

Local scouts forced to flee Spanish Peaks

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Open flames can be seen in the woods Thursday, June 20, as Boy Scouts and their leaders and families were forced to evacuate the Scout Camp at Spanish Peaks in Colorado. The fire destroyed nearly everything at the famous camp. Photo courtesy Cindy Frerichs

Boy Scouts familiar with making fire, not fleeing from it

By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

Around 6 p.m. local time on Wednesday, June 19, leaders at the Spanish Peaks Scout Ranch were busy taking down flags for the traditional end of the day ceremony at Boy Scout summer camps.

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Soon after, one of the youth at the Colorado camp spotted smoke, and a camp staffer went closer to investigate. Upon inspection, the staffer could see visible flames.

Scouts and staff camping at Spanish Peaks were quickly evacuated, with many going to an open shelter at John Mall High School in Walsenburg, Colo., and others choosing to go home.

Nearly 13,500 acres of land were burned in the fire. The cause of the fire was lightning from a storm in the area the previous evening, and flames were ignited on Wednesday by strong Colorado winds.



Spanish Peaks is a traditional choice for many Southwest Kansas and Oklahoma Panhandle Boy Scout troops for summer camp, and Liberal Scout Ethan Frerichs, along with his mother and Scout leader, Cindy, were at the camp at the time the fire started.

This was Ethan's third visit to the camp, going twice as a Boy Scout and once as a Cub Scout. Cindy said about 175 Scouts, 45 adult leaders and 50 other staff were evacuated the night of the fire.

"There were troops from Kansas, of course, a few from Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma," she said. "They said there was a Nebraska one."

As expected, Cindy said summer camps have been canceled for the rest of this year.

“It will be several days before they’ll let anybody back up there,” she said Tuesday. “The majority of the troops had to leave with nothing. Had to leave the trailers behind and all of our equipment.”

Cindy said it is not known at this time what is left from the blaze at Spanish Peaks.

“It will be a few days before they ever let anybody back up there again,” she said. “They’re going to put together a team to go up and see what can be salvaged, go from campsite to campsite to see what troops might have anything left.”

Cindy said plans do call for summer camps to start again next year, though.

“There won’t be anything left this year,” she said. “It’s all been canceled. From what they’ve said and posted, they will try to be open for next year. We don’t know what buildings are left.”

Along with the evacuation, Cindy said camp leaders are working to get any troops who were scheduled to have summer camp at Spanish Peaks accommodated in another location.

During the day at summer camps, Boy Scouts attend classes for various merit badges, and Cindy said on Wednesday, the Scouts at this year’s camp had just finished their classes for the day when the fire hit.

“Most of the boys were either back at their camp or on their way or picking up food for the evening meal,” she said.

When the fire was spotted, it was about a mile and a half from Spanish Peaks, according to Cindy, who added that many people had put much in the way of time and effort into the camp.

“There’s so many people that were there as Boy Scouts and are now leaders that take their troops there too,” she said. “Our boys, if given the choice, always vote to go back there instead of trying somewhere else.”

Cindy said camp staff, including director Shirley Salley, daughter of Bill Salley of Liberal, and Liberal’s Lana Hittle, handled the evacuations very well, as did other emergency workers.

“Red Cross set up a shelter at the high school on Wednesday night,” she said. “The majority of the scouts spent the night there and left the next day. There were a few that had to wait for rides because they didn’t have any transportation to get home.”

Turpin, Okla., Boy Scout Eli Bromlow was not at Spanish Peaks at the time of the fire, but having attended summer camp there a few times, he does have some memories.

“I remember how cool and calm the weather was,” he said. “The hills and mountains was a breathtaking view, and there were endless tall trees, which to a boy from the Panhandle of Oklahoma was different, the clouds were always above us letting some rain fall now and then.”

Bromlow, who recently achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, said when he heard the news of the fire, he was naturally saddened and shocked.

“That beautiful place is now a pile of ash?” he said. “It was hard to believe. I thought one of my friends were playing a cruel joke, until I heard the news. Now I have only memories of Spanish Peaks which I will treasure always, and to the Scouts who were looking forward to camping there, I hope you guys are safe and help rebuild the awesome Spanish Peaks.”