all a bit uneasy with so many fires surrounding our town. The only person that did not have a worry in world that day was my three-month-old brother, Johnny. His only concerns were napping and diaper changes.

Just as Dad and I were drying off the back fender, Mom yelled “Supper’s ready! Wash up before it gets cold!” We laughed. After all, it was a planned cold supper. Even after such a hot day working outdoors, we still had our sense of humor.

No sooner had we picked up our forks and taken our first bites, when our next door neighbor, Gerry Miles, suddenly appeared in our living room. Her eyes had a wild look to them and tears streamed down her ashen cheeks. She looked like she had seen the devil himself.

1. Michael spent his youth in Seneca and has many memories. He now lives in Cloverdale, California, and we have a lively e-mail correspondence

“My God! Have you seen the hill? Come out and look at the hill!” As she cried out, she wrung her hands, draining the blood from her knuckles. She pulled my dad out of his chair, dragging him toward the back door, a piece of fried chicken still clutched in his hand. She was trembling so hard it was a wonder that she could still stand on her legs and move toward the door as fast as she could. Mom grabbed Johnny from his playpen and the three of us followed Gerry and Dad.

We were not expecting what we saw. Fire was traversing the top of the west ridge, much like a child rolling a large hoop, except that this hoop was alive with angry flames. The flames were devouring the sagebrush and juniper trees in its path. Both of these plants contain high volumes of natural fuel ideal for feeding a hungry fire.

Forest Service fire crews were blasting the ridge with jets of water in an attempt to keep the fire from creeping down the hill towards the Edward Hines caterpillar shop and surrounding structures, which included two 15 to 20 feet tall gasoline and diesel oil tanks. Under normal conditions, some of us kids delighted in climbing the narrow stairways that wound their way up the sides of the these big silver tanks. This was a no-no in the Company’s eyes, but escaping getting caught was half the fun. Now these tanks that had provided hours of entertainment could soon be the source of our cremation. The combination of the fuel in these tanks and the dried vegetation covering Bear Valley made Seneca a deadly fire-trap; too deadly for even the townsfolk to imagine.

Crews made up of personnel from Edward Hines Lumber Company were beginning to dot the side of the hill with their shovels in hand and back-pack flame throwers. As the adage goes “It takes fire to fight fire.” The flame-throwers were being used as control devices to burn the flora that was feeding the fast moving fire. A strong west to east wind was whipping up from the heat being generated from the flames causing a voracious firestorm.

Dusk was soon being replaced with darkness, and Dad was called to work to equip the caterpillar tractors that were being stored in the cat (short

for caterpillar) shop with lights. Luckily that night several repaired cats were sitting, ready for their return trip to the logging areas east of Seneca. On this night, they would be used to dig up the sagebrush and juniper and large amounts of dry soil to create a firewall with hopes of containing a fire to one area.

“Pack the car with only the necessities and don’t wait until it is too late to leave!” Dad instructed Mom as he ran toward his truck.

“And you, Mike! You’re the man of the family now. Get the hose out and start spraying water on the house, especially on the roof.”

“What am I going to do, Genevieve?” Gerry Miles kept asking my mom. She was so beside herself with fear that she could not think. Mom told her to first go to her house and bring back her month-old son, Joe, Jr. and put him in the playpen with Johnny. Second, she was to go to her house and bring back her most important papers, mementos, and baby supplies to be packed in our car. Gerry would be leaving town with us. Her husband, Joe, who normally worked on the train hauling logs between Seneca and the lumber mill in Hines, Oregon, was evacuating the train to Hines out of Harm’s way.

“Mike, stop wetting down the house,” Mom yelled. “The car is loaded and we’re almost ready to leave town. Go back in the house and pick one, and only one, thing from your room that you would like to take with us. Now hurry and don’t stall around!”

I ran into the house and back to my room. I grabbed the blue-plaid marble bag with the brown shoelace cinch that my grandmother had made for me in which to carry my marbles. I reached into the top drawer of my chest of drawers and took out a couple of white cotton handkerchiefs and covered the marbles inside the bag. On top of the handkerchiefs, I gently laid my miniature glass dog collection, my most prized collection at that time.

As I was running down the back steps of the house, I saw Mom and Gerry, with the babies in their arms, walking toward the corner of our street to view the hill. The fire was beginning its descent over the top of the ridge.

“We’d better get back to the car,” Mom said. In the glow from the fire, I could see her tear-stained cheeks, mixed with the soot that was filling the air.

Just as we got back to our car, Chet Arnett, Seneca’s law enforcer, stopped his pick-up in back of our car, blocking our driveway. “Gen (as he called my mother), are you folks ready to evacuate?” Mom nodded, though there was an obvious sense of doubt in her answer.

“I wouldn’t wait too long,” Chet advised. “Rubbernecks from John Day and Burns have almost blocked any hopes of escape by the highway going either north or south. The logging road has been blocked off to any traffic going east due to the five to six fires burning in that area. It may reach a point where none of us can leave. Hope you make it.” He drove off.

We sat in the car jumping back and forth in our minds as to what to do. Gerry was putting most of the decision making on Mom’s shoulders. I remember Mom crying as she held onto the steering wheel of the car. “What if something should happen to Kenneth or Joe and we are not here. Maybe we should give it a little more time.”

Smoke and silence filled the inside of the car, proportionately, as we sat there waiting for Mom to make a decision as to whether or not we would try to evacuate Seneca or stay at our home which could be engulfed in flames at any time. Over the rooftop of the house in front of ours, we could see the glow of the fire reflecting off of the gray smoke-filled sky. The night sky was not its usual black background to the bright moon and twinkling stars with an occasional renegade star shooting its way toward Earth. That particular night, glowing embers, being swept up from the ground by ferocious wind created from the fire’s heat, replaced the moon and stars. The only times that the silence was broken was when Gerry Miles whimpered under her breath, “My God, we are going to die!” Both infants slept through the excitement as though it was any other ordinary night, their mouths plugged with comforting thumbs.

Mom finally broke the silence. Being a nurse had helped her through many crises. She was able to think calmly and quickly and make sound decisions when required.

Let’s take the babies, walk down to schoolyard and assess the situation.” She said.

As I look back on that night, I perceive myself not realizing the total impact of what was going on around me. I believe at this point, I was filled with more excitement of the whole scene, rather than fear. I saw fear in Mom’s eyes whenever our eyes met, but I believed that mothers are supposed to carry the fear for all of us. I guess that as long as I believed that Mom was there to absorb all the fear, I really had nothing to worry about. All the activity at this point in the night was one big action scene that I had so often seen in the movies.

The schoolyard, the length of a football field, was a half of a block from our house and paralleled Highway 395. The highway, a small grazing pasture for a few horses, and the Silvies River were all that separated the town from the blaze. It did not take long to assess that evacuation by the highway was impossible.

Cars, filled with rubbernecks, were parked three or four deep at both the north and south ends of the highway running through town, and had the highway sealed off from any means of escape. State police, with flashlights in one hand and walkie-talkies in the other, walked between the cars trying to break-up the congestion. Their orders fell on deaf ears. Not one car budged. With each car approaching the town limits of Seneca, it became impossible for the early arrivers to even try to move their cars. We were told later that cars lined up, bumper-to- bumper, as far as a mile from Seneca in either direction.

Townpeople began to fill the playground. The scene reminded me, a ten-year-old boy, of a science fiction movie I had seen. In the movie an alien spacecraft landed near a small town, similar to Seneca, and the people from the town were drawn to it, with blank stares on their faces, by some unknown magnetic force. As the Seneca people gathered in the schoolyard, reflection on their faces from the flames revealed fear and dis-

belief. Tears, caused from smoke and uncertainty, streamed down the cheeks of many of the people standing there that night. Even the toughest men in town who had not been called to fight fire wiped tears away from their eyes and their running noses with handkerchiefs or the sleeves of their shirts. Hardly a word could be heard, except for an occasional prayer, or the utterance “We are done for!”

All eyes were directed towards the hill watching the heavy-duty equipment and water tanks trying fervently to fight the lapping red and gold flames without much success. The winds became stronger and made it almost impossible for the firefighters to battle the blaze.

We had been there for several hours and many of us sat on the ground from physical, as well as emotional, exhaustion. The fire slowed down considerably, but was still burning its way toward the oil tanks. With so much heat near them, it was a wonder the tanks had not yet exploded. None of us knew which was the more frightening: the fire itself or knowing that at any time the tanks would explode and we would all burn in Hell’s inferno.

Around 3:00 a.m., we noticed the crowd in the schoolyard had grown throughout the night. It was as though everyone thought that if we were going to die, we would all die together. We all waited for the inevitable. Children slept in their mother’s arms and laps. The waiting was too much for some of us to bear. It was at this moment that I remember fear beginning to engulf me. I moved as close to Mom as I could. Even though, I felt the skin on my face stinging from the blaze in front of us, I was suddenly cold and began to shake as if it were in the middle of the winter. After all these years the words are vague, but I can still remember my mother remarking that my hands were freezing, a reaction that always occurred with me in the face of fear

I do not remember who was the first to notice, but suddenly the wind changed from its west-to-east direction to an east-to-west flow. A miracle was in process. Flames that appeared lower on the

hill seemed to reverse their course and gradually head back the way they came. With no fuel in its reversed path, the fire began to slowly waver.

Except for a whispered “Thank God” uttered here and there throughout the crowd, a presence of awe encompassed that schoolyard. People, hesitantly, began to return to their homes, knowing that if the wind changed again, Hell on Earth would be realized.

Back in the house, none of us could sleep. We spent the next few hours mostly talking about Dad and Joe and their safety. We had not heard a word on either of them all night. No news is good news. We had to believe that.

Dawn finally broke through the smoky ceiling of a sky. I suggested that we return to the playground to view the aftermath of what we witnessed the night before. The hills that had once been golden with dried summer grasses were now black and smoldering. Firefighters rummaged through the smoking ground, putting out hot spots that remained from the fire. They called it “mopping up.”

A few years earlier, a couple of the churches in town had joined forces and plowed a wide, flat space on the highest knoll on the ridge where the fire had eaten its way through all that stood in its way. They covered the space with gravel and in the middle, they erected a huge wooden cross to be used for Easter sunrise services.

Upon reaching the playground, our eyes were immediately drawn to the hill where the cross majestically stood, framed by the gray, smoke-filled sky. Wisps of smoke trailed upward from its arms joining the haze hiding the sun. From where we stood, we could make out the faint charred outline of its wood. None of us took into mind that the graveled parking lot surrounding the cross is what had saved it. At first view, we all believed that we had seen the second miracle in a ten-hour time span. Miracle or not, we knew that it was by the grace of God that we were still alive, our homes were still standing, and our loved ones came home to us tired and unharmed.