

VOGUE



This Side of Paradise

What survivors' stories of the deadliest blaze in California's history tell us about the new state of climate change.

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CULTURE

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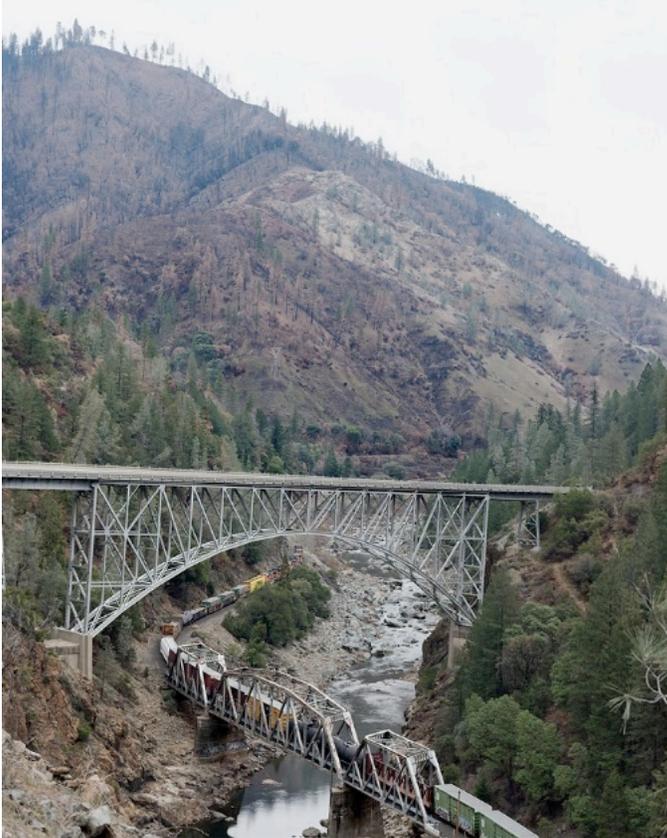
The Camp Fire began on the clear morning of November 8, 2018, which made it eerier still, a radiant sky that turned black. Through the pines and cedars came the persistent sound of crackling foil. Propane tanks exploded like bombs. Most people in Butte County had lived through multiple fires before—this is northern California, this is wildfire country—but no one had seen one like this, so fast and enveloping. No one had experienced the unique horror of watching the hospital burn, or the Safeway, as flames lapped at the sides of their own cars on the one main road out. No one had witnessed a whole town go.

The fire burned through rural Concow, through Magalia, through Paradise. On Butte Creek, it burned the Honey Run Covered Bridge, a local landmark for 132 years. It devastated entire neighborhoods, and inexplicably it left some houses unscathed. It is believed to have originated on Camp Creek Road, north of Paradise, which is where the Camp Fire, now the deadliest and most destructive in California's history, got its name.

The president repeatedly called Paradise “Pleasure” when he visited a little over a week after the blaze, advised the state to “rake” the forest floor, and made repeated threats to cut off federal disaster aid. “We cannot continue to spend billions of dollars, billions and billions of dollars,” he said in early February.

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“Forest fires are totally preventable.” Trump’s pronouncement came two days after 100 Camp Fire victims were told they could no longer camp on their own lands as they rebuilt, because of benzene contamination, and a week after the Red Cross closed its last relief shelter in Chico, which still housed approximately 600 people.



A railroad and vehicle bridge cross the Feather River in Butte County near the suspected origin point of the Camp Fire.



“If you’ve been through [a] wildfire, you think you know what to expect,” says Michelle Camy, a photographer who lives in Chico with her husband, Brandon Squyres, a musician. She drives to her parents’ ranch near Butte College almost every day to take care of her horses. The ranch survived the Humboldt fires of 2008, and they had made some crucial changes, like installing solar paneling for the water pump, but early on the morning of November 8, there was a new urgency in her father’s voice. “We’re the last one in the canyon so it would have hit us first,” Michelle told me. She drove in as Paradise burned on the ridge above. “We’re like a buffer. We got trapped fast.”

“Horses don’t like to be alone, so we tried to keep them together,” Michelle says. “Brandon got the idea to make a stencil with my phone number and spray-painted it on all the horses, just in case we had to let them loose.” They moved the animals close to the house for safety, creating a makeshift corral with electric tape. By 5:00 p.m., fallen trees in the road blocked their way out and fire surrounded the ranch. Brandon, who has a fire sprinkler business, walked the grounds in a pair of swimming goggles and a backpack water tank, tamping out grass fires. Coyotes and deer fled through the yard, and at one point, a terrified bear. “We saw him again a few days ago,” Michelle says. “So he survived okay too.”

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Brook Madison (left, with her children, Justin and Eva) grew up in Paradise. It's in her blood, she says, and now a reminder of her hometown is also tattooed on her forearm. Soon she's leaving, heading west to work as a massage therapist. "I'm going to the coast," she says. "It's time to move on."

Jennifer Christensen (right) let her 2-year-old son, Avery, sleep late on the morning of the fires when she left him with his adopted grandparents and drove to work in Chico. When she tried to go back to rescue them, she was stopped by the police. "I thought I'd never see my son again. I kept calling his grandparents, who were driving by then. At one point they put Avery on and he told me he loved me and he'd be okay. But at three o'clock they were stuck in the same spot they'd gotten to at noon. At one point the authorities moved them to a parking lot and said they were going to put them in buses. They stood there with strangers surrounded by flames 100 feet high. They were able to drive, finally, but it took them until 8:00 to get to me in Chico. My son was okay. He had burns on the back of his head, but he was okay. He still has PTSD. He freaks out when he hears loud sounds, a train. He has major separation anxiety. He can't be without me. We live in a trailer now, parked at a friend's in Magalia, and I'm not a trailer kind of person. But sometimes I go in there and cry."

Though the cause of the Camp fire has not been confirmed, PG&E, the already embattled electric utility, acknowledged last week that electric equipment is likely a factor. Facing upward of \$30 billion in liability, PG&E declared bankruptcy, and is the target of numerous individual and class action lawsuits. The larger blame is more nebulous, of course, but it is embodied in the most apocalyptic image of Paradise: a sizzled sports car, stripped and oxidized to a permanent

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shade of primer and rusted ocher, parked in front of a gas pump above the canyon and a perimeter of scorched pines. It is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, it is a burned car commercial, a molten American dream of oil and conquered country.

Before the Camp Fire, Paradise was a picturesque town in the Sierra Nevada foothills, once a gold rush town, now a retirement town. Parts of *Gone With the Wind* were shot in Paradise, which stood in for Scarlett O'Hara's fictional plantation Tara, before it too was burned. In the late 1950s, Raymond Carver wrote some of his first short stories in a little bungalow here which is now just a stone hearth on a destroyed side street.

The sudden and arbitrary nature of fire shows exactly how unexpectedly a person can become homeless, how quickly the surety of one's world can change, how the idea of home is upended. Most of the fire evacuees first took temporary shelter in Chico, normally about a 20-minute drive southwest, which declared a housing shortage and homelessness crisis weeks before the Camp Fire. In an age of global warming, grassroots citizen-led groups like North Valley Mutual Aid are taking it upon themselves to initiate long-term renewal, rebuilding, and creating community. Ordinary people, many who lost everything, are doing the same.



Ciara Barnes (right), a women's studies major at the University of California, Santa Barbara, started Miss HeartShine when she was still at Paradise High. "I competed in pageants in high school. I started late; I wasn't a typical 'toddlers and tiaras' kind of girl," she says. "My guilty pleasure is listening to metal. But I heard pageants were a good way to get scholarships, so I started doing a few. I didn't have the most expensive gown; I was a bigger size. I started to think how nice it would be if that

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wasn't the focus. And if volunteer work wasn't just an afterthought." She founded the Miss Heartshine Pageant based on service and "inner beauty"—"A girl who has heartshine lights up a room naturally, and that's what we look for," Ciara says—and it has since grown to include regional and national pageants, with all-ages and gender-nonconforming categories, and a warehouse of 250 dresses for competitors who couldn't otherwise afford them. All of the dresses were destroyed by the Camp Fire. Ciara, whose family lost everything, is taking a year off college to rebuild too.



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Alexx, Megan, and Kristin. Alexx Collins was kicked out of an abusive home in Washington in her early teens, and traveled around the country, staying on the streets for 12 years, nearly half her life. When she was eight months pregnant with her daughter, now 3 years old, she met Siana Sononquie, who works with North Valley Housing and Safe Space and helped her find a place to live, and when the fire hit, a job finding homes for others.

Kristin and Alexx first met years ago, at another California shelter, where they bonded over years of living on the streets and ultimately lost touch. “Your hair was so short when I met you!” Megan says, pulling at the dark curls that fall over Alexx’s tattoos. “You were singing in the streets,” Kristin remembers. “And now I have a spice rack!” Alexx says. “I’m very proud of my new spice rack.” When they ran into each other again after the fires, in the Red Cross shelter in Chico, Kristin had just found herself without a home for the first time in three years. Alexx was doing outreach for Continuum of Care, a multiagency organization that provides services aimed at self-sufficiency and permanent housing. “Alexx makes space in her life for people,” Kristin says. “She has such an open mind. And she understands what people are going through, ’cause she lived it too.”



Members of the Paradise High School Bobcats girls volleyball team. Paradise High was remarkably spared from the fires, except for water damage that renders it inoperable until fall. In the meantime, like other schools in the district, they made do. Elsewhere in town, Sheri Eichar, an elementary school teacher, turned her house into a makeshift classroom. Drop-in classes for several grades were held at a Lenscrafters at the Chico Mall, and currently the student body of Paradise High School report to class in a Facebook office complex near the Chico airport.

Ninety percent of Paradise High students were displaced by the fire, moving into motels and overcrowded trailers or moving out of the area altogether. Enrollment at the school has dropped by nearly half, according to the school's athletic director, Anne Stearns, who also coaches the girls' volleyball team. Only six of her players will return next year—normally, she says, they have three teams. “But the ones that remain, it's like a family bond, surviving this,” she says.



Kenwani-Cahee Kranitz, Lete Sanchez, and Nicole Jaquez.

“Paradise was beautiful and set back in time and everyone was geriatric and it was awesome,” Nicole Jaquez says. “We’re like aspiring geriatrics,” says her fiancée, Lete Sanchez. (She is 32, and Nicole, who goes by Nicky, is 29.) Last summer, after Nicky got her undergraduate degree, she and Lete, a firefighter for Cal Fire, moved to Paradise and rented a red A-frame barn surrounded by cedar trees. They planned to buy a home in town one day. Every Sunday they would drag a mattress into the living room and sleep in front of all the windows. On the morning of November 8, Lete woke first. “It looked like I was at work. Like when I’m in the middle of a fire,” she says.

“My brain couldn’t process what I was seeing,” Nicky remembers. “The sky was raining ash. I looked at her and time stopped and I started shaking and crying.” They loaded up their cat and dogs, called friends, knocked on doors. As they pulled away, their neighbor stood in his yard aiming a garden hose at the flames. “When we headed down Skyway,” Nicky says, “Lete broke all these traffic laws. She didn’t hesitate, she just went around and jumped over like three streets, she was taking back alleys and driving over people’s lawns.” (“I’m kind of a badass,” says Lete.) “I mean, you don’t often get to see your partner doing their job,” adds Nicky.

Lete returned to work soon after the fire—too soon, she says now. She’s taking some time off. The RV4CampfireFamily project pairs families displaced by the fire with donated RVs; they liked the fact that Lete was a firefighter, and gave Lete and Nicky a fully outfitted 1956 Airstream. For now, they’re living like geriatrics again, pictured here with Lete’s mother, Kenwani-Cahee Kranitz, traveling the country, taking the bus on the road.



Megan Brown and Sharon Brown.

In Butte County, Megan Brown is a sixth-generation commercial cattle rancher. The cattle she does for her parents; the heritage hogs (including a particularly beloved sow named Marissa and a boar named Kevin Bacon) she raises on her own and blogs about on a site called thebeefjar.com. In 2017, the Cherokee fire destroyed two family homes and all the corrals. This time the fire felt surreal. “I didn’t take anything, really,” her mother, Sharon, says. “It just wasn’t real to me. It couldn’t happen again. We hadn’t gotten through the Cherokee fire yet.”

As they had done in 2017, as most ranchers do, she and Megan did not evacuate, staying as close as they could to the animals. They drove to the end of their road, the edge of the evacuation zone and tried to sleep in their cars, watching the fire return to the ranch again. “We couldn’t tell if we’d lost our homes,” Sharon says, her voice breaking. “The smoke changed and the fire changed by what it was burning.” “It looked like everything was gone,” Megan says. “But the pigs were alive, my dogs were alive; I was puking and crying, but my livelihood was still here.”

“Now the whole landscape of everything is changed,” she says. “At night, if you drive up toward Paradise, the lights are gone. Everything looks different. I’ve lived in California all my life. And I’m lucky—my house is made of stone, we have fire breaks, but the fires are different now. They’re bigger, faster, hotter. Superfires. Maybe it’s a new time in California where we talk about sustainability and community. Where we

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really talk about global warming. These are uncomfortable truths, but it's happening, and what do you do?"



In the Red Cross women's shelter, Taylor Reese is a calm center in a storm of chaos, tuning in to remote places. "It does help when everyone's fighting around you, to be able to just go, Oh, what are people doing in Germany right now?" Most of her closest relationships are online. "They were the most important relationships I ever had, and we're still friends," she says. Taylor is 34. "I didn't connect well to people when I was younger. I don't know if that's because I didn't know who I was yet, or what." Days after she came out as a woman, she was promoted to manager of a resort at Yellowstone National Park. When the season ended, a friend invited her to come live in Paradise. When the fire came, they fled on foot. The friend went to live out of state with family, but Taylor doesn't talk much to her these days. "I'll go back to my job when it starts up again, or maybe I'll go back to Albuquerque," she says, where she studied film.

In the Air Force, Taylor worked as a weather forecaster and was stationed near Biloxi, Mississippi. As she was completing her service in 2005, Katrina hit. "That was the first natural disaster I survived," Taylor says. "I came to California because I thought it was where I could be myself, trying makeup, wearing wigs. I did think climate change was bound to hit Northern California first, but I didn't think it would be within three weeks of me getting here."



In Butte County, Adopt a Family fliers are posted in coffeehouses and on community boards. Some families adopted each other naturally. Christy Voigt, Carrie Stratton, Anna Smith, and Chawne Luna were already part of a houseboat community of friends on Lake Oroville. The fires destroyed all of their permanent homes in Paradise, and several places where they worked burned too. The friends found themselves again on rapidly shifting ground, their unofficial water compound transferred to land. “We all got evacuated with the full expectation of going home,” Chawne says, as she sits inside her temporary home, braiding her teenage son Aiden’s hair. “And then we all moved in together.”

Christy and Carrie, best friends since seventh grade in Paradise, managed to find places to rent temporarily on a property in Chico with Christy’s mother and their combined four children: Ty and Chase, Maggie Mae and Tanner. Behind a small farm on the edge of Chico, Anna and Chawne found a spare rental house where they have integrated their families while they figure out where their lives will go next. “The toughest part is the kids,” says Chawne. “Paradise was all they’ve ever known.”

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