

Carpenter Road Fire
Evacuated Youth Camp to Bustling Fire Camp
9/17/2015

Fruitland Bible Camp Director Paul Tappero describes the events of August 14th as being reasonably normal, until... A Ukrainian Church group of 270 youth and sponsors from the Seattle area had arrived the previous evening for a long weekend retreat. Enjoyment of Friday's activities caused a late start for dinner. As they were finally sitting down for the meal, authorities notified the camp that an approaching wildfire required immediate evacuation of the camp. The importance of the announcement was not fully understood until a group member relayed it in their native language. Responses were then swiftly put into action. Children were ushered to the green ballfield and all buildings were checked to assure no one was inadvertently left behind. With everyone accounted for, they quickly returned to collect their belongings and move to a safer location. The threat was real. Flames scorched the entire hillside just across the road from it, but the camp was spared. One can only imagine the stories those campers have and will tell of their 2015 Bible camp experience.

The story does not end with a tense exit. As the Carpenter Road Fire continued to escalate, a flood of incoming firefighting resources needed a base of operations. Fruitland Bible Camp was chosen for that purpose. The tidy red and white buildings were rapidly engulfed by tents, large and small, firefighting apparatus and a myriad of supply and support vehicles. The "population" of the command post exceeded 1000 at its peak and has bustled with activity to feed, shelter, shower and support firefighters and managers for over a month. The incident management teams brought in caterers, portable shower units and other contractors to support their operations, but camp buildings served well as meeting rooms, offices and dormitories—affording the rare luxury of sleeping in a bed under a real roof at a fire camp.

Prior to its new-found celebrity as base of operations for a large wildfire, Fruitland Bible Camp in rural Stevens County, Washington has had a rich history. Founded in 1943, Reverend Edwin and Mrs. Mary Murphy Torgerson felt a very specific calling from God to establish a place to focus on spiritual growth and renewal. Initially it had a local focus with the chapel on the grounds serving as the local church. Over the years, other opportunities and activities were added to fulfill the original mission. The "camping season" expanded and the number of campers took a decided increase beginning in 2000.

The quality of the base of operations has a big influence on the firefighters' experience. A good camp can offset many other less positive factors and a poor camp can diminish an otherwise positive experience. Although Reverend Torgerson and his successors likely did not consider hosting a major fire camp in their plans for a spiritual renewal facility, the consensus is that it served admirably. In its own way, Fruitland Bible Camp contributed positively to the successful containment of the Carpenter Road Fire.

###