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Pioneertown Is Ersatz; Its Compassion Is Real

The community -- built as a B-movie set -- tries to help its residents whose homes and lives were devastated by July's Sawtooth Complex fire.

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September 18, 2006

PIONEERTOWN, Calif. — Few places in the broad sweep of Southern California encapsulate the nexus of movies and real life as sweetly as this little enclave of Old West facades and New West ranch houses, home to some 350 people who revel in the isolation of the high desert and Hollywood's romanticized version of life on the frontier.

The town was built 60 years ago as a self-contained film site for B-westerns, the familiar squared-off facades hiding real homes in which the casts and crews could live during shoots. When the "oaters" died out in the 1950s, a few people hung on.

Over the years more people filtered in, adding modern houses to the Old West motif — some drawn by the oddity of living in a movie set where the likes of Roy Rogers and Gene Autry once sang and rode.

Most, though, came to this high valley 30 miles north of Palm Springs for the intangible benefits of living in a place where the Milky Way stains the night sky, the only paved road is usually clear of traffic, and other people are rarely seen or heard.

"They say there's closeness among neighbors, but every one of us moved up here for space," says Tom McKinney, 68, a retired investigator from Ventura County, working alone to clear the debris that was his house at the southern edge of town. "We really don't want anything to do with neighbors."

July's 61,700-acre Sawtooth Complex fire changed that for many people here, bringing Pioneertown face to flame with its own mortality.

As the fire crested a southwest ridge on July 11, the village and surrounding countryside were evacuated, some people escaping in dramatic last-ditch rushes. One man, Gerald Guthrie, 57, was overrun by the fast-moving flames and died.

Most homes and Mane Street, the old movie set, escaped damage, but about 20 houses in the southern and western parts of town were destroyed, accounting for about a third of the region's property losses. At least eight properties were uninsured.

In the aftermath of that devastating convergence of flame and hearth, these willful misfits and self-imposed outcasts have come to recognize that they are indeed a community, that in spite of their inclinations they do have neighbors, and that sometimes that's not such a bad thing.

Over the last few weeks, local residents have raised about $1,800 through phone calls, 60th anniversary celebrations over Labor Day weekend and unsolicited checks from concerned people.

A few of the neighbors are helping find a house trailer for one burned-out family of five and digging up a water heater and washing machine for another fire victim. A Labor Day weekend screening of "The Last Western," a new documentary on Pioneertown, to benefit the fire victims was postponed for lack of a workable projection system, but plans are in the works for a Dixieland-themed fundraiser.

"It brought a lot of people back together," says Carole Kester, who lost landscaping and outbuildings to the firestorm. "People who were mad at each other have gotten over it."

You could argue that Pioneertown isn't really a town at all. Although it has a post office, it was never incorporated, and the Census Bureau doesn't list it. Which could mean that Pioneertown is a state of mind.

"There's a certain surreal quality to the idea of a town that was born to serve as the fictional setting for movies, then actually turns into a real town," says Chris Deaux, whose documentary "The Last Western" sought to capture some of the spirit of Pioneertown. "There's almost a 'Twilight Zone'-esque quality to it."

There's one bar, Pappy & Harriet's Pioneertown Palace, an open-sided roadhouse owned by Celia and Linda Krantz that's closed on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Pioneer Bowl, with its "antique" six wooden lanes, has barely been open all summer. On Saturday afternoons, Kester and the rest of the Pioneertown Posse reenactors take over Mane Street for a melodrama of petticoats and pistols in exchange for donations from tourists.

Other than that, the action is limited to scurrying rabbits, an occasional rider on horseback, and the hustle-bustle of quail and roadrunners.

And, more recently, grief.

Brenda Wilson answers the door at the Pioneertown Motel with her hair in a jumble, her over-large T-shirt on backward and her eyes struggling to focus.

It's the middle of the day, which is the middle of the night for the graveyard-shift respiratory therapist at Joshua Tree's Hi-Desert Medical Center. But Wilson wasn't sleeping. She hasn't slept much at all, in fact, since the fire crested the ridge and turned Wilson's modest dreams to ash.

Since then, Wilson, 50, has had trouble finishing sentences. Trouble concentrating. Trouble seeing a recognizable shape to a future that seemed so certain in June, when she and her husband, Jim, moved here full time.

The Wilsons have four adult children, and about six years ago, when the kids were all out on their own, the couple plowed all their cash into a future retirement home and 2½ acres about three miles northwest of Pioneertown.

Four years ago, one of their daughters became unable to care for her children, and the Wilsons became parents to their grandchildren, now 9, 6 and 4. With the adoption expenses, suddenly providing for a family, and Jim Wilson giving up his job as a Pomona truck dispatcher to care for the kids, they opted out of insuring their desert home.

"We had everything, and it took it down to nothing," Brenda Wilson says. "It took everything except the claw-foot bathtub….

"I don't even know where to start. If I had some way of helping myself, I would. I work 12 hours a day so I don't have to think about my situation, and I can at least put some good back in the world."

The kindnesses of neighbors and colleagues have helped. A few days after the fire the family set up quarters in the motel, where the owner gave them a break and charged them $150 a week.

Staffs at Hi-Desert and St. Bernardine Medical Center, where Wilson worked in San Bernardino until June, have donated cash and supplies.

Kester and others in town are working to find the family more permanent living quarters, and as people hear of the family's plight they've brought food and necessities. One local woman won four tickets to Disneyland and a night in an Anaheim hotel in a contest. She dropped the prize off at Wilson's door.

"I'm absolutely overwhelmed with emotion and love," Wilson says. "That's what makes the difference, the kindness of all these neighbors. I'm trying to break it all down into the things I'm grateful for."

Wilson speaks in tones of optimism, but in an hourlong conversation she continuously breaks into tears. Answers sometimes don't match the questions, and anecdotes spin off without conclusion.

Wilson is asked whether she's seen a counselor. She says she talks to her husband, but one of the doctors she works with suggested she was suffering from delayed stress, which would explain her inability to focus, to finish thoughts.

"We had just gotten ahead, got the kids," Wilson says. "I wanted so much to give them a chance, and all I've done is let them down…. It's just hard for me to fathom."

Wilson isn't the only one having trouble concentrating. Just about everyone directly affected by the fires readily admits they're still in shock.

"Since this happened, I just can't focus," says Kester, who moved back into her house a month after the fire, and on the last Saturday in August joined fellow Posse members in resuming the weekly reenactments to an audience of about 40 people — well below the 250 or so they usually attract. "I can't center on my thoughts. There's so much to do, like arrange to get the debris picked up."

As Kester talks, some of the 20 people who lost homes in Pioneertown but had insurance have gathered in the community church, close enough to the Posse show to hear the gunshots. The meeting with the nonprofit Community Assisting Recovery group was supposed to last two hours. It turned into a group therapy session and ran more than three.

The meeting was arranged by the Pioneertown's homeowners association, part of a broad plan to help fire victims, says president Claudia Sall, whose home escaped intact but whose husband's family homestead burned.

There are seven members of the board and each has agreed to mentor three or four of the people who lost homes and buildings in Pioneertown, helping them navigate the labyrinth of government and insurance bureaucracies. They've become united by a shared experience, those who lost homes bound by an even deeper bond.

On a Saturday afternoon, Cindi Ribera, 43, usually would have been outside in the scorching sun playing "Miss Kitty McCoy" in the Pioneertown Posse show.

But the fire burned her house and possessions, including her costumes, and forced her and her teenage daughter into a rental in Yucca Valley.

So instead of joining the melodrama, Ribera went to the meeting, trying to figure out how to deal with the insurance

company and the other more tedious elements of resuming a normal life. She'd be able to do more faster if she could just keep her mind clear.

"I have a hard time remembering things," says Ribera, who works for the Golden State Water Co. "I can't sleep."

Ribera went through a similar hell three years ago when her boyfriend died, and she rode the fast-sinking feeling of despair and, eventually, on out of that particular valley of pain. She feels the parallels to what she's experiencing now.

"You grieve just as you do at a death, but you don't even have a home to go to," Ribera says.

"It's like someone ripped your life out in one hour."

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