

BIG BEN BURNS – Alarm Bells Ring

Report by Noel Charonnat

Just three days before the recent 49^{er} Fire that destroyed over 50 homes in Auburn in a matter of hours, Serene Lakes miraculously escaped a similar fate. A combination of a calm windless evening, early detection, plus quick action by local residents, knocked down a spreading forest fire on Royal Gorge lands just 150 yards west of the intersection of Hillside Drive and Acorn Road.

Thursday August 27 had the smell of smoke in the air all day, blown in from the fire at Yosemite N.P. This masked a smoldering illegal campfire that had been set on Royal Gorge property the night before by an unknown person. The fire had no ring of rocks and was not doused, as the person built a fire in an open space and simply spread out the small burning branches upon departing. A collection of dry dead limbs was piled nearby, although there was no evidence of a party or other human activity.

Probably around 5 PM, the smoldering fire spread to forest litter under several big trees as this was about the time when many residents and some construction workers later reported a stronger smell of smoke. Around 6 PM, nearby homeowner Noel Charonnat was out for a walk and noticed that the smell had in fact turned to visible smoke in the air. A quick jog down the trail that leads from the end of Acorn Road onto Royal Gorge property and its **Big Ben XC ski trail** revealed a terrifying sight – flames knee high spreading along the forest floor and rising into the trees.

Noel immediately ran back to his house on Hillside to call 911, and seeing his neighbor Jerry Dahlen, yelled out that there was fire in the forest. Jerry and his son Andrew went to the fire with a fire extinguisher and shovel, and Noel joined them with his shovel after reporting the blaze. They were able to knock down the fire to just a smoking state, with occasional flare-ups. If the evening had been windy or breezy, this would not have been possible. The Dahlen's extinguisher (larger liquid type) was the most effective tool as the forest floor was mostly a dense mat of pine needles and dead limbs.

The 911 call was immediately transferred to Placer County fire dispatch, but the dispatcher was uncertain of Serene Lake's location – truly as if talking with someone in Kansas. *Many minutes* later, after the fire had been snuffed down to a smoking state (but ready to re-ignite at any moment), Noel went back to his house and recalled 911. Fire dispatch insisted fire trucks were on their way, but more minutes passed before a siren could be heard in Soda Springs 2 miles away, even more before arrival.

The single Truckee Fire engine, dispatched from the Donner Summit station near I-80, had two firefighters. They worked quickly to lay a hose from the engine at the end of Acorn to the site, putting out the flare-ups and hosing down the burn area. Eventually – perhaps 45 minutes after the call – Calfire (CDF) arrived with two trucks, and got lost trying to find the dirt road that is Big Ben trail.

Alarm Bell #1 is why it took so long for a fire engine to make it to Serene Lakes. This is probably more an issue of dispatch and communication, not response time from the DS firehouse. If this had been a kitchen fire in a house, only the foundation would have been saved. Given a more common breezy evening, perhaps the fire would have spread to acres and structures before firefighters, especially Calfire (CDF), would have arrived. Given a train stopped at the tracks, it would have been a real disaster.

Alarm Bell #2 is the fact that there is a firehouse in Serene Lakes, just 4 short blocks away, which has a fire engine but sits un-staffed – by Truckee Fire, Calfire, volunteers or off-duty personnel – even though it includes living quarters. If Truckee Fire cannot, perhaps Calfire can staff that firehouse in summer?

Alarm Bell #3 is the huge amount of forest floor litter and ladder fuels in the surrounding forests, and on many lots in Serene Lakes, both those with and those without houses.