

'Mountain died,' friendships bloom

Bobcat fire victims drawn to reunion

By Mike McPhee
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DRAKE — Reunions are always bitter-sweet and the Bobcat Fire Chili Cookoff, marking the two-month anniversary of the devastating forest fire near here, was no exception.

About 150 people came down out of the woods to River Forks Restaurant on Saturday to eat, dance and talk about life since the fire, which briefly became the top priority in the nation for deploying resources and consumed 10,500 acres.

The cookoff was merely a guise to raise money for the volunteer fire department, which endeared itself to nearly every resident in the canyon for its tenacious stand against the inferno. But the talk was not all happy and sweet.

"It's been like a death. Our mountain died," said Cathy Miller, who with her contractor husband, Carl, were two of the unsung heroes in the fire that claimed more than a dozen houses.

"It'll never be the same. Everyone talks about how the forest rejuvenates itself. But it won't be in our lifetime. The grass and flowers will be back. But those black sticks will be there after we're gone."

And some residents, such as Elaine and Richard Wind, doubt they will ever be able to rebuild, not because of the fire's devastation but because they say their insurance company refuses to cover their losses sufficiently.

"(The company) gave us less than \$100,000," Elaine said, which was to cover the loss of her 30-year-old house and all its contents, plus lodging for six months. "When I asked them why it was so little, they told me my house was only 400 square feet. It was 900 square feet, always has

been and it's even shown on the tax assessor's records as 900. I think they mistakenly read a 4 for the 9, and that's all they're going to pay, they said.

"There's no way we can afford to go back up there unless they paid us the amount for a 900-square-foot house. Then we could make it."

The couple has been living in a 19-foot trailer in Loveland, while fighting to return their lives to normal.

Others, such as Bill and Diane Hughes, lost everything. The Hugheses were living in a trailer on their homesite as they prepared to build their dream home. All their materials, mostly lumber, had just been delivered when the fire swept through and destroyed everything, including the trailer. They said their insurance company had refused to insure the trailer and the building materials.

For the most part, the community has bonded since the fire.

"It brought a lot of us together to share the pain, the hurt and the sadness," said Jim Stetson, whose green chile finished very high in the voting Saturday. "This used to be a pretty place. It still is to some extent but it's sad."

As to the adamant belief among the community that the fire was started by a camper, who has refused to talk to police and hasn't been charged, Stetson asked, "What are you going to do? Sure he started it. We know it came from his campground. I know he didn't mean to but he should have been more careful.

"We asked the regional forester to shut down the national forest to camping until the fire ban is lifted Sept. 21, but they denied it. I think Montana has closed some national forests, why can't we?"



Carl Miller offers support to his wife, Cathy, during the Bobcat fire in June. The Millers were two of the unsung heroes in the Bobcat fire, which claimed more than a dozen houses. The couple helped firefighters locate homes, brought them food and answered countless phone calls from those who were evacuated. Since the fires, Carl Miller says he and neighbors have caught at least 15 different groups with campfires in the tinder-dry forest.

Denver Post file
John Epperson

Carl Miller — who with his wife helped firefighters locate homes, brought them food and answered countless phone calls from those who were evacuated — said he and neighbors have caught at least 15 different groups with burning campfires since the Bobcat fire was doused.

"Some people just don't get it," he said, shaking his head. "We've found kids dancing around bonfires, campers, all kinds of people."

A sore spot for many is the belief that

donations made out to the Red Cross during the fire would be passed on to the victims of the fire. However, according to Red Cross policy, all donations are kept by the agency to support its efforts in future disasters.

Many residents here said that when they designated their donations to go to the Red Cross, they never believed the money wouldn't remain in the community. "We'll never do that again," said one. A Red Cross spokesman could not be reached for comment.