Twin fires of '64 threatened county in one 'hell week'

There were two photos on the front page, like bookends on each side. One showed a broken vase and a chimney cat lying on a slab of ash-covered cement in front of a blackened tree as if it had patrolled a fireline.

The other image was the weary figure of Bert Anderson, foreman of the Wiliup Ranch development, dwarfed by the stark skeleton of an oak tree as if he had patrolled a fireline.

The Sept. 23, 1964 edition of this newspaper, 30 years ago today, bears testimony to a terrible week in the history of Sonoma County.

The news on this Friday was hopeful — for the first time since the previous Saturday, containment of the two separate fires that had burned more than 52,000 acres in Napa and Sonoma counties, the newspaper reported, could come as early as the following morning — if the weather held. It was the beginning of the end of our "hell week."

Too often since then we have watched television at Santa Barbara and the Oakland Hills and Malibu and its neighboring canyons were consumed by fire. As the flames flicker on our screens, many of us can smell the burning brush again and see the ominous glow in the night sky and hear the police car's loudspeakers calling residents to "Evacuate! Evacuate!

The "twin" fires started on a Saturday (Sept. 19). One, to be known evermore as the Healy Fire, began at 10:15 a.m. in Napa County on the south slope of Mount St. Helena, near a clifftop resort called Healy's. The Forestry Investigator would later determine that a careless (which is not a strong enough term, try criminally negligent) deer hunter had tossed a cigarette away.

The Nunn's Canyon Fire, which took its name from the section of the Mayacamas mountain range east of Sonoma Highway and Dunbar Road, already was burning. It had started with a bang at 5 a.m., when a PG&E transformer exploded on Al Torriere's ranch on Nellis Road in the same canyon, spewing sparks that ignited dry brush. Al and his brother Nick fled ahead of the fire that consumed their barn and three trucks as it roared off in two directions, toward Sugar Loaf Ridge and Adobe Canyon and south toward Sonoma.

As it was with all those "television fires" we have witnessed since, the conditions were prime for fire.

The area was in the throes of a week-long heat wave with temperatures bouncing over 100 degrees. A hot, dry, late-season wind was blowing. The fuel moisture index, monitored by the Forestry, was at 3, described by a ranger as "about as low as it gets."

The Healy Fire raced down the mountain into the Napa Valley and into the city limits of Calistoga, burning some 40 homes before the fire line of professionals and volunteers held fast. School buses waited on downtown streets to evacuate the entire town, when it became necessary, as many felt it most certainly would. But the fire died down, and by Monday morning, fire bosses were tentatively predicting containment.

The Nunn's Canyon Fire burned up the Sugar Loaf Ridge where gusting winds carried it down into Adobe Canyon, destroying both permanent homes and summer cabins along the way.

Then, on Monday night, the unthinkable happened. The wind kicked up and the Healy Fire turned west, jumped the hills and roared over the hill, into Knight's Valley and headed for Santa Rosa, going more than 40 mph. It burned homes and ranches along Porter Ranch Road and Mark West Road, into the Riebold area, destroying homes on Winemiller Heights. It burned into Wiliup and across Parker Hill Road and appeared to Santa Rosa on two fronts, from the north and the east.

Some 5,000 homes in Napa Valley and on Monte Rio Heights and along Chalk Hill Road were evacuated. Cars filled with scared, sleepy children, frantic pets and household goods charged Middle Rincon Road and Highway 12, heading for the homes of friends, for the shelter opened at the Veto Building.

All through the long night, Santa Rosa residents stood in the streets, listening to the smoke-stuffed hooves of horses being ridden up Sonoma Avenue from rural Rincon toward the safety of the fairgrounds.

In most instances, it was mothers and children who evacuated and fathers who stood by with a garden hose, hoping for the best. In many cases, their "best" worked well enough, in tandem with a fire fighting technique known as "pump and run." Firefighters, knowing they couldn't stop the blaze, which was traveling in bursts up to 80 mph by the time it reached the Riebold area, simply moved a tanker truck beside the threatened house, added their big hose to the garden hoses and stayed as long as they could. Many homeowners fled at the last minute, believing their houses were lost, only to find at daylight that the flames had passed by the wet wood structures.

Firefighters and hundreds of volunteers, including a corps of junior college and high school students, formed a wall of determination from Mendocino Avenue to Wallace Road. They had 129 pieces of equipment, including bulldozers to make fire breaks. They had shovels and hoses and wad sacks to beat the flames. And they had feet to stomp. Ever so slowly, as the wind died, they backed the fire down the ridge.

People who were not in Santa Rosa then had difficulty believing this, but the Healy Fire was finally stopped just 100 yards away from Community (then County) Hospital.

Had the winds not shifted, it would have burst into the junior college neighborhood, down the canyon of Rumble Street, destroying hundreds of homes.

And when Assistant Fire Chief George Elliott spoke to reporters about the 3 a.m. "miracle" stand at the hospital, he said: "It was a battle of survival for the northern area. We just had to make a wall to save the hospital, and that's what we did. We put everything we had — hands, tools, sacks. We had wonderful assistance from all the people."

Meanwhile, the wicked winds had turned the heat of the Nunn's Canyon fire south. It whipped up across the Trafalgar Road area and headed for the triple towns of Agua Caliente, Fetters and Boyes Springs.

Once again, the heroes were many, including the high school football team. Three Valley of the Moon firefighters stayed so long defending the San Francisco Boys Club summer camp on Cragmont Road in Agua Caliente that they had to dive into the pool to avoid the flames, only to have the pool's chlorine tank explode.

All three were treated for chlorine poisoning.

In the hills above the city of Sonoma, the "rich and famous" gathered to save their expensive homes. Frank Bartholomew, chairman of the board of United Press International and a Sonoma resident, "covered" the story for his wire service, listing the names of the important people — chairman of Maisen Navigation, an Airmac executive, at least two beef generals — who joined firefighters on the line.

The great fire burned to the edge of Highway 12 and to the outskirts of Sonoma, before the wind shifted and then died and the danger passed.

When the smoke had cleared, residents counted 111 permanent homes and 24 summer cabins lost, along with thousands of acres of pasture land (causing ranchers to sell their stock and begin again) and 106 million board feet of timber.

Incredibly, no human lives were lost. And surprisingly, few firefighters were injured. But the smell of the fire lingered long. And it only takes a gusting south wind and a few dry leaves cracking down the streets to make it come back again.