Tahoe memorial honors 5 firefighters who died

By Susan Wood

CARSON CITY – If you don't think wildland fire is on the back of Clear Creek residents' minds, just look at road landmarks.

One of which was just established on Highway 50 east of Spooner Summit where the Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District, with its brethren, came out a few weeks ago to memorialize the five firefighters who died during the 1926 Clear Creek Fire.

More than 40 people attended the ceremony on Sept. 28, the 90th anniversary. A version of "Taps" played while people reflected on the five unmanned helmets to signify George Brown, J.E. Mitchell, Bryant Whitmore, Arthur Sunday and Ross Morres.

A little-known permanent plaque on a cement block describing the horrendous fire has been installed at the Highway 50 turnout. The memorial overlooks the "Double Barrel" turn in the canyon where the three inmates, forest ranger and V&T railroad gandy dancer, respectively, were trapped there by swirling Zephyr winds.

These represent the same notorious winds residents in the sleepy neighborhood southwest of Carson City were keeping their eyes on earlier this month. **On Oct. 13,** a wildland fire broke out east of the canyon.



Five helmets just east of Spooner Summit on Highway 50 represent the firefighters killed in 1926. Photo/Provided

The men and women who defend the area are fully aware of the danger and know the possibility of another tragedy like the 1926 fatal fire exists when strong winds and drought conditions are combined with a dangerous topography like Clear Creek.

During the 1926 fire that started at 4am, those notorious winds kicked up and a fire was sparked, with the results disastrous.

“The wind shifted three times on them,” Tahoe Douglas Fire spokesman Eric Guevin said while looking over the canyon.

“Their lives were spent saving resources important to Nevada,” Guevin pointed out, referring to the forested area.

As the modern-day firefighter glanced out on the perch overlooking the valley, an ominous haze lay hanging above the

valley floor from an El Dorado County prescribed burn.

“This was our largest fatal wildland fire in this area. The fire went downhill, then came back up when the winds shifted. I think they thought to go into a defensive mode, but caught too much fire. It must have been difficult,” Guevin told *Lake Tahoe News.* “Our crew was named the Zephyr crew from those winds. (That 1926 fire) was definitely fanned by those winds.”

He admits the protective equipment has improved dramatically, including the uniform, goggles and masks. Ninety years ago, firefighters wore water-soaked bandanas – but they would get fatigued breathing into them.

What hasn’t changed are the winds known to shift dramatically. Another constant threat – more people live in what’s called the wildland fire urban interface – meaning on the edge of the forest.

Guevin described the memorial ceremony as having a somber mood mixed with a fitting sense of camaraderie. “A lot of our younger guys didn’t know about it. So having them there standing brother to brother was a neat feeling for something so well deserved.”

Three of the firefighters died at the scene. The other two succumbed to burns on 80 percent of their bodies in the hospital.

Consequently, two of the inmates were pardoned.

“They gave the ultimate sacrifice,” Guevin summarized.

Residents to this day are constantly worried about another fire.

“We worry about people starting fires up here,” contractor Steve Cote told Lake Tahoe News.

The 20-year resident has put a lot of money and effort behind

keeping his 12 acres maintained. He has a large mower and other heavy equipment designed to manage the brush around his property.



Tahoe Douglas firefighter Eric Guevin plays the bugle during the ceremony this fall honoring those who died 90 years ago. Photo/Provided

“These (firefighters) are heroes, but sometimes (the fires) get away,” he said outside his home perched on a hill as strong winds blew the vegetation in the distance. “Sparks can even cause one.”

Cote was referring to power equipment, adding he doesn’t run his when it’s really hot outside.

If a fire is sparked, vigilant neighbors are on hyper alert.

“We all kind of look out for each other here,” he said, pointing out how he saw the lightning strike for another fire sparked closer to Jacks Valley months ago.

Down his driveway to the privately-owned Clear Creek Road, signs of every sort are placed on the road to remind residents and the limited visitors who drive the seldom-used road to be extra careful.

One sign reads: “Beware of Fires.”

Others declare a list of “fire safety rules” as in no “off road activity, camping, campfires, fireworks, outside smoking and open flames.”

Another homemade plywood sign at a fork in the road marking a development even notes the emergency exit.

To a longtime resident like Dixie Busch, there’s no messing around or leniency when it comes to the threat made by the careless. The intrepid senior who’s lived at her Clear Creek Road home for 30 years has even stood up to a stranger trying to camp in the canyon telling him to move along.

“I asked him where he lives,” said Busch, who lives on a road named after her family. When the man answered, she said: “Good, then I’ll come camp on your lawn.”

“We’ve been lucky this year. We’ve had more rain, and that’s helped a lot. But it’s still dangerous,” she said.

To alleviate the threat, Busch has much of her property mowed down like Cote. But beyond the Busch estate, she wished some of her neighbors on the other side of Clear Creek Road took the same extra care. The canyon is heavily forested, with ladder fuels blanketing the area.

When the strong Zephyr winds roar through, residents like Cote and Busch become even more sensitive to traffic on the road. Their stranger danger threat could be someone setting a fire.