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'It was so bizarre'

Two miles from blaze, one house catches fire

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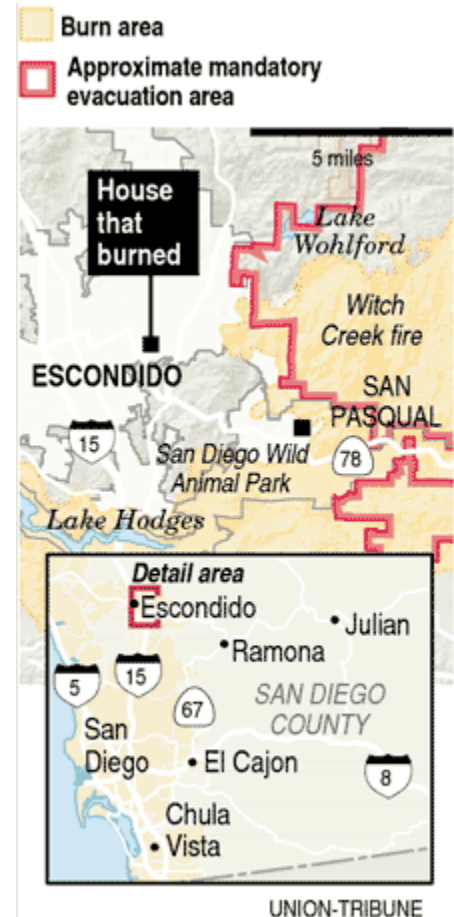
CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Jeff Smith's gutted home, which caught fire even though it was about two miles from the Witch Creek blaze, was the only house on his street to burn.

ESCONDIDO – Jeff Smith's house was about two miles from the nearest one in Escondido damaged by the Witch Creek fire last week.

Yet to the astonishment of Smith and his neighbors, it caught fire and was gutted virtually without warning.

“I'm fine; it's so far away,” Smith recalled telling his daughter on the phone about the distant red glow in the hills. “Probably as my roof was burning above me.”

Firefighters and looky-loos are still driving by and talking about how flying embers must have settled on the home so far from the fire. Smith's shake-shingle roof may have been the reason he was so unlucky, neighbors said.



Residents on Queenston Drive had promised to call or knock on each others' doors if they saw any sign that the fire east of them was getting too close. There had been no evacuation order for the neighborhood.

Smith was at home about 7:30 p.m. Oct. 22, he said, and wasn't worried about the fires. His first warning came when his German shepherd, Timber, began whimpering. When Smith looked out the window he saw ashes and embers, and his neighbors were scurrying about. By the time he got in his pickup, the roof of his house was in flames.

“It was so bizarre,” Smith said. “It went up like gas.”

The gutted house is at the end of a cul-de-sac on a slight hill. Intact houses surround it in the Oak Hills neighborhood east of downtown, about a mile from the evacuated Mountain View area on the east end of the city.

Escondido Fire Department spokeswoman Carol Rea said the cause of the fire at the house is still under investigation, but flying embers blown by heavy westerly winds are suspected. The winds were so strong they carried more than just embers, Rea said.

“During wildfires like the ones we've experienced, it could have been a large piece of bark from a burning tree,” she said.

The houses on the street were built about 1974, but Smith's is the only one that still had a wood-shingle roof, residents said.

Rea said fire officials are also considering that. “Certainly, the wood roof played a large part in the extent of the damage,” she said.

Flames from Smith's home burned only as far as nearby shrubs and to the corner of the house south of it, where Debbie Powell lives with her husband, their daughter and her in-laws.

Powell said the family was watching television news about the fires when she noticed the orange glow outside. In the rush to flee with her mother-in-law, she didn't notice that her husband and father-in-law stayed behind to fight the fire on their house with garden hoses. Their slightly wilted asphalt roof, put in two years ago, shows the intensity of the flames.

Another neighbor, Peggy Ryan, said she didn't notice the fire until a bright orange glow reflected off her wall. She looked outside to see orange embers flying by.

Amid the rain of fire, she grabbed an elderly neighbor and left, thinking no one was left inside the burning home.

Smith's missing truck, usually parked in the driveway but that night parked on the street, threw neighbors off, they said. Smith got out shortly after his neighbors fled.

Miraculously, Ryan said, no one was hurt. At least three fire engines responded within minutes, and everyone on the street was home within about an hour, she said, with neighbors keeping vigil over the smoldering house all night. The house is one of 49 homes damaged or destroyed by fire within Escondido city limits.

George Acquavella, who owns the Queenston Drive home and has rented it out for years, did not return phone messages.

Smith, who said he had no renter's insurance, lost all his belongings. The owner of the house and FEMA officials have been helpful, he said, but he's still in shock.

“There was no smoke. I didn't feel any heat; the house wasn't near the fires,” Smith said. “I just couldn't believe the whole roof was on fire. It happened so fast.”