

The
Day the
Ranch

DISAPPEARS

**I'll always remember the
firestorm of April 9, 2009**

Story and photos by

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DISAPPEARED

A photograph of a large firestorm with thick, dark smoke rising into the sky. In the foreground, there is a grassy field with a fence and a small white building in the distance. The word "DISAPPEARED" is overlaid in large, dark, serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

There are dates that live in infamy. Some dates mark national tragedies, like Pearl Harbor Day or the attacks of September 11, 2001. Other dates are more personal, like the birth of a child, the death of a parent or perhaps the date of a car wreck that changed one's life.

For me, what started out as a sunny day in April is now permanently etched in my personal calendar as a date I will never forget. It is the day the ranch disappeared.

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THURSDAY STARTED LIKE ANY OTHER DAY. BEFORE DAWN, OUR house was buzzing with activity, which is commonplace in a home with three school-age children. The kids were excited about their class Easter parties slated for that afternoon. I sent them off to school with their candy-filled eggs, then headed to "town" to run some errands.

We live on a ranch in Archer County, Texas, halfway between the small town of Archer City and the "big city" of Wichita Falls. People say we live in the sticks, and I would have to agree. Travel five miles down a bumpy dirt road, and you'll find where we call home, a house that has sheltered six generations of my family. We moved here in 1997, a few years after the passing of my grandfather, Dick Coleman, who lived his entire life in our house. It's where my husband, Doug, and I chose to raise our children, daughters Ashton and Sidney, and son Blake.

There are only a few other houses in eyesight of our place, which is framed by miles and miles of grass pastures, pastures that were thick with old grass that April day, thanks to an above-average rainfall in last summer's growing season. But a fall drought and the cold temperatures of winter turned that grass to dry, standing forage. Simply put, it's what firemen call "fuel."

I was on my way home from the grocery store, mentally going over my to-do list for the rest of the day. The sun was shining high above my head, and the wind was dry, sucking moisture from every crevice of the earth.

The Texas Forest Service characterized the day as "Extreme

High Wildfire Danger," citing strong westerly winds coupled with low relative humidity values. Forest Service reports that echoed on the early morning news said, "Conditions will be in place for extreme wildfire behavior."

If I had only known how this report, heard in the background between my morning cups of coffee, would directly affect my life that day.

As I topped a hill on our dirt road just a few miles from home, my heart began to pound inside my chest. Smoke was just beginning to billow up on the far western side of the ranch. Instincts told me it would be minutes before the flames kissed the ground near our house and barn. I had to get our horses to safety.

I drove alongside the fire, frantically calling 911, Doug and a few other friends to help. "We're on fire" was all I could say. And all I needed to say. Everyone in the area knew that fire and wind make for an uncontrollable disaster.

Arriving at the house, I shucked my sandals for my "barn" tennis shoes. Just north of our house sits a 60-acre wheat field. The drought had taken its toll on the wheat. It was green but sparse, and I hoped it would not burn.

I opened gates to let our horses to the perceived safety of our wheat field, just in time to see the flames racing for the house. Deep in my stomach, the reality of how fast the fire moved was setting in. Only minutes had passed since I had called the fire department. I knew there was no way they could get here in time.

A few more open gates, and then my plan was to escape





down the road away from the fanning flames. I jumped in my car to head down the driveway when I noticed that a few young horses did not go to the field. They had balled up in the corner of another trap – a trap that was on fire. Driving toward them, I could see the flames kissing their fetlocks as the horses hopped back and forth, left foot, right foot, as if doing some kind of dance to try to escape the heat of the flames.

Two more open gates. Then they followed me to the safety of the wheat and bolted toward the other horses. I had done all I could do. All the horses were together. The girls' show heifers and their newborn calves refused to follow me to the wheat and instead headed directly for the flames. There was no stopping them. Their instincts took them away from my perceived safe ground.

It was time to leave.

Back in my car, I looked ahead to witness the flames jump across my driveway. Farther south, I could see that the fire had engulfed the road. There was no way out, on roads or otherwise. No escaping to safety.

Without a second thought, I turned my car around and headed for the center of the wheat field. If it was good enough for the horses, it would have to be good enough for me. I parked my car facing the flames head on. If this fire was going to take everything, it wasn't going to do it behind my back.

The horses stood together at the far end of the field, almost at attention, fear evident in their eyes as they watched the flames advance upon their home. How could I reassure them that they were in the safest place possible when I could hardly reassure myself?

I called Doug, then I called 911 again. Someone needed to know where I was. If my barrier of safety didn't hold up, or the smoke got too thick, I wanted them to be able to find me. Then I called my dad.

Even though I'm 36, the reassurance of my father on the other end of the line was golden. "Be careful," were his words. "Let me know. Stay in touch." What more could he say? I felt sorry for him, feeling his frustration, 240 miles away, knowing there was nothing he could do to help his little girl.

Now 20 minutes into the fire, my cell phone rang incessantly. Fellow ranchers are always on the lookout for grass fires, and word began to spread that it was overtaking our

ranch. "Yes, we need help!" "No, you can't get here from the east. You'll drive right into the fire." "Yes, I'm OK, but I think the house might be gone."

Saying those words out loud brought a sense of reality to my nightmare. The thick, black smoke and flames had completely overtaken my view of the house. Our century-old ranch house had solid wood walls covered by vinyl siding. It was no match for any fire, much less a fire of this size and scope. I grabbed a camera that was in my car's console and snapped a few pictures. The journalist in me wanted to document it all.

Then, for a few moments, the phone quit ringing, and I was overcome by a peaceful feeling. It was as if God was sitting there with me, holding my hand. I knew at that point, everything would be OK. I didn't know what "OK" would entail, but that warmth and peace provided much-needed reassurance. We would get through this, and it would be "OK."

The tranquil feeling then gave way to survival instincts. The fire was close, and the smoke became increasingly thick. I grabbed a case of bottled water from the back of my car and soaked a stray T-shirt that was sitting in the seat. Holding the wet cloth over my face helped reduce the impact of the smoke in my lungs.



And then I saw Doug. He was leading the volunteer firemen through the pasture toward our house. The fire blocked the road accessing our place, and he navigated these heroes through pastures to reach our home. The smoke was so thick, Doug got lost in our small field trying to get to the house. Finding a fence, he followed its path to our home.

Soon, he found me in the field. The reassurance to see him in person was indescribable. “The house isn’t on fire – yet,” he said.

I drove through the smoke to find most things engulfed in flames. The yard was on fire, my plants on the porch were black, round bales of hay stacked nearby were burning, as was the tractor parked adjacent to the house. But I still had a home.

The next 12 hours were spent fighting the fire with water-filled cattle sprayers and bulldozers. The unrelenting winds – sustained at 40 mph with gusts at 60 to 70 mph – created a dust and ash storm like the firefighters had never seen. The heat of the fire had consumed every inch of organic matter that grew from the ground, and the winds whisked away the remains. All that was left was burned sand, which gleamed like crystals in the palm of your hand. The charred pastures were not black but instead revealed an eerie brown moon-scape. It was like the ranch had disappeared.

Dozens of friends and neighbors came to our aid that day, herding cattle away from the flames and rescuing baby calves that were just days old. We watched as cows ran directly into the fire to find their newborn babies, and they escaped with only minor injuries. A few young calves suffered burned ears or tails, but all have recovered very well.

Later that day, we evacuated the horses to a nearby boarding facility. Their eyes were swollen shut due to the smoke and flying ash and sand, but they, too, recovered without any lasting effects.

My family experienced many miracles that day. There were drifts of embers and soot inside our house and attic, but it never caught fire. Wood shavings in the horse barn smoldered in the stalls, yet those embers never ignited the barn. Flames 20 feet tall licked all sides of a steel barn filled with a year’s supply of hay, but nary a spark made its way inside.

Eight volunteer fire departments worked tirelessly throughout that day trying to preserve structures in the fire’s path. According to the Texas Forest Service, the fire that rolled across our ranch – named the Two Mile Hill fire – burned approximately 20,000 acres before tracking to a large lake, where it was snuffed out. All told, on April 9, 2009, more than 140,000 acres in North Texas burned that day. Many homes, livestock and lives were lost.

As for my family, we’re optimistic about our future.



Within three weeks of the fire, a string of wet days in April filled our rain gauge with almost six inches of moisture. Livestock tanks are full, and the grass has filled our pastures. It’s almost as if we have a 1,000-acre lawn. The fire cleaned our pastures of dead mesquite trees and brush piles. Our livestock – which grazed a temporary home for the summer – have now returned to an improved grass pasture that can sustain their nutritional needs.

April 9 was a day that I will never forget, and a day on which I will always be thankful – thankful I still have a home to walk into at the end of a long day, thankful my children were in school during the fire and did not experience the terror with their own eyes, thankful for so many friends and neighbors who gave of their time and assets fighting the fire and in the days following, thankful to the Lord for giving me peace during what can easily be described as hell on earth.

And thankful that the ranch is reappearing. 📍

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