

Cooke City hermit homeless

Scott McMillion



Tom Garrison, 83, lost his cabin to wildfire.

Tommy Garrison has lived alone in a cabin in the woods for 30 years, making it easy to call him a hermit. And perhaps he is. He almost fits the stereotype.

Only now, because of efforts to stop the Storm Creek fire, he has been burned out of his home.

At the age of 83, Garrison cuts his own firewood by hand, is unaccustomed to living with electricity and plumbing. He has a reputation for quarrelsomeness and eccentricity, for shooting first and asking questions later when strangers approach.

On the other hand, he is an articulate man who enjoys driving his yellow MG convertible. He says he doesn't care for reading, yet he speaks intelligently about topics like rain forest defoliation and this year's Paris-Dakar road race.

Garrison's home was the victim of the angry winds that kicked up in the Cooke City area Wednesday. Gusting to 40 mph, they knocked an intentionally set backfire reeling out of control.

Ignited to protect Cooke City and Silver Gate from the Storm Creek fire raging a few miles to the west, the backfire swept the forested hillsides from just west of Silver Gate to seven miles east of Cooke City.

The out-of-control blaze barely squeaked by Cooke City, passing within 50 feet of some buildings.

Although it missed Cooke City, the fire took four storage buildings and five residences, one of them the 16-by-24-foot cabin Garrison had called home for the past 30 years.

“They wouldn’t let me through the roadblock to get home and everything went up with my cabin,” Garrison said Friday, explaining how he lost a lifetime’s accumulations. “As a result I have nothing left but this car, these clothes I wear and a chainsaw I had just bought.”

Garrison is sleeping in his car these days, where he says he stays warm during the bone-chilling nights with an aluminum space blanket and a fur-lined hood.

The former miner, prospector and trapper pronounces his current sleeping arrangements satisfactory, although he expects he will change things before winter sets in.

“I don’t have any plans now, but I’m of the opinion that I’ll work out some solution,” he said. “However, at my age I can’t lay up. I have to be active. Last winter I had to saw firewood by hand, split it up, all that sort of thing.”

Garrison remains agile despite his age. He had lived yearround in his isolated cabin near Cooke Pass and, until now, had made his infrequent 4-mile trips to Cooke City on foot, in the MO or, when snows were deep, on snowshoes.

His cabin is now nothing more than deep, powdery ashes surrounding the twisted metal debris of cooking pots and a cookstove.

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By SCOTT McMILLION
Bozeman Daily Chronicle

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The Ted K Archive

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