

## VII. Big Rock

The fire did not jump Mulholland Highway, as the wind shifted and moved the fire to the ocean, then flanking west and east, also being fanned along by coastal onshore winds.

Big Rock Map 1 identifies the 51 homes that burned on Big Rock Mesa with a red x. The house at 20529 Big Rock Drive where only the garage burned is identified with a green O around the red x. The locations of the properties of the three homeowners that did not evacuate and provided documentation pertaining to saving their own homes as well as neighboring homes are indicated with a green O. Red arrows indicate the approximate fire movement and the location of the successful uphill backfiring along Big Rock Drive.

Official Fire Department postfire reports do not acknowledge that some homeowners did not evacuate and therefore gave firefighters credit for all the homes saved on Big Rock Mesa. However, homeowners that did not evacuate were also instrumental in personally saving homes and guiding firefighters to save additional homes. The testimony of three of the homeowners that did not evacuate is provided herewith.

1. Mr. Morris at 20762 Rockport Way (Big Rock Map 5) stated that he had water pressure until about 16:30 (4:30 pm) and that the firefront moved through his area between 17:30-17:45 (5:30-5:45 pm). Sunset was 16:59 pm (4:59 pm). His house was saved by him because of a great amount of watering, the wind being in his favor, and lots of luck. He also stated that the roads were not adequate or safe to evacuate/return or let firefighters reach the area.
2. Mr. Cords, who also took a video of the fire movement from his location at 20400 Little Rock Way, stated that the fire first came from the east (from Las Flores Mesa) along the lower, ocean side-slopes in the area of Rockport Way, igniting houses there. Then the fire also came down from the top of the mesa (north) catching homes at Whitecap Way and Rockcroft Drive on fire while moving down along Big Rock Drive towards Little Rock Way (Big Rock Map 1). At about the same time the initial firefront had expanded along the ocean side-slopes, came up from Seaboard Road, expanded along Pinnacle Drive, and, as indicated on Big Rock Map 2, ignited the structures between Big Rock Drive (20503, 20505, 20507, 20509) and Little Rock Way (20404, 20402). At approximately the same time firefighters had backfired/ignited the slopes below 20400 Little Rock Way which directed a seemingly “hell of flames” to the Cords’ fire-safe home above. A fire engine that had just backed down the steep and narrow common driveway leading towards 20400 and 20402 Little Rock Drive, at his request saved his motorhome that was about to be overrun by the backfire flames igniting flammables around the motorhome, but could not save 20402 when its wooden deck ignited. The initial hose layout was not long enough to reach the deck and the engine ran out of water. Jürgen and Helma Cords saved their own home because of excellent clearance and also saved the home at 20415 Little Rock Way when wood lattice attached to the house ignited about midnight and a large railroad tie retaining wall was burning the following morning. Big rigs did make a successful stand along the homes of west Little Rock Way, a safe area half-encircled by Pinnacle Way and Big Rock Drive (Big Rock Map 3). No houses burned in this area.
3. Mr. Ihde of 20246 Piedra Chica Drive also did not evacuate, hiding with two neighbors in his garage. They saved his house, their own nearby homes, the house behind him at 20469 Inland Lane, and also directed sleeping firemen to tie into the swimming pool of his neighbor at 20238 Piedra Chica Drive. He documented how late at night (hours after the firefront had moved through) about three houses below him (20252, 20272 [wood roof?] Inland Lane; 20178 Rockport Way) and four to five homes towards Big Rock Drive (20173 Rockport Lane; 20054, 20085, 20109 Big Rock Drive) caught on fire from floating firebrands (Big Rock Map 4). According to him, they could have been easily defended if homeowners would not have evacuated. Big Rock Map 6 identifies these homes and also indicates homes with addresses in blue that had swimming pools in the area.

The Rand Report states the following “*Not long after 1900, there was heavy fire in the area and six Los Angeles City*

*engines were in the neighborhood as was Ventura County (1) and Orange County (1).” Winds came from the east at 2100. Many fire engines were pulling out of Big Rock at about 2100-2115. At about 1700 at the top of Big Rock Drive, a 75-year-old man was forcefully evacuated by police. One Big Rock homeowner had a 2-1/2" water hose attached to the hydrant and was using lots of water. There was some confrontation between police/firefighters and people who were forced to leave (force-evacuated).*



**Big Rock Map 1** \*Red arrows = Fire movement based on eyewitness reports. \*Three red arrows in almost semi-circle = Backfire uphill of Big Rock Drive. \*Red X = Burned homes. \*Green O = Homeowners that did not evacuate and provided testimony. Green O over red X = Only garage burned.

Needless to say, firefighters coming into Big Rock Mesa after dark were not familiar with the area and could therefore only defend homes in neighborhoods with adequate ingress and egress for big rigs. It seemed that when firefighters ran out of water, they pulled out of the area with little patrolling done at night as firefighters seemed to be tired and exhausted and then bedded down for the night. Homeowners assisted firefighters in locating pool water sources.

As stated on p.132 of the L.A. County Fire Department's Old Topanga Incident Report as quoted from the Rand Report, there was hydrant water available until about 2100 (9 pm) but "*...the hydrants went dry on Seaboard Road (about 2100) and some units were forced to temporarily withdraw to the coastline.*" "*One LAFD engine was trapped on upper Seaboard Road for about 45 minutes with fire on both sides and flaming debris blocking their way.*" "*After the leading edge of the fire front passed, strike teams re-assembled in a defensible area on lower Seaboard Road (more level, easily defensible) where they used syphon ejectors to draw water from swimming pools to assist in the successful defense of many residences.*" This was probably critical as wood shingle homes were still scattered throughout this area, dating back to the original development of the community. However, the Google Map indicates that only four homes in this area had pools, with three of these burning down (20284, 20394,

20468 Seaboard Road). These areas could have also been more easily defended with the assistance of homeowners if they were not force-evacuated as was stated by some residents.

While the report also mentioned that 56 homes were destroyed at Big Rock (25% of the total homes), as it expanded its Big Rock assessment map onto PCH, the Malibu City Disaster List (Burn List) identifies the following 52 homes:

Big Rock Burned Home List

23 - Big Rock Dr. (20085, 20054, 20109, 20203, 20330, 20340, 20350, 20503, 20505, 20507, 20509, 20529 [garage only], 20563, 20721, 20734, 20743, 20765, 20776, 20777, 20779, 20851, 20871, 20933)

01 - Cool Oak Way (20771)

02 - Inland Ln. (20252, 20272)

02 - Little Rock Way (20402, 20404)

02 - McAnany Way (3648, 3651)

01 - Pinnacle Way (20564)

05 - Rockcroft Dr. (20600, 20628, 20659, 20723, 20725)

06 - Rockpoint Rd. (20670, 20700, 20765, 20782, 20790, 20797)

02 - Rockport Way (20173, 20178)

07 - Seaboard Rd. (20384, 20394, 20468, 20470, 20540, 20585, 20649)

01 - Whitecap Dr. (20650)

52 total

Big Rock Mesa provided a good visual setting for identifying the locations of these homes and perhaps identifying some of the risk factors. Big Rock Mesa was developed in the 1960s not only with a single ingress and egress road cut steep into the sidehill along with a dangerous half switchback, but also spaghetti-like dead-end side roads, some with long driveways. Wood roofs were seemingly then the norm on many of the smaller, single-story homes within the more-level mesa itself. Development was further expanded from the mesa into even steeper, more mountainous and less defensible terrain. This then became a true “design for disaster,” just awaiting its first wildland fire. Big Rock Map 2, the November 1978 aerial photo taken by K. Radtke of central and upper Big Rock Mesa, provides a good overview. Infrared aerial photos taken of the Santa Monica Mountains in 1980 as then part of Dr. Radtke’s research, such as shown at the beginning of this report for the Costa Mesa area, were very useful in identifying wood shingle homes with almost 90% accuracy. On the 1978 photo, 20433 Seaboard Road still had a wood shingle roof (replaced in the 1980s with an asphalt shingle roof). Did 20394 Seaboard Road that burned still have a wood shingle roof during the 1993 Fire? A fire hydrant was located on the opposite side of the street and a covered pool in the front yard. Unfortunately, firefighters were not aware of the covered pool until its cover started burning.

Whatever the case, homes seldom burned alone unless isolated or perhaps unattended by firefighters, who kept the adjacent homes from burning if water or foam was available. Once ignited, wind-whipped flames, radiation heat and firebrands apparently preheated and ignited adjacent homes and their surrounding flammable, often largely landscaped vegetation. This is typical during a wildland fire if homes are unattended and water is not available for firefighting. The safety of your home then also depends to a large extent on your surroundings, such as the safety of your neighbor’s home and property as was so well documented with the home losses in Costa Mesa. The wind will then be the final, deciding factor of expanding the home-burning firefront, as it will direct/redirect flames, firebrands and convection heat.

With the advancement in technology, let us now look more closely at this wildland fire safety conundrum by evaluating postfire Google Map screen shots of the upper (northern), central (western) and lower (eastern) Big Rock Mesa in relation to the burned homes.

The maps seem to indicate that the bulk of the home fire losses were located:

A.) Exposed within close proximity to highly flammable native chaparral that, when burning and depending on the

wind and topography, preheated them to the ignition point and showered them with firebrands. Many of these homes were directly accessible street-side, but most of them were still located on side-slope roads such as Big Rock Dr., cut into the mountains.

- B.) Along outlying areas characterized by dead-end streets such as upper Big Rock Dr., upper Seaboard Rd., as well as lower Big Rock Mesa and its spaghetti-like dead-end side roads.
- C.) Largely in groups of burning homes, as it is difficult if not impossible to save adjacent structures without a water source because of the radiation heat that travels in all directions, irrespective of the wind, as close-by homes ignite.

The predictable lifespan of some of the “new” homes built in the graded areas along upper Big Rock Drive, as indicated on the 1978 aerial photo, such as along Rockcroft Drive, was less than 15 years.

What about the next wildfire? While one cannot judge just from the present Google Map aerial photos without field-checking the information, both the ground and aerial photos combined seem to indicate that many home sites are not fire-safe maintained. However, a drive-through of the Mesa in August 2019 indicated that the community overall is more fire-safe than it was in 1993, with additional brush clearance carried out along Big Rock Drive as well as removal and thinning of flammable pines and some Eucalyptus. The community is also more fire-safe from the standpoint of having eliminated almost all its wooden roofs, as the 1993 Old Topanga Fire already eliminated/burned many. Yes, it is true that much more can be done by individuals to make their property more fire-safe; this not only depends on the removal of flammable vegetation but also by making sure that firebrands do not find any materials that can be readily ignited around a home.

We must again emphasize that effective firefighting comes to a standstill if water or foam is not available, as was again documented during the 1993 Old Topanga Fire. The water pressure is expected to fail as the fire moves through wildland areas, since the water systems are not designed to provide fire flow for such multiple emergencies. Along with this we must acknowledge that it is the homeowners’ responsibility to keep their properties fire-safe. Depending on largely out-of-town and often inexperienced structural firefighting responders, and depending on the local fire departments to strictly and timely enforce the fire codes while further educating and assisting wildland residents in cooperating with other public agencies, is like playing Russian Roulette.<sup>4</sup>

Playing Russian Roulette with a single bullet in one chamber of the cylinder:

1. You did not maintain your whole property in a fire-safe condition, but the wind shifts and the flames and firebrands initially bypass your house (spin the cylinder and pull the trigger and the house survived).
2. While you may have a pool, you are not home to protect the house (spin the cylinder a second time, pull the trigger and your house survived again).
- 3 . Experienced firefighters arrive at the scene through heavy smoke after the fire flashes through again and is licking on your house but the hydrants are dry and firefighters either do not have, or are out of, foam and cannot reach your pool to hook up to it (spin the cylinder a third time and see what happens). How long do you think your house can survive given these odds when not prepared?

<sup>4</sup> The practice of loading a bullet into one chamber of a revolver, spinning the cylinder, and then pulling the trigger while pointing the gun at one's own head or home.



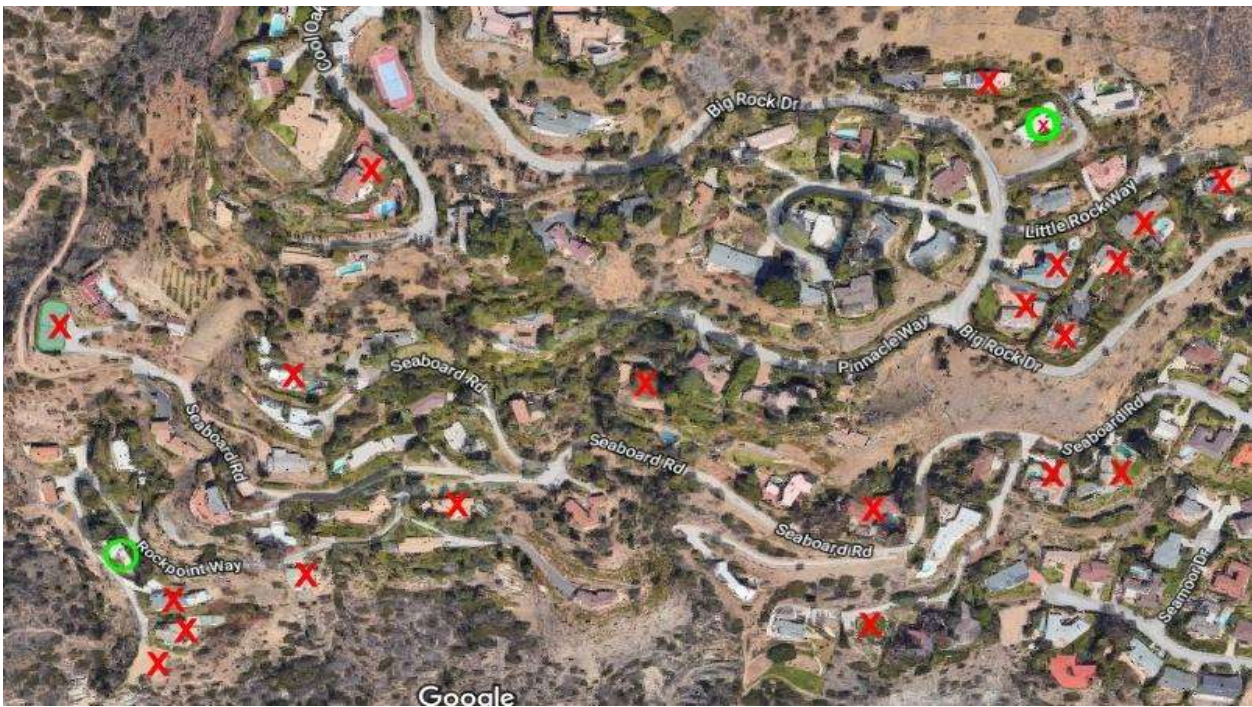






Big Rock Map 3 – Big Rock Mesa Northern, Upper Section (Red: homes burned in 1993).

Big Rock Map 4 – Big Rock Mesa Eastern Section (Red: homes burned in 1993).



Big Rock Map 5 – Big Rock Mesa SW Section (Red: homes burned in 1993).



## **Seaboard Road, Big Rock Way, Little Rock Way, Piedra Chica Road, Rockpoint Way**

### **A. Seaboard Road**

Seaboard Road was lined with fire trucks downhill from the chokepoint above 20433 Seaboard Road where the road narrowed, became winding and went more steeply uphill, a potential entrapment situation for fire trucks attempting to venture further. Water was available from hydrants at this location and along the street downhill as the trucks arrived. The Big Rock main connected to Seaboard Road at this location along an old, abandoned access road uphill of 20433 Seaboard Road.



Fire trucks lining Seaboard Road.



Fire trucks pulling out of Seaboard Rd., Big Rock Dr.

#### **20433 Seaboard Road (owned by Klaus Radtke; leased to the Jeffries)**

Since Klaus had a rental home in Big Rock, he decided to tie into it and stay with it during the burnout period of vegetation in the area but had not been overly concerned about its safety. While some people in Pacific Palisades were frantic, fearing that the fire would expand into their community, Klaus was not concerned about it as the likelihood of this was slim. Since he had studied and was therefore quite familiar with the age classes of chaparral in the Santa Monica Mountains and fire patterns given an ignition source during Santa Ana winds, he knew that the eastern flank of the fire was expanding during the night into young age, more fire-resistant chaparral within Topanga Canyon, while the western flank of the fire, still pushed by more stronger winds, was expanding towards the 1985 Piuma burn where it could also be more readily mopped up.

“With Klaus driving from Pacific Palisades, he and I (John Thomas) tied into/behind a strike team at PCH and arrived at the intersection of PCH and Big Rock Dr. at approximately 2130 hours. We started up Big Rock and it was like driving straight into Hell. There were roaring flames on both sides of the road and smoke so thick it made it difficult to avoid boulders in the road that were released by the burning chaparral.<sup>5</sup> We crept on and when we arrived at 20433 Seaboard Rd., three nearby homes on Seaboard were in flames and a fire truck was spraying water from its

tank on the 'County' hillside above 20433 Seaboard along the disbanding connector road. (The connector road also served as pathway for an over ground water line from Big Rock Drive to Seaboard Road and was partially lined with Aleppo Pine trees which delineated the property boundary.) The firetruck soon left after our arrival and we went to work beating out the remaining flames here and there on the lower slope.

<sup>5</sup> It was apparently during the final burnout period of the degraded chaparral on either side of lower Big Rock Road with firefighters having largely vacated Big Rock Mesa before this section of the road had become temporarily closed safe ingress and egress. It was not life-threatening from a fire safety viewpoint (K.R.).

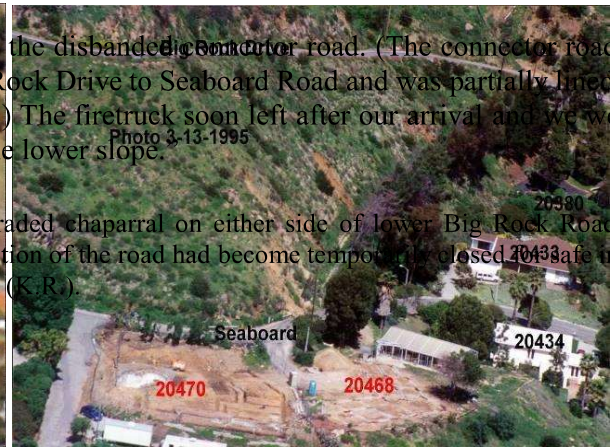
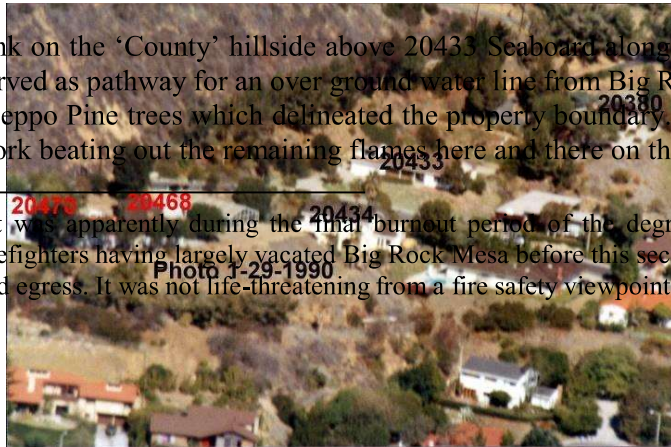


Photo 1-29-1990

Photo 1-13-1995

(20433, 20434, 20468, 20470 Seaboard Road, 20380 Big Rock Drive).

Big Rock seemed to be totally deserted (evacuated). Vulnerable homes (somewhat surprisingly and probably from firebrands) were burning down across the street at **20468 and 20470 Seaboard Rd.** While a total of seven homes burned down on Seaboard, we were not aware of when and how the other homes burned as these sites were not visible from our location. While the Rand Report (p.122) stated *"the need for water in this neighborhood was so acute that the air units were recalled at approximately 2030 and they continued to drop in this area until 2200,"* we were not aware of any water drops. They may have happened in the less accessible areas of Big Rock not visible from our location.

20433 Seaboard Rd. was a one-story house with a non-wood "second-story" loft. Back yard and front yard lawns as well as the driveway provided a fire-safe zone. The row of Aleppo Pine trees along the Seaboard Rd.- Big Rock Dr. connector road provided some protection from debris rolling down the steep, largely chaparral- covered "County" slope below Big Rock Drive and was always a cause of concern. Klaus attempted to keep the disintegrating road base free of flammable litter that readily accumulated there, initially hauling out more than a truckload of highly flammable litter and dead tree branches.

Many older homes in the neighborhood had wood shingle roofs when Big Rock was developed and Klaus had changed his wood roof to asphalt shingles after purchasing it some time ago. He also spent some time under the house, re-leveling it in response to the Big Rock slide.

The sliding door of the upstairs loft had been left open by the tenants but the room had a linoleum floor (not carpeted, no drapery) and firebrands apparently did not ignite anything. Klaus then went around the immediate neighborhood, checking that all windows of homes had been closed (and closing them if not totally closed), while also making



sure that no sparks and firebrands were still smoldering immediately around these homes.

John Thomas had recorded the following:

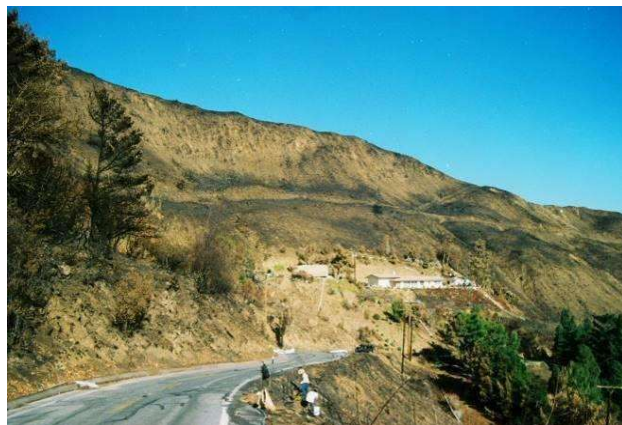
“Knowing that near-neighbor Mike Spak’s house off Big Rock Dr. had a wood shingle roof, we took a ladder and went there (refer to continuation of narrative of 20380 Big Rock Dr.).”

“When morning came Klaus returned home to the Palisades with a small cat found wandering about during the night (later it was returned to its owners). I remained behind because vegetation was still smoldering here and there. Later in the day the hillside between the burned houses (**20468 and 20470 Seaboard Rd.**) and Ed Bell’s two-story house (**20434**) across the street from **20433**, burst into flames, which I (John) fought with a shovel until a fire truck came along. Klaus returned in late afternoon to pick me up and we both then drove up Las Flores Canyon Rd. to check on Ed Hill’s residence on 21656 Las Flores Heights Road (Ed Hill had been featured in Klaus’ June 1982 booklet *A Homeowner’s Guide to Fire and Watershed Management at the Chaparral/Urban Interface*. Klaus had advised him on how to build and protect a basically fire-safe-designed home in a not-too-safe fire environment at his father’s former summer residence erased by the 1942 Las Flores Canyon Fire. A fire storm, charging down Las Flores Canyon, could be expected to overrun the area again during the next wildfire).

“The bridge at Las Flores Creek had been destroyed by fire so we had to park and walk from there. About halfway up we hitched a ride on a fire truck. Although the Hills had left their house before the fire arrived (they were elderly and were concerned about smoke inhalation), it was standing unscathed, also thanks to a good friend who stayed with the house. After the firestorm had rolled over the house and it was safe to exit it about 10 to 15 minutes later, the young man used the generator-powered pump to extinguish spot fires with water fed by their nearby, uphill water tank. When we arrived, the Hills had returned and Mrs. Hill, in tears, embraced Klaus and said, ‘You saved our house.’ Except for weariness, we were none the worse from the experience except for coughing spells that lasted for the next three weeks.”



Old Seaboard-Big Rock Connector Rd. with water main. Temporary irrigation lines above scorched pine



Barley contouring slopes before covering them with straw. Germinated barley in contours along Big Rock Dr.

Concerned about heavy erosion from the steep, bare slopes below Big Rock Drive and not wanting to wait for the belated “government funded” hydroseeding that was dependent on rainfall, we immediately installed irrigation lines, barley-contoured the slopes with pregerminated barley, and then covered the slopes with straw mulch and started watering. Since the water pressure from 20433 Seaboard Road was too low to cover the slopes effectively, an uphill neighbor on Big Rock Road provided the water via garden hoses connected across Big Rock Drive as needed. By early January, germinated barley started to cover the slopes.

### **20418 Seaboard Rd.**

One-story stucco home with wood roof.

Seaboard Road was lined with fire trucks as it is a wide road and water was available from fire hydrants as the trucks arrived. As the wood roof of the garage caught on fire, firefighters were able to extinguish it almost immediately, limiting damage to about 5% burn or less.



20418 Seaboard Road – August 2019.

### **20649 Seaboard Rd.**

House ignited before 1900?

### **20468 and 20470 Seaboard Rd. (Ignited about 1900?)**

When John and Klaus arrived at 20433 Seaboard Road about 2130, both houses had already ignited and were burning down.

### **20434 Seaboard Road (Ed Bell)**

The next morning, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, when John woke up from a short sleep, Big Rock seemed eerily deserted. A Battalion chief drove by in the morning inspecting the area but John can't recall seeing any other fire equipment during the



morning hours, being busy with the irrigation system.

In the early afternoon he suddenly saw some smoke and flames behind the house on 20234 Seaboard Road across the street from 20433 Seaboard Road. He took a shovel and rushed over to find the slope behind the house on fire, with sparks apparently having rekindled into flames from an uphill breeze along a small draw leading up to the house. After beating out the flames for about 15 minutes, a fire truck arrived and firemen rushed over to him with one having a shovel. He handed his own shovel to the firemen requesting it and retreated as they went to work knocking out the remaining flames. The arrows on the 1978 Radtke aerial photo and the 2019 google map photo shown on the following page show the flames that endangered homes during the next afternoon after the fire front had moved through the area the previous evening. While the flames were moving slowly through largely flash fuel grasses and landscape fuels within about thirty feet downslope of the house, if not extinguished, they as well as firebrands could have ignited flammable fuels adjacent to the house, intruding then through the vents into the wood frame. Firebrands could have also ignited the wood roof at 20418 Seaboard Road that had been saved the previous evening by firefighters. As indicated on the google map photo, the wood roof was replaced with a fire-safe roof after the fire.

This incident demonstrated again how important it is that homes are not left unattended after the fire front has moved through an area.



Arrows indicate where fire reignited the afternoon of November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1993 (cropped Nov. 1978 aerial photo by K.R).



For comparison, arrows on the 2019 google map indicate where fire erupted in the afternoon of Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1993.

## B. Big Rock Drive

### 20380 Big Rock Dr. (Mike Spak)

“A fire captain had been there earlier and left his business card saying the house was ‘secure’ (‘we saved your house’). When we (John and Klaus) arrived, a large pile of firewood within about twenty feet of the house was burning and a fire captain, dropping by to see what we were doing, advised us to scatter the burning firewood as its radiation heat could catch the side of the house on fire and blow out its windows. While we were concerned about the wooden roof catching on fire, we therefore also had to attend to all the other emergencies encountered. Klaus attempted to scatter the burning wood pile while at the same time trying to move some of the burning pieces further away from the house. It was ‘hot like hell’ and every time a burning piece of wood was moved a shower of sparks would almost engulf us.

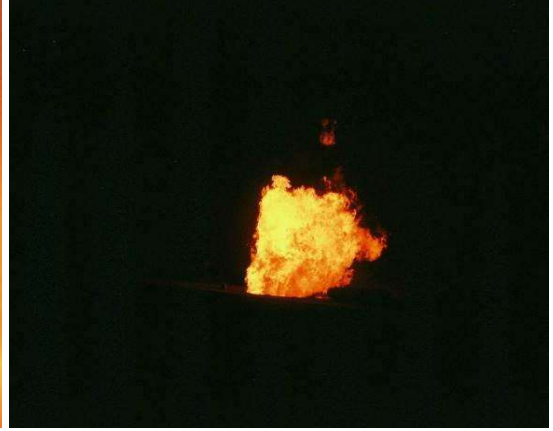
“Fortunately, the Spaks’ house was left unlocked and we were able to get a trickle of water from the sink faucet, which we used to soak cloths that we tied over our faces because of the smoke. **20402 Little Rock Way** above Big Rock Drive was going up in flames and the burning embers were floating down on the Spaks’ roof. We used a shovel and gunny sacks to beat them out as they landed. I (John) spent a good part of the night on the roof, for later the wind shifted to the opposite direction (onshore) and burning embers were again blown at us from a house in flames farther down on Big Rock Drive. Explosions inside this house could be heard as containers of chemicals, paint, etc., ignited.

In addition to attending to these emergencies, a small wooden bridge below the Hamill’s property (**20358 Big Rock Dr.**) that connected it to the Spaks’ property went up in roaring flames. Throwing dirt on it slowed the fire down. However, fire and sparks from it spread up the grassy slopes towards the Hamill house several times during the night and were beaten back/extinguished with shovels. With a shift in the wind the Hamill house could have burned. Mr. Spak told us later that his insurance co. paid for a new roof as he told them that firefighters had damaged the roof, trying to save the house.”

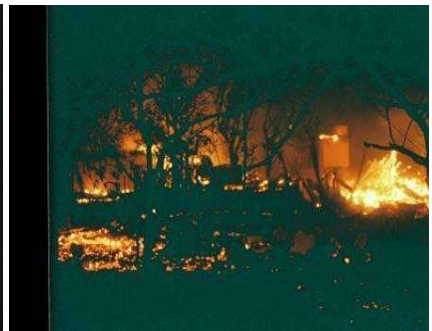




John on Spaks' roof with shovel about midnight.



Burning wooden bridge contained.



Nearby homes burning down during the night.





Nov. 3, 1993 – Early morning. Homes burning out w/o firefighter patrols.



August 2019 – The Spaks' house itself is now a more fire-safe stucco home with composition roof but roof extensions/overhangs that can act as fire catchers and many surrounding pine trees increase the fire risk.

**20330 Big Rock Dr. (Ernest & Jane Ricket)**

The adjacent house at 20340 started 20350 Big Rock Drive on fire before also igniting 20330 Big Rock Drive. Mr. Ricket's written testimony submitted to NFES (fire questionnaire) reads as follows:

"I ignored Sheriff's Department orders and walked along the beach from Topanga to Big Rock, arriving at my house at about 3:30 p.m.

"It was my intention to stay and try to save our house. I feel reasonably secure in my understanding of fighting fires due to my training as a Naval Officer. I was involved in preparing my proper clothing and firefighting equipment, constantly avoiding the helicopters and law enforcement officers at the door. At 6:30 p.m. an out-of-town fire company was parked in our driveway. The telephone which was still working summoned me at about 6:45; my wife and children asked me to leave because the media was repeating the command structure's demand for homeowners to evacuate. They were afraid for me.



“With the fire company on my driveway, I felt reasonably secure in turning over the job to them. I showed the company the pool and I opened the gate for them.”

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John Thomas, on Mr. Spak’s roofs, saw the house igniting/burning after 2300+.

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Soon after Mr. Ricket evacuated, the uphill Big Rock Drive slopes were backfired as the fire moved down from the top of the hill. It was done to protect the large pine trees at 20358 Big Rock Drive across the street from bursting into flames and its house from catching on fire and also to protect the homes at 20330, 20340, and 20350 Big Rock Drive. Sadly, these three homes did not have to burn if there would have been a coordinated effort such as if the chiefs would have been informed that there was a pool water source almost across the street from the lower back burn area (were they?), and if there would have been night patrols to follow through. However, the area had largely been evacuated by 2130 (9:30 pm), as there was no hydrant water available and before the burning brush-covered slopes at lower Big Rock Drive would have at least temporarily closed off the area. When Klaus Radtke and John Thomas drove up Big Rock Drive to Seaboard Road at about 2130 these slopes were burning and rocks and boulders had rolled onto the road from the slopes.



August 2019 - A fire-safe home with small, protected windows. However, the “invisible” dead interior crown of the tree on the right should be of concern.

#### **20340 Big Rock Drive (Anderson)**

Wood roof. This house started to slowly ignite sometime after dark and then started to ignite the Strickland house (20350 Big Rock Drive) before igniting the Ricket house (20330 Big Rock Drive).

#### **20350 Big Rock Drive (Robert & Rosalle Strickland)**

A tile roof but with decorative overhangs covered with treated wood shingle roofing that ignited. There was a Jacuzzi for water. A fire engine was in front of house about midnight. The house ignited after the Anderson house and was fully engulfed by 0300. A chief's car was patrolling the area. At 0600 on November 3rd, there was a fire engine in front of the house pulling out hoses to extinguish embers within the burned-out structure.

#### **20503, 20505, 20507, 20509 Big Rock Drive (1830-1930)**

The initial firefront moving east along the costal slopes from the direction of Las Flores Mesa had expanded along the oceanside-slopes, came up across Seaboard Road, expanded along Pinnacle Drive, and, as indicated on Big Rock Map 1, ignited the structures listed above, being also instrumental in igniting the adjacent homes at 20404 and 20402 Little Rock Way.

### C. Little Rock Way

#### **20400 W. Little Rock Way (Jürgen & Helma Cords)**

One-story stucco home with rock roof.

The Cordses attempted to maintain their property fire-safe in anticipation of the next wildfire. A concrete retaining wall largely protected their home on the uphill side where they had cleared the flammable vegetation so that even a beehive which they kept there within 20 feet of the house did not burn. A steep, largely ice plant-vegetated slope on the downhill side abutted Big Rock Drive. As was their standard procedure, they had placed plastic trash cans filled with water and rags centrally located along the downhill side of the house and had no flammable fuels anywhere around the house.

When Jürgen saw the smoke to the north, he jumped in his jeep and drove up Big Rock Drive as far as he could and also walked, looking down into Las Flores Canyon where he observed a wall of fire. He drove immediately home and he and Helma prepared for the advancing fire by installing wet cloths with duct tape as needed on all vents.

At 1625 a helicopter flew over ordering mandatory evacuation but the Cordses ignored it and prepared for the fire. It was dark (about 1800) by the time he saw the fire moving across and up the bluff above Pacific Coast Highway (coming from the Las Mesa Flores area). From there it expanded onto central Las Flores Canyon across Seaboard Road and Pinnacle Way. Jürgen already had his generators running to provide light.



Helma securing the vents.



Properly dressed, still patrolling after the firefront.

He immediately went with his jeep looking for firefighters to provide a firetruck for his home as he knew that the fire was coming over the top from Las Flores Canyon. He found three fire chiefs (white shirts, etc.) at the corner of Big Rock Drive and Pinnacle Way and urgently demanded a fire truck. One of the chiefs asked him “What roof do you have?” He answered “Rock roof.” “What house?” He answered “Stucco.” “Clearance?” “Good all-around clearance with ice plant slope at Big Rock.” The chief then answered “You will get a truck,” and radioed to get a fire truck from the top of Big Rock Drive. Jürgen drove back home and when no truck came, drove back up, met the truck and drove in front of him as it backed down the steep, narrow driveway leading to his house at 20400 and his neighbor’s house at 20402 Little Rock Way.

At about this time another firefront was moving down Big Rock Drive from the top of the mountain to meet the firefront coming uphill, while a strike team with five engines from the San Diego Fire Department came up from lower Big Rock Drive. Soon thereafter, at about 7:00 pm, one firetruck came down from upper Big Rock Drive and stopped on the slope below him. Firefighters then immediately backfired/burned the largely grass and brush-covered hillside across from 20358 Big Rock Drive to the right of his property. They were concerned that the firefronts could catch the many large pine trees at 20358 Big Rock Drive on fire and burn the house down as well as adjacent



downslope homes along Big Rock Drive. A backfire is deliberately set in front of an active, oncoming firefront to consume the fuel in its path, hopefully before it reaches the burn area so that the direction and force of the oncoming convection and radiation heat sources can be minimized and the firefront perhaps even redirected.

To Jürgen it looked like “flames out of hell” racing from the east towards his basically fire-safe home above. According to him the firefighters should have known that there were homeowners above as he had his generators running. However, the firefighters that had backed their truck down the driveway saved his motorhome that was about to be overrun by the backfire flames as they blew towards the west across his ice plant slopes, by using their firehose to douse the flames of nearby igniting vegetation. By that time the fire coming uphill was already leapfrogging across and burning the homes between Big Rock Drive (20503, 20505, 20507, 20509) and Little Rock Way (20404, 20402) and meeting the fire coming downhill. The Cords house saved itself because of the all-around good clearance and there was no need to roll out fire hoses around it.

A Channel 5 News helicopter started to fly overhead at about that time.

Soon after the firefighters had saved the Cords’ motorhome, the neighbor's house at **20402 Little Rock Way** started to burn when the downslope pointing wooden deck ignited. The fire crew attempted to save it but could not as the fire hoses were not long enough to reach the deck and the fire truck ran out of water (actually it is standard procedure to retain at least 150 gallons for lifesaving needs for firefighters, so that the truck may not have been completely empty).

The large, black plastic drain pipe, installed between both houses but much closer to 20400 Little Rock to drain sections of the plastic-covered uphill slide scar, started to burn furiously. It, along with firebrands swirling all around and also from the backfire moving into the easterly draw below the house, could perhaps have started the downhill deck on fire. The firefighters used breathing masks to protect themselves from the thick smoke and burning pipes and also ordered Helma into the motorhome so that she would not have to breathe the toxic smoke. From the inside she took a video of flying embers swirling all around.

By about 2000-2030, the Cordses were force-evacuated from their home by the firefighter team, which was apparently ordered to pull out because of lack of water and were concerned about leaving the Cordses alone. First, the Cordses had to stand for about twenty minutes at Pinnacle Way waiting to be taken down the hill by strike team units who were leaving the area because they had no water. When Jürgen tried to “sneak back” to the house, the firemen forcefully put them into their cab to keep an eye on them while waiting for a strike team unit that took them down the hill at about 2100, and Jürgen asked to be dropped off at PCH. Jürgen was then sitting at the base of Big Rock Mesa at an open garage at PCH for about twenty minutes. Concerned about his house, he decided to walk back uphill to his friend at 20246 Roca Chica who had not evacuated and ask for a ride uphill. While the captain who had force-evacuated them had promised to send a crew back up to watch the house and neighborhood during the night, Jürgen was not so sure about it. He managed to bypass police and fire chief patrol cars whose occupants looked him over but did not stop him as he walked past their cars, as he was dressed in his German hunter’s gear, resembling a uniform. His friend drove him to the bottom of the slope below his house at Big Rock Drive where Jürgen crawled uphill through still smoldering ice plant, arriving about 2130. He was happily surprised to find that the captain had kept his promise as a different firefighter crew was there, relaxing on his property, drinking the soft drinks he had left in one of the trash cans. Jürgen then took his jeep and picked up Helma at the base of Big Rock Drive about 2130, as almost all firetrucks had evacuated Big Rock Mesa by then and there was no police around. Jürgen and Helma then went around with their sprinkling cans and doused plants that would reignite. The firemen still at their house told them to conserve the water, to just put a little water on at a time and then return as needed.

Jürgen and Helma then went to 20415 Little Rock Way about midnight and saved it as the wooden trellis attached to the house had started to burn. As they were driving back to their house, there were no more fire engines along upper Big Rock Drive and the “fire watch” crew they had left behind at their house also had left. The next day they

found branchlets and burned-out embers on their stone roof.

Jürgen, a German Master Mechanic, working at VW Santa Monica, was also well-prepared to pump water, if needed, from his trash cans with a water hose and shut-off nozzle attached to a sump pump operated by one of his small generators. The Cordses were also featured in U.S. and overseas news reports.

When Klaus visited Jürgen's home in August 2019, he found the property as prepared for a wildfire as it was in 1993. Trash cans filled with water had again been placed around the house (Jürgen's standard procedure during the fire season) with no flammable materials stored near or around the house. During a subsequent meeting with Jürgen at his home and reviewing fire tapes, Jürgen, now 82, provided further details and also followed it up through further phone conversation. Sadly, Helma had died rather unexpectedly of lung cancer in January 2019. Could it have been related to the toxic smoke from the large plastic drain pipe burning through much of the evening on the day of the 1993 Old Topanga Fire?



The Cords house after the fire clean-up with the Canary Island pine in the background.



A fire-safe setback along the east side of the Cords home protected it from the backfire flames.





August 2019: A view of fire-safe rebuilt homes below at 20330, 20340, 20350 Big Rock Drive.

#### **20402 Little Rock Way (James & Nancy Abrahams) Burned about 1900**

The large black plastic drain pipe installed between the Abrahams and Cords houses to drain part of the Big Rock slide scarp above, burned furiously, sending columns of black smoke and a vortex of heat and flame to the house. It, along with firebrands swirling all around and also from the backfire moving into the easterly draw below the house, could perhaps have started the downhill-facing deck on fire. The fire crew attempted to save the house but could not. With Jürgen holding the firehose while the truck was pumping, the fire hose hook-up was still not long enough to reach the deck and the fire truck ran out of water (it may not have been completely empty). Since the garage was closed, one firefighter joked if there was a Maserati or Bentley in there burning up.

The house burned out by 0130 or later, sending showers of firebrands onto the wood shingle roof house at 20380 Big Rock Drive (Mike Spak). John Thomas was on the roof of the Spak house from about 2200 to 0330, extinguishing firebrands with a shovel and dry rags (no water) as they landed on the roof, and saved the Spak home.



The burning downslope deck (photo Jürgen Cords).

#### **20404 Little Rock Way (Luscian & Gayton Harris) Ignited about 1800-1900**

A draw leads uphill from Big Rock Drive between 20402 and 20404 Little Rock Way, and fire from these slopes may also have been instrumental in igniting the houses.

#### **20415 (20327) Little Rock Way (Widow Doris Janes)**

After having secured their own home, Jürgen and Helma Cords walked about midnight up the driveway to Mrs. Janice's house where the wood lattice attached to the house had started to catch on fire. There was no water except in the buckets Mrs. Janice had left to feed the coyotes and Jürgen used it to douse the wood lattice while at the same time pulling it away from the house. Both then made sure that there was no other flammable material around the house that could catch on fire.

The next morning when the large railroad tie retaining wall was burning in front of the house, Jürgen had a fire truck come up to the house and put out the fire. The house was saved twice. However, the owners unfortunately rebuilt with railroad ties which are now largely covered by vegetation, a future design-for-disaster.



20415 Little Rock Way. Replacing burned railroad ties with highly flammable railroad ties.

#### **D. Piedra Chica Road**

##### **20246 Piedra Chica Road (Gerhard Ihde)**

Gerhard did not evacuate and hid in his garage with two more neighbors living on the same street. There is a good turn-around in front of his house and there is also a good turn-around at the end of the road at 20247 Piedra Chica. There was a fire engine at the end of the road when the fire first went through.

As the fire burned on the ridge with flames that looked like they were several hundred feet high and then moved downhill, it was creating its own wind, circling like a typhoon or hurricane and showering the neighborhood with embers that came down like hail. Gerhard's two neighbors who had been hiding with him in his garage went to their own homes to protect them.

The adjacent home at 20238 Piedra Chica had a pool and tile roof. When some of the landscape vegetation ignited around his house, Gerhard put out the fire with water from his neighbor's pool. He had a water pump (which caused problems) and therefore also used buckets to get water. 20269 Inland Lane, the house below him, had a wood roof. Gerhard and his friends took a ladder and ripped the wood shingles off as they caught fire. He and his neighbors saved 20438 Piedra Chica and 20269 Inland Lane and their own homes.

Two to three hours after the fire had burned through but with the mountains still glowing, the firebrands had largely stopped. However, the neighbor's home had started to smoke as there was firewood stacked adjacent to the house which had finally caught on fire and got into the eaves. As he observed, unless a wood roof is involved, it may take several hours for firebrands to ignite firewood, decks and thick timbers, and these homes could be readily saved if attended. To save his neighbor's house, he drove up Big Rock Drive looking for firemen. He found 4-5 fire trucks on upper Big Rock Drive with firefighters sleeping. He was mad and asked/told them to "get on the ball" as a neighbor's house had started to burn and others were endangered. One firefighter crew came down with their truck and saved the neighbor's house using the pool water and prevented the fire from spreading



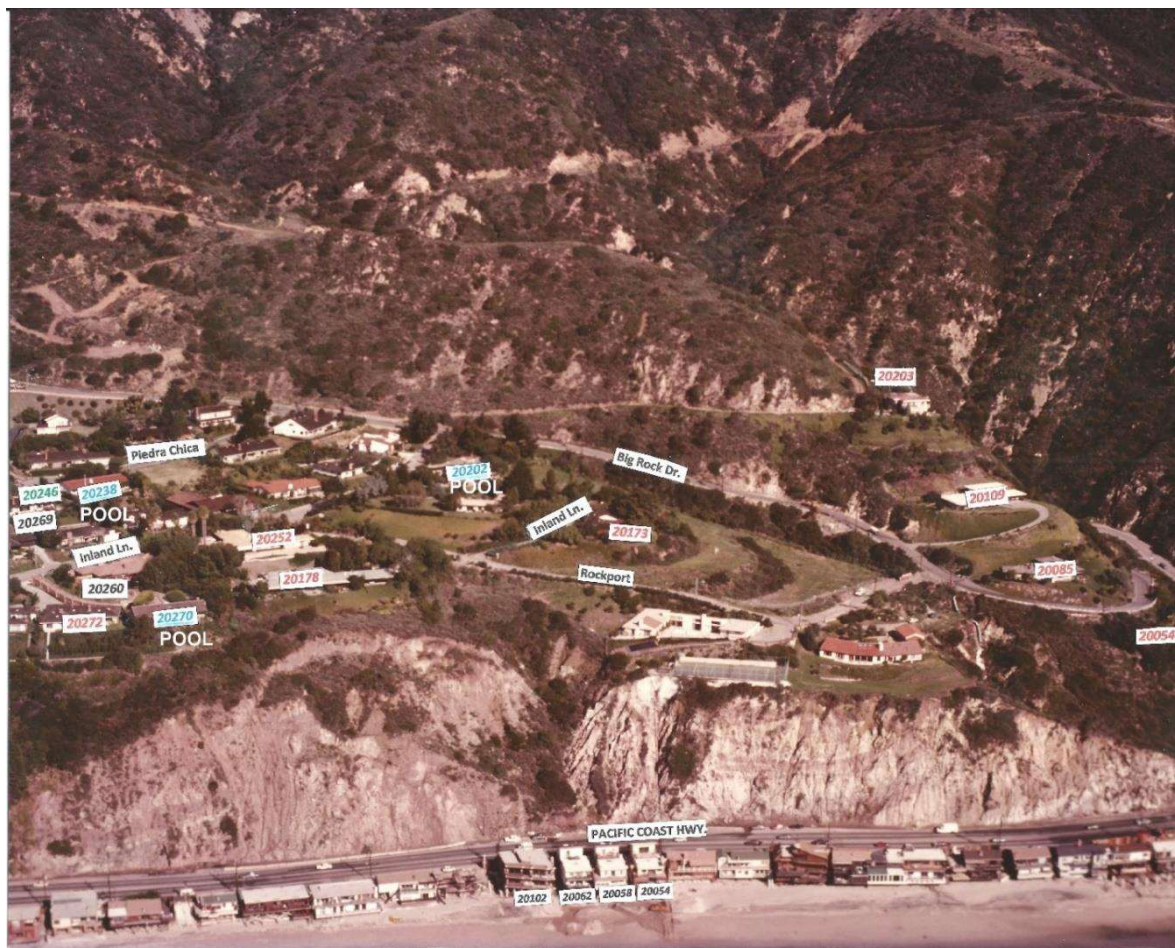
to other homes.

As observed by Gerhard, firebrands that had showered the area two to three hours earlier ignited the following houses below and could have been readily saved if attended by homeowners or fire patrols:

A.) Three houses in front of him towards the ocean (20252, 20272 [wood roof?} Inland Lane; 20178 Rockport Way)

B.) Four to five homes below towards Big Rock Drive (20173 Rockport Lane; 20054, 20085, 20109 Big Rock Drive).

While there were fire trucks at Big Rock, there were no fire trucks patrolling his area. If these houses would have been attended, they would not have burned, but because of mandatory evacuation, they did. The last house started to burn by about 2 am. It had palm trees all around. Palm trees are a big problem. When you don't cut the stems clean, fire catches them and they become torches.



Big Rock Map 6 - Big Rock Mesa SE. Homes shown in red largely ignited by firebrands late at night (12-1983 Photo K. Radtke).

## E. Rockpoint Way

### 20762 Rockpoint Way (Morris)

Mr. Morris did not evacuate and stated that he saved his house by determination and sheer luck because of shifting winds as, according to his estimate, 3/4 of the houses in his area burned. "The area was not safe enough for fire

trucks to venture down there.”

Mr. Morris had water pressure until about 16:30 (4:30 pm) and was watering things well. As documented further by him, the firefront moved through his area between 17:30-17:45 (5:30-5:45 pm). Sunset was 16:59pm (4:59 pm).