

Fire Inspires 82-year-old to Thin Trees

AS THE 2002 FIRE SEASON HEATED UP, Christie Kinney's thoughts immediately turned to her land. Then this plucky octogenarian rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

A resident of the forested Elk Ridge subdivision in Routt County, Colorado, Kinney started raking up loose vegetation near her house, a cleanup that she performs with ritual regularity each spring. But when the Hinman Fire spread near her home, she kicked into high gear—thinning, limbing and even serving as a public advocate for defensible space.

Keeping her home protected from wild-fire was harder for Kinney than it is for some. At 82, she has suffered some of the usual infirmities of age. But as an outdoor enthusiast all her life, this old farm girl sounds almost defiant in saying, "I can still run that limb saw."

Efforts motivate others

Kinney said her yard—which covers more than two acres and is steeply sloped in areas—became "brushy" after the death of her husband, Harold, in 1989.

Born in 1920 on a farm in Kansas, Kinney married her high school sweetheart in 1939 and they started their married life on a farm near Topeka. In 1958, they moved with their son and daughter to Longmont, Colorado. Harold spent most of his career helping to make solar observatories as a machinist and tool and die maker in Boulder for the firm now called Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corp.

About 10 years before his retirement, they began to look for a new place to live. They had taken camping trips to Routt County since 1960 and fell in love with the mountain landscape. In 1970 they bought the lot where they built their home.

In pioneering fashion, the Kinneys had a well drilled and installed a septic tank and water lines, then built their log home with their own hands, putting up the garage first so they could live there while they worked on



the house. They started with an asphalt shingle roof, switching to metal when they could get the color they wanted and moved into their new home in the early spring of 1980 with snow still on the ground.

"I love it here," said Kinney, describing her efforts to keep the fire threat down by clearing her property of ground fuels. "That's the reason I worked so hard last summer."

When her husband was alive, she said, he was on the fire board and they worked together to keep the land clear of underbrush. He would fell trees, then she would limb them and load them in a trailer pulled by a tractor.

But after his death, her work to reduce the fuel load consisted mainly of annual raking of leaves, twigs and pine needles. That's how she started in the spring of 2002.

Watching the Hinman Fire from her home provided Kinney with all the motivation she needed to do more. "That's when I started really thinking about it and thinking we should do something around here," she

Christie Kinney and Ginger ready to limb their trees



Chuck Vale, Routt County director of emergency management

said. With two children, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, she enlisted help from her family, as well as other area residents.

Her daughter from Grand Junction, Colorado, visits each year for a spring cleaning, but in 2002 Kinney asked her to pitch in with yard work instead of doing household chores. They raked even farther from the house than usual, collecting more than 30 bags of leaves. Later, she recruited her son and daughter-in-law to rake even more.

Meanwhile, State Forester Terry Wattles paid her a visit. He sharpened some of her husband's old tools, identified some vegetation and recommended someone to help with its removal.

A contractor cut down more than 30 trees identified by Wattles, while Kinney put her freshly sharpened shears to work on juniper bushes. "I had always avoided them because they're so sticky and make me itch so badly," she said. "Those juniper bushes just really burn hot, I guess."

Kinney remembers the time when Chuck Vale spotted "me and my little limb saw" high in a tree, working to trim some branches. Vale—Routt County's director of emergency management—admired her determination and self-sufficiency while privately fearing for her safety. He graciously offered to lend a hand.

Vale thought that Kinney's actions could serve as an example for all. He said the problem with mitigation is getting people motivated, and he thought Kinney's story might help motivate others. At his request, she contacted local media to tell the story of her efforts to create defensible space. Articles followed in local and statewide newspapers.

"It can't always be the government saying we need to do this and that," Vale said.

Kinney's efforts did help to get others interested in the mitigation cause. Eventually, more than 25 of her neighbors created significant defensible space in their yards, too.

Childhood memories of fire

Kinney said she never liked the prairie grassland fires near her home when she was growing up. "Being a youngster, it scared me," she recalled.

The alarm would come over the telephone, which was a party line.

"With the old switchboards, it was possible for the operator at the central office to open up all the party lines at once out in the county in order to give out an emergency message," she recalled. She remembered the set-up because her grandfather had operated the central phone office in the 1920s before they had electricity. The switchboard had battery-operated lights.

After the call came, her father would hurry to get his wagon with the water tank. She estimated that the big metal tanks used to water the cows held about 500 gallons. Her father would put gunnysacks in the tank so they could soak as he drove the Model T or horse and wagon, usually taking about 30 to 40 minutes to get to the fire. He would have to go through fenced pastures opening gates along the way. Once there, he and the other men would beat the fire out with the soaked gunnysacks.

The women would get together and make sandwiches to bring to the men. "I got to go with them one time," she said.

More work to be done

After all her work, Kinney is pleased with her landscape. "I think it looks beautiful," she said. "I miss the trees, but it's better than the alternative of having too many trees and having them burn."

Next spring, she plans to put her propane tank underground and to take out one healthy tree that could cause problems because of its proximity to the house and other trees. She also hopes her son-in-law will take out some trees that beetles have killed. And she wants to terrace one area so that it will not be so steep.

"I'll shovel it myself if I have to," she said. ■