

# Oakland Tribune

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January 26, 1992

To the Judges:

On a quiet Sunday morning in October, Oakland Tribune reporter Janet Byron drove to a small grass fire in the hills. City Editor John Raess got his daughter ready for ballet class. Editor and Publisher Robert Maynard looked at the scaffolding around his house: Did he like the color of the new paint?

An hour later, Byron tried to grab interviews as 10,000 people fled for their lives. Raess directed a dozen reporters and photographers in the field, more on the way. Maynard loaded the car with family treasures, his backyard in flames.

A hard hot wind had whipped the little grass fire into a 2,000-degree inferno. The firestorm raged over three square miles, killed 25 people, gutted more than 3,000 homes and cost at least \$1.68 billion. It was the most destructive wildfire in California history, fueled by exploding eucalyptus trees and wood-shingle roofs, complicated by narrow streets and dry reservoirs. Entire neighborhoods went up in smoke. Yet experts said it was only a preview of disasters to come, part of a "fire of the future" trend caused by cities pushing into open land.

The Oakland Tribune covered this tragedy as it has no other. The newspaper, which only two months earlier had been given new life by a financial restructuring, assigned its entire staff to the firestorm. The first week we published 500 stories, columns and photographs, more than 100 pages worth of coverage. Maynard's eyewitness report -- written while the fate of the publisher's home was still unknown -- was among dozens of Tribune exclusives. Miraculously, the Maynard house was saved. Many were not so lucky.

Our reporters worked 20-hour days. The first day, they wrote between power brownouts in the Tribune Tower, some of their friends and relatives still unaccounted for. Within 24 hours, they uncovered the inadequate firefighting response and empty reservoirs, and they traced the inferno's source to a blaze on Saturday that hadn't been fully doused. Within 48 hours, they formed a nine-member investigative team that filed more than a dozen public records requests. The Tribune published two pages of photos daily, chronicling the grief or joy of those whose homes were lost or saved, as well as the unreal landscape, the rows of broken fireplaces that stood like tombstones marking the places where houses had been.

Within a week, the Tribune began a five-part investigative series, *Bitter Lessons*, explaining why wildfire ravaged our hillsides with such ease. The series revealed Oakland's haphazard standards for building in fire-prone areas; how firefighters could have saved blocks of homes if the water system had not failed; that the fire department's emergency response plan was 10 years old and included phone numbers for firefighters who had died, and that a powerful lobby had persuaded state legislators to ignore the fire hazards of wood-shingle roofing.



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Bitter Lessons ended with a front-page editorial, *Never Again*, detailing what we must do to prevent a future tragedy of such magnitude. Within weeks, city officials approved a fire protection plan that included many of the Tribune's recommendations. A key state report supported our blueprint for fire-safe building in the hills. And on the first day of the 1992 session, California lawmakers introduced 10 fire bills, all related to issues we had raised. In addition, the Tribune received a Special Honor for our fire coverage from the Northern California chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. We were the only newspaper to be so honored.

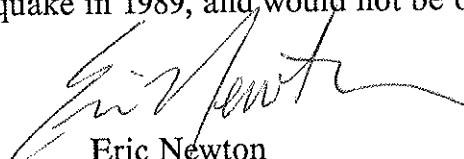
If the Trib's coverage was unmatched, so was its service to the community.

From the beginning, we thought of the fire's victims. We had to. They were our civic leaders and business people, our artists, lawyers and laborers, our friends and neighbors. They were family.

On the first day, the Tribune created a fire Hot Line. Hundreds called with questions; we gave them answers. We began publishing a daily full-page Bulletin Board for community messages. Friends used the Bulletin Board to find missing friends in the chaos after the fire; others found free counseling, new housing, lost pets, a place to volunteer. The newspaper opened up space for letters from people who wanted to praise or criticize. A community talked itself back from the depths of disaster through its newspaper -- and that dialogue did not end when the smoke cleared. The Bulletin Board and the Hot Line continue, and our news reporters and photographers visit the fire scene daily as we follow the survivors' struggle to rebuild.

The Tribune printed the first list of homes destroyed, the only running list of damaged homes, the only comprehensive biographies of people who died in the inferno, the only independent estimate of the firestorm's financial toll, and the most detailed catalogue of lost artwork and architecture. Through the Trib, people from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area learned about the fire survivors and their needs. Within two weeks, the Red Cross had received more than enough money to pay its disaster bills.

As we became part of the story, the story became part of us. Tribunes were dropped free at relief centers and placed at the feet of sleeping firefighters. And when the flames finally died, our staff found it had recorded more than a story of grief and loss; we had captured the strength of people who were not defeated by earthquake in 1989, and would not be overcome by fire this time.



Eric Newton  
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