

MALDEN

Babb Fire: The people and their stories



Sept. 23, 2020



Special Supplement to
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• Whitman County Gazette
• Cheney Free Press

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Discovering Malden through disaster

By Paul Delaney
Special Section Editor

MALDEN - When a low pressure system moved through the region on Labor Day, it brought with it a fire weather watch as the system produced strong gusty winds. And when coupled with terribly dry conditions in both fields and forests, it was, unfortunately, the perfect recipe for a potential tragic result.

For the tiny community of Malden in northern Whitman County, it was a day the few hundred residents will never forget. The 18,000-acre Babb Road fire quickly raced south and then turned towards the west. It reached Pine Creek, which funneled the conflagration that later consumed much of both Malden and Pine City.

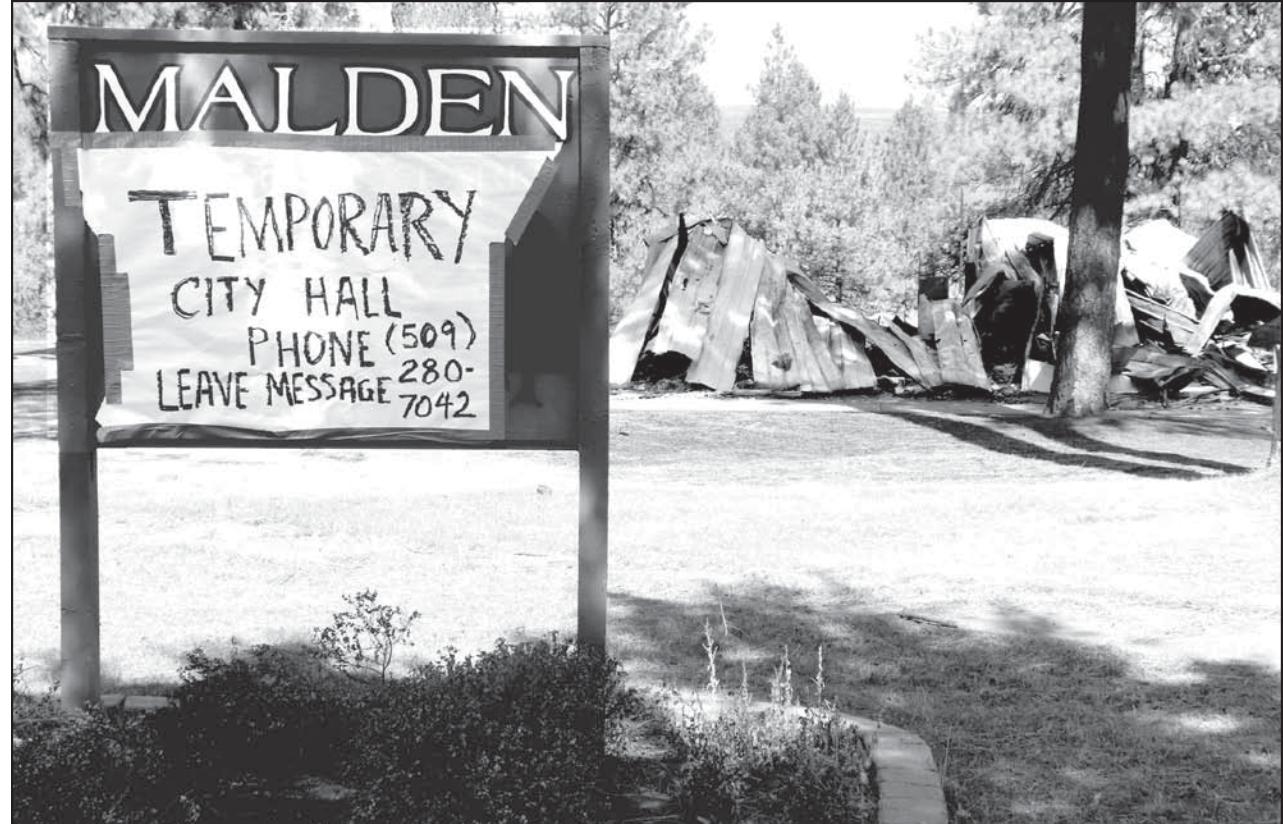
Retired - well semi-retired - since December 2018, my phone rang Sept. 15 and Free Press Publisher Roger Harnack



Paul Delaney

wanted to know if I would want to head to Malden in search of collecting as many survivor interviews as possible.

Just where in the heck is Malden in the first place I thought? The former bustling regional headquarters of the old Milwaukee Road railroad is just west of Rosalia along U.S. Highway 195. Pre-fire, it was a mere skeleton of its former self, but it was still full of life. Now despite losing an estimated 80% of its structures - primarily homes - just a week removed from the devastation, the burned-out version of Malden was dusting itself off and doing what they



Malden's park has been turned into a temporary town hall.

could to rebuild.

Seems that with small communities, the ability to gather together and help one another is just part of their DNA.

I spent portions of

three days in Malden, stunned at first when I drove past the city limits sign. But after poking my recorder and camera

at willing residents, I left with the notion that in the

next few months Malden so I suspect it will be for Malden, Wash.?

In the meantime, here are some of the harrowing Babb Fire stories, as told by residents of Malden and Pine City:

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The Ritzville Adams County
Journal

WHITMAN COUNTY
GAZETTE

Jeff Peterson

Welder and Fabricator

"I mean cost-of-living and I wanted to be out in the country."

Lost his shop, but saved home."

LATER IN THE DAY

"We came back. We ran up to Cheney and then came back about 7 or 8 that night and we stayed till 4 in the morning just yarding stuff.

(Peterson's focus was on a portion of the shed and to) keep that from catching on fire because I had pellets in there and a bunch of consumables. So if we can save that we'll probably save the house.

We got about 2 tons of pellets out of there. So hopefully that Yeah,"

INSURANCE?

"Yeah. I was hoping you were the insurance adjuster?"

A 10-YEAR RESIDENT

Jeff Peterson's experience as a member of the fire department gave him the knowledge to prepare defensible space that likely saved his home. The self-employed welder and fabricator lost his shop and will have to replace tools.

THANK YOU HEROES!

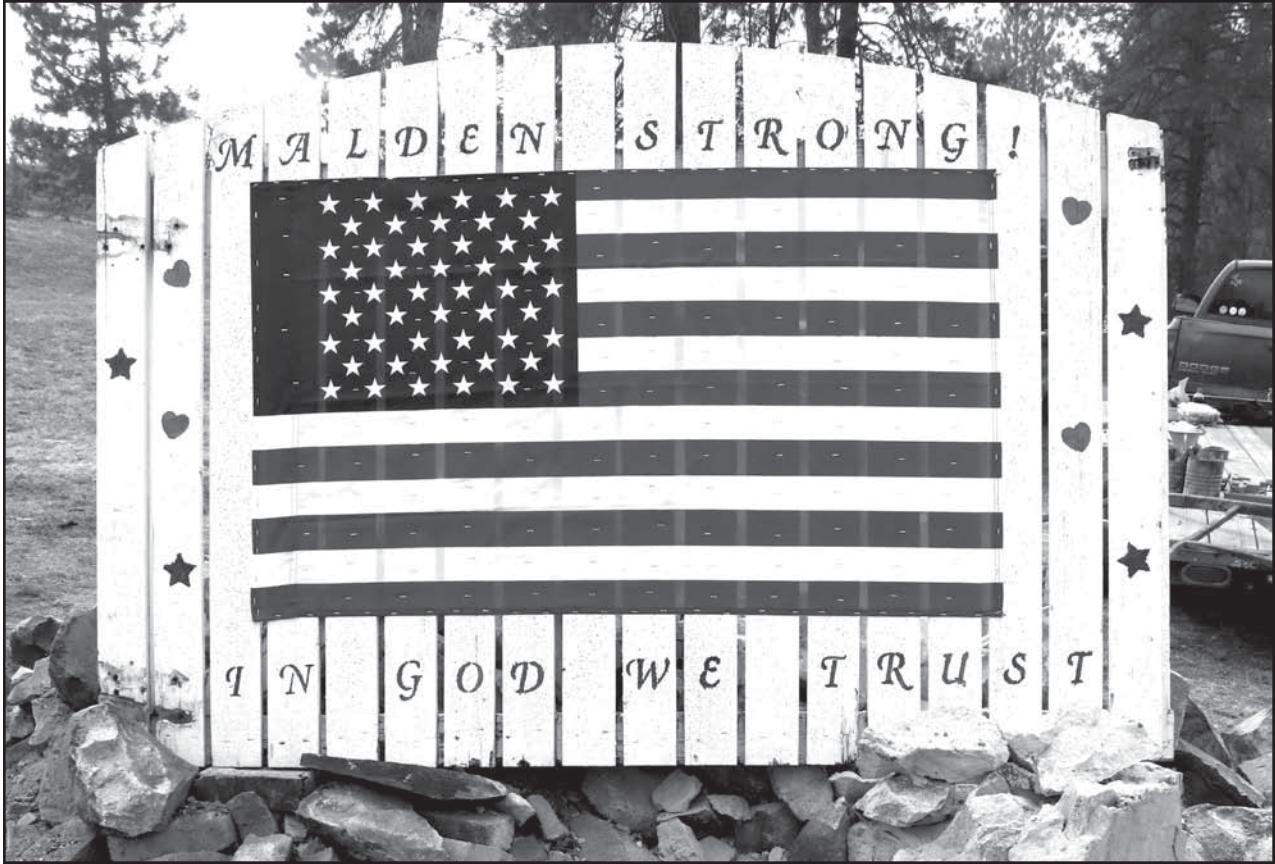
We salute our **first responders!**

Help us support our neighbors in need!

P1FCU has created a fire Relief Fund for the community members affected by the fires in Orofino, Colfax, Malden, Pine City, and the surrounding areas. We have donated \$30,000 to start the fund, and we will be accepting donations at all branch locations and over the phone. For more information or to donate, visit your local P1FCU branch or call 208.746.8900.



An ornamental windmill stands among debris.



A "Malden Strong" sign is erected atop rubble from the destroyed Masonic Lodge.

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Laura Rankin

Malden Resident

WHEN & WHY MALDEN?

"I wanted to get out to a more secluded place with privacy, cheaper taxes, right after I became a widow in 2009. I live in Malden."

I grew up in Cheney. My mom was a Willms, she grew up in the ranch across from rodeo grounds. Timm and Marie Shepard are my cousins."

REBUILD?

"Yes, I will rebuild, ASAP."

THE DAY OF THE FIRE

"Monday before we had to evacuate, I saw what it looked like in the sky before the wind went crazy. I called



Laura Rankin

friend up the hill. Then I just went back to what I was doing.

All of a sudden, fire crews were yelling, going door-to-door. We packed animal kennels, but only could find three out of eight pets.

We drove to the last hill before St. John, faced east on a farm road for 30 minutes. After we left town, the smoke plume was so black we knew it all might be gone. It was."

RETURNING TO THE AFTERMATH

"I found two felines singed with burnt pads two days after fire then one more four days after fire. Three are still missing and might be at Whitman County Humane Society.

"I already miss the vegetation, it was 300 feet long and 6-feet high greenery, 50 pine trees, irises, dahlias, and hundreds of bulbs, and perennials. We didn't even need curtains, no one could see. I already miss that."

WHAT SURVIVED

"Our 40-foot refrigerator sea container somehow survived with all of my parents pictures and memorabilia for their years of being on this earth. I'm going to see what pics I can come up



A burned out car sits near downtown Malden.

with between doing laundry in the hotel

I am blessed. We can only hope that all the underinsured can get help before winter, if they don't, we will lose them from the town.

People are living in tents in Rosalia and still going to work."

NOT A FAN...

"Gov. Inslee is a waste of space, he was only there blaming global warming. Give me a break, he hates

Trump so bad he won't ask for federal help.

These people needed FEMA trailers last week. I will be OK but many are struggling. I'm praying hard for them to be able to come back to Malden."

Thank You to the Firefighters, First Responders and all the volunteers for all your hard work & sacrifice. All of your selflessness is greatly appreciated.

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Larry Pitner

Welder, Journeyman
Machinist

watched out for us."

POINTING UP AND DOWN PINE CREEK PAST A DEVASTATED AND DESTROYED DUCK FARM

"You see all four houses? We're all very religious, very religious people trusting God. All our houses made it. Unbelievable."

WHAT WAS LOST?

This right here was an egg-washing plant for ducks.

"Well, this, this building here was my boathouse? You want to see my boat?" as he pointed to a melted pile of aluminum, steel and fiberglass and once was 15 feet long with a Suzuki motor. "Gone away."

Pitner has insurance coverage for most everything he lost.

Turing towards Pine City further down Pine Creek, Pitner points to more damage.

That building there was the duck barn.

I wasn't (in the business Pitner said); my nephew and his sister were.

That big building housed 400 ducks and they'd free range them out here. They eat the grass.

All 400 were lost. They're not going to start up again."

THE DAY OF THE FIRE

"It was Monday, Labor Day. I was home. I saw a plume of smoke way to hell and gone, just a plume. And I told my wife, there's a fire they better get on it with the wind.

And it got bigger and bigger and bigger. So I drove to the (Rosalia) airport road. And it was crowning. The fire went up a big pine and whoosh. And then the wind blew it.

So, I came back to Malden. I told them somebody better get on that. The thing is Malden and Rosalia (fire departments) were all down in Colfax.

So nobody was here for the first 20-30 minutes with a 40 mile-an-hour wind. What do you think? It took 45 minutes for them to get back here.

They got called out and when they get called out they go. So it took 45 minutes for anybody to get back here. It was 20 minutes before the sheriff even got here.

And they started evacuating people immediately. Get out, get out, get out, get out. You got no time right.

And it took 20 minutes for the fire to go from one side of town to the other. If you go up into Malden there's a blue house off on the right oh yeah everything around it is burned. That blue house is my brother-in-law, another very religious man."

BACK TO PINE CREEK AND THE PITNER HOME

"Everything on the hill is gone. You see how far. It got within 5 feet of the back of my house and, well, my middle shed.

Then the wind was blowing hard enough I think it creates a draft so it went over the top of the building and then up the

hill."

THOUGHT WE'D LOST IT ALL

"We thought we get anyway, we kept trying to call our house. That phone is no longer in service (was the message) so we thought well, the house is gone.

We were the last ones to leave. I have a very stubborn wife. No fireman's gonna tell me to get out of my house. Well, she went outside and looked, and by then it was already coming down this side of the hill."

AN ADDED RESPONSIBILITY

"We have a handicapped son, quadriplegic, so we had to get him and some of the stuff into

see **PITNER**, page 7

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PITNER

continuing from page 6

the car.

And by the time we did, when she drove out, the fire was going up this bank right here. The fire, it was coming across the back of the house. I told her we gotta' go we gotta' go. Yeah. And she said, anyway,

We grabbed what we could, supplies for our son. She drove one car and I drove mine. And the pickup, no big deal to lose it, but we didn't."

Pitner pointed across the road to a small building near his house

That's a chapel, it's been blessed and consecrated.

The fire went up along the fence line and then right up around and come down went up this way. It singed everything all the trees and burnt the moss off the rocks in the front yard. I mean it got that close. But by the grace of God.

Pointing down Pine Creek to a still-standing home.

Everything's gone but his house. He lost his garage, lost everything. The big tree fell on his. It didn't get the rafters and stuff inside. But they survived."

LOOKING TOWARDS MALDEN

"That's my nephew (with a house still standing).

And people on the corner, you see all their buildings gone, they put all their stuff in the middle of the parking lot thinking it would be safe. You know, three four-wheelers, Jeep, Toyota Rav4, all gone, it's all gone.

What was really strange, look at that (pointing to a close by vehicle). There's still tires with air in them, everything else burned.

That wind was blowing so hard it collapsed (an outbuilding). There's the snow tires for my pickup. (Only the rims remain).

You know, it takes 2,000 degrees to melt glass (showing off disfigured and melted glass and bottles)."

GLAD TO TALK

"I don't know anybody that don't want to talk about it because it happened and that's the way it goes.

I guess just myself, and my wife, she has some really down days - you know that survivor's remorse?

I had it for a couple of days, I mean it happened.

That's amazing, all those houses were everything burned and then the ones that didn't.

The ones on that side the park, there was no fire came through there, went around it.

So all the houses this side of the park until it got down toward this end of town and then it come back the other way.

My brother-in-law's house, his daughter saved it. She happened to be there, it was already catching on fire.

They sprayed the cinders and stuff on the roof with a hose. And then it started burning up his buildings coming from the other side so she just slit a swimming pool. That big flood of water put the fire out and everything. But just this side everything is gone."

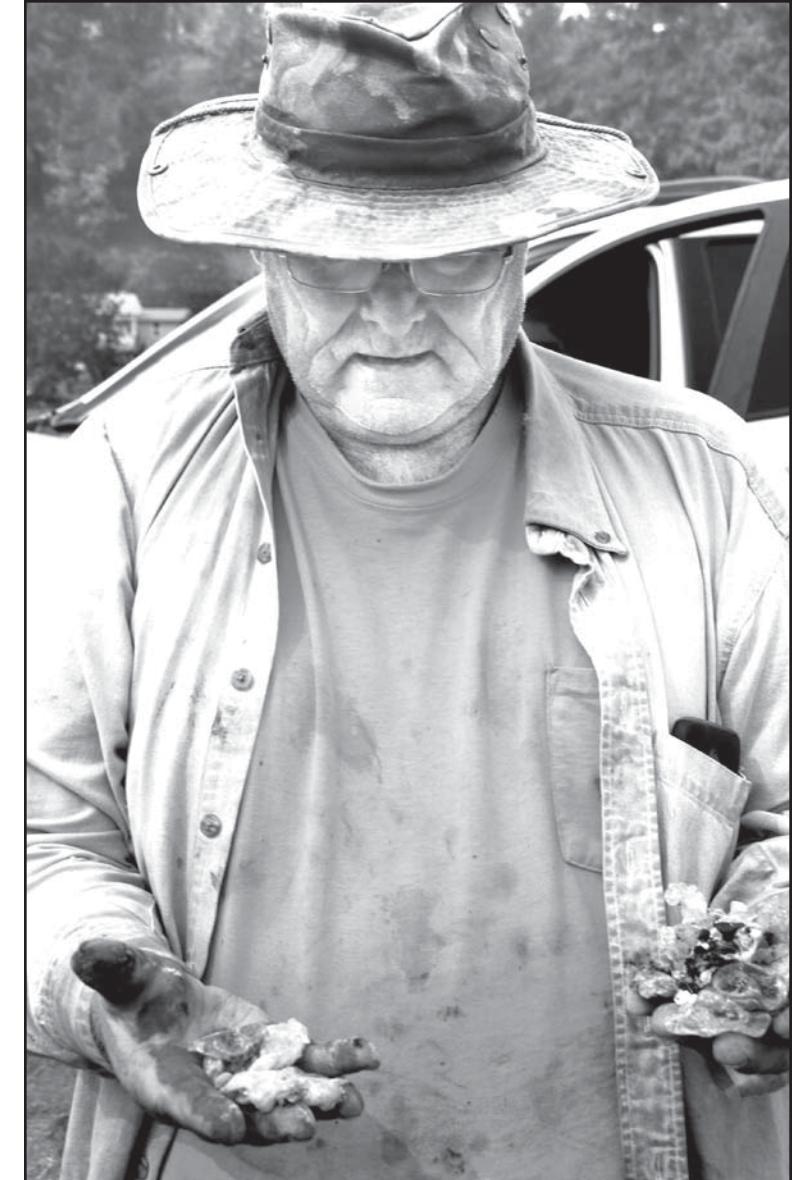
NO ONE IS PREPARED

"I know one thing right now though, nobody, absolutely nobody is prepared for natural disaster. And that's what this was.

I have friends that brought generators from everywhere. And we had generators for our freezers. We had generators for 'frigerators. So in reality, we lost nothing."

UNSEEN PROBLEMS

"The gal that was doing inspections, she swiped the wall and the top half was dust she blew off. See all that black stuff right there? That's soot, our house full of soot. So they've got to come in and clean the walls, clean the ceiling, clean the floors and the rugs and all our clothes."



Larry Pitner, who lives along Pine Creek between Malden and Pine City, shows off melted glass, proof that the Babb Fire reached some impressive heat extremes. It takes 2,000 degrees to melt glass, Pitner said. While family members lost a duck farm and Pitner's home across the road was relatively unscathed.

THANK YOU

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Thank You.

Thank you firefighters, power crews, law enforcement, and other responders for your answer to the call to serve your communities.

Thank you churches, neighbors, and charities for opening your doors and donating what was needed.



Cathy McMorris Rodgers


**Cathy
McMorris Rodgers**

CONGRESS (R)

Paid for by Cathy McMorris Rodgers for US Congress.

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALL THE FIREFIGHTERS AND FIRST RESPONDERS.

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To our **fire fighters, emergency responders, volunteers**, and countless others,

Thank You.



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Nan Cao

Malden Resident

"My face had all the smoke. When I left, I'm thinking I was in danger. I could feel the ash coming down to my skin. I was like, the first time in the wildfire. I lived in Houston, Texas, for 20 years. I deal with two hurricanes, flood. I move here with my cousin and fire. When I come out, smoke was coming from that way. I felt the ash on my skin. I knew it was late. I didn't grab anything. I just run."

I've lived here two years. I do resale on eBay. I use my house for all my storage. No insurance. Oh man, my neighbors are all gone. I can't believe it's still here."

LEAVE THE WATER RUNNING

"Before I left, I leave it open. You see the line. I did the right thing. I'm lucky."

OUT-BUILDING THAT BURNED:

"This was like an old horse barn. I don't want it and it's gone, which is good."

Injured. It's good. This neighbor just came home. She brought her mom, before she took off I asked what was going on then I leave. One neighbor, one tell me, another tell another and we're all safe.



Firefighters put out hotspots at a home in Malden.



A Malden home smolders on Labor Day.

Thank You.

To everyone who worked so hard to save the town of Malden and surrounding areas.

Our hearts go out to those of you with losses.

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MALDEN STRONG!

Sean and Rebekah Health

Malden Residents

Rebekah recounted her story after returning and finding their home intact:

"It's truly sad. It's not like anything you would ever imagine. I went to grab some Funyons and Flaming Hot Cheetos. We were just going to rest for our Labor Day weekend. On my way back, I'm like that is not dust. I was raised in Ritzville. Within 20 minutes, it was right here. We had police coming down saying evacuate, evacuate."

LOOKING ACROSS THE STREET

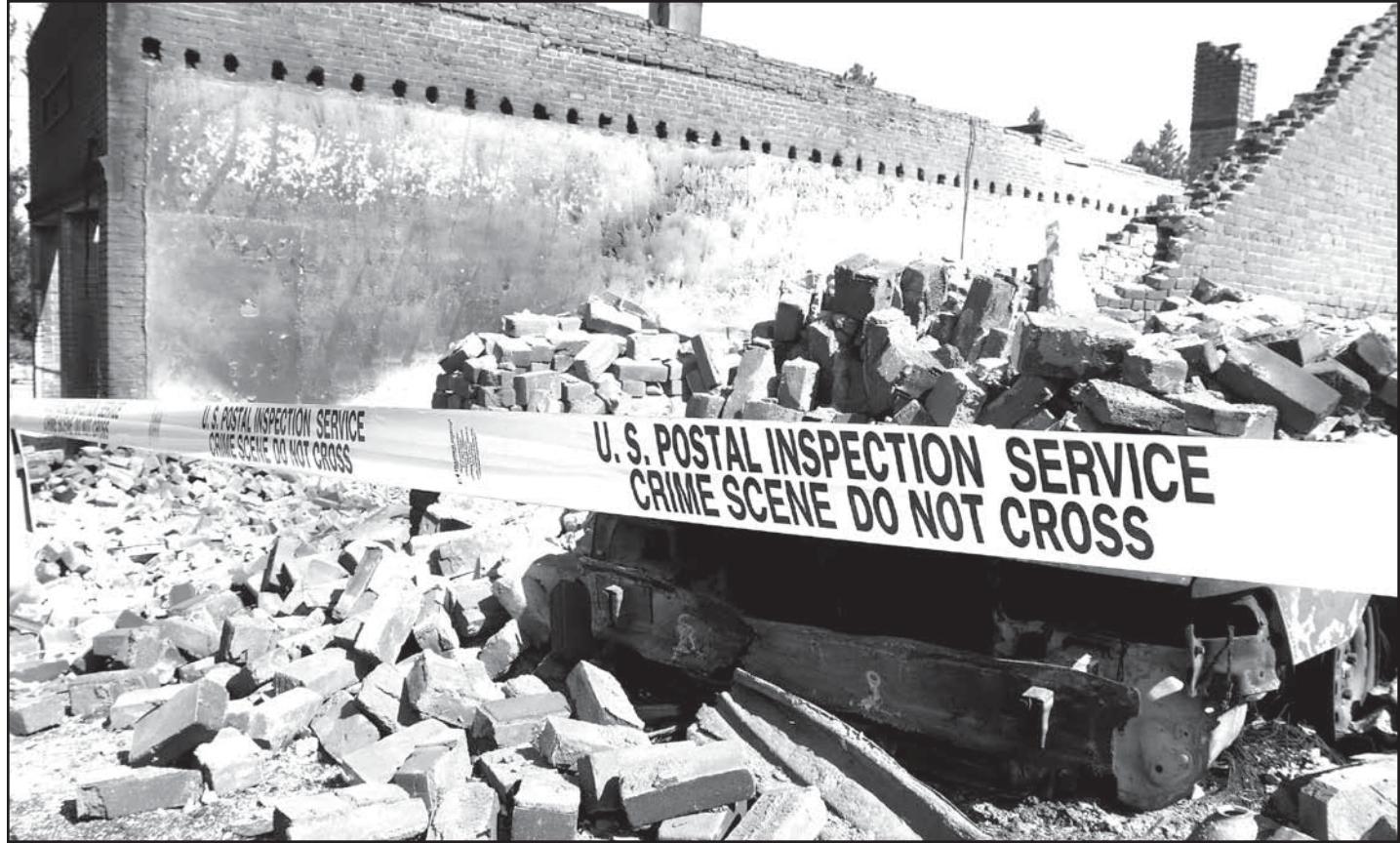
"I can't believe their home is gone. We bought our house a year ago. It's very quiet out here. It's just sad. Everybody knows everybody. There's only a couple hundred people in the whole town."

ON THE POST OFFICE BURNING

"I should've got my mail on Friday. I usually pick up my mail first thing. I should've got my mail; you can't get mail delivered here. You have to go to the post office. It's too tiny a town to get mail. It was one of the oldest post offices; it was No. 10 on the registry."

SURPRISINGLY, OK

"Our neighbor, evidently is fine. And this neighbor is fine, and our house. Our kitties are in there. I didn't know what to do with them, so I put them all inside. I closed it all up and they're all OK. It's strange."



Crime scene tape stretches across Malden Post Office debris.

Thank You,

To our wonderful community, *fire fighters, first responders and volunteers*, for the hard work & support during the Colfax, Malden-Pine City fire.

**Team Washington,
Tammy Lewis**



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Scott Carlon

Part-time resident
of Pine City

Scott was working on his family home when he was evacuated, with his wife, Heather Carlon, whose originally from Cheney.

WE GOT THE NOTICE

"We left right about 2 p.m. They came through blasting evacuate, now. The sheriff came up our driveway and told us to evacuate, so we did.

I wanted to stay, but I didn't. I don't know if I could've saved anything. I sure didn't like the drive."

LONGTIME FAMILY

"We've been here five years trying to restore this property to its previous grandeur. My dad grew up here in Pine City. He was born in here in '24. My grandfather came here in 1898. This is home, the family home. It meant so much to be able to restore part of Pine City and now the centerpiece for us is now gone."

This is surreal.

The stone church, I'm part of the Pine City Historical Society, is gone. That was the only commercial building, if you will, that had survived. The original downtown was already gone. It was a beautiful church inside. So much of the history of Pine City was inside. It's now gone; there's nothing left. Nothing like this at all. There was a downtown building that burned down in 1940. But that pales in comparison to this."



The Carlon home stands in the aftermath of the fire.

FAMILY HEIRLOOMS

"We were working on this and living here part-time. All of my family heirlooms are there.

They're all gone. That's the sad part. All these wonderful heirlooms I had from 1865 and after are all gone. All the cher-

ished family photos of my dad and family from that era are gone. There's nothing left. It's just heartbreaking."



The Babb Fire destroys Scott Carlons home on Labor Day.

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To the best fire fighters, law enforcement, power crews & volunteer responders in Washington on a job well done.



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Todd Deckard

Malden Resident



Todd Deckard

"I was born here. Mom and Dad came here in '62 and I was born in '63.

We've lived in about four or five, maybe six houses here.

We live down the hill in a house. We lived in Margaret Carol's, the hotel they call it.

We used to have the picture where I was tied to the clothes line, me and the raccoon. That way people wouldn't run over me or the coon when they come down the back alley."

(MORE RACCOON STORY BELOW)

"We've got a lot of crud that we've been in this town and that square over there, (pointing to the east down the street) we had the Malden service station.

Then in '92, the EPA shut us down. Mom didn't want to rebuild and they were asking really personal questions, or I'd still be running it. We had a service station in Rosalia, too, but they built the fire house on top of it.

There's just so much stuff, I don't know where to begin.

I lost everything lost. I lost everything but my guns and my money box, we got it out.

I started out that morning, I was sitting in my chair and I was talking to my brother on the phone.

We just got done with harvest. I told my boss I says, I'm going to go home and sleep for two days, get some R&R and I'm hammering away and I go we got something wrong. I told my brother Skeet that there's did something wrong.

And I went outside and I could smell it coming so I got in the car, me and the dog, and we went to the airport.

We watched it come over the hill, about 15 feet high flames being pushed. We watched two tractors try to put it out and it was like born water in the boot.

It was it was blowing

so hard to blow right over their chisel marks. Then it hit the trees and it was in the top of these trees is just like a horror movie.

And in less than 45 minutes It was here and it started more.

I live right across the street from the post office and I own the whole city block. Well, between the whole family we own it."

BACKGROUND ON PROPERTY

"It was supposed to be divided between us and the brothers. Well, I was I was the caretaker. And of course I'd gotten divorced so I needed somewhere to live. Mom's trailer wore out so. So I bought Bruce's trailer, the one in the corner.

And it was way more updated in our '65, '68 (trailer), I don't remember how old that was but it was a lot more modern and shit, I just moved up in the world.

It had a dishwasher, I had frickin' a nice backup you can fit in. You know, I live in like a king in a frickin' 12 by 66 trailer. I mean it wasn't much but it was home. It was home and I was where I needed to be."

HIS LOSSES

(I lost) all the mementos, it's just like burying mom and dad all over again. Because some of the brothers didn't come get your stuff.

I had stuff put away in the house if they ever did want to come and there's a half million-dollars worth of shit that I'll never be able to replace.

I had cutting torches welders and lawnmower and yard tools.

You know what I tell everybody, I don't know what I'm doing the next morning, but the first 7 o'clock phone call, then I know what I'm doing.

So I go out in the yard and grab like yard tools or whatever I need or put the ball on the truck. And we go help somebody. I have given away more labor than I've ever made

money at.

But that's who I am. That's is that part of small community. You help your neighbors. I've always had that.

You know, you're little and you went to that little white church up there. And they teach you how God wanted things. And I've always kind of lived by some of them rules.

I may not spend much time in that little white building, but I've got my standards. You know, most time I like to go to the top of the mountain and have my conversations (with God)."

YOU COMING BACK?

"Only if things change here, where we're not mini-Seattle or mini New York."

REBUILDING ROADBLOCKS?

"The rules that they have built that has cut or cut our nose off to spite of our face.

(So being able to rebuild here might be a problem?)

It is for me. There is rules that shouldn't matter. Because even though we're a town, people have to live, right? There's no way I can afford a \$70-80,000 mobile home or whatever to put on that place again.

I went shopping yesterday. I even went looking for a brand new camper. It was \$35,000. Where am I going to dig up \$35,000? I didn't have that much saved up yet again.

I just bought a \$31,000 truck. I had myself pretty well weaseled down. I don't have a little change laying around, but I save

see **DECKARD**, page 14

Great job first responders and all who helped the community!



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Thank You

To all the fire fighters, paramedics, law enforcement and volunteers who stepped up to help during the recent area fires. Your actions helped save property and lives.



Tires LES SCHWAB



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WANTS TO THANK EVERY PERSON WHO HELPED WITH THE RECENT COUNTY FIRES.

THE PERSONAL RISKS RESPONDERS TOOK, AND THE COMPASSION AND CHARITY FROM THE COMMUNITY IS INSPIRING TO MANY.

THANK YOU!

To all the first responders, volunteers and the community for their amazing response to the fires in Whitman County.

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Thank You

To all the fire fighters, paramedics, law enforcement and volunteers who stepped up to help during the recent area fires. Your actions helped save property and lives.

Tires LES SCHWAB

DECKARD

continuing from page 13

that for emergencies. You know, that's the way my parents taught us. They went through the Depression. They know, they taught us well you know?

My old man wasn't the most lovable man, but he did teach us some things. And my mother taught me all about living in the country and taught us how to hunt how to fish. My dad didn't teach me that my mom did."

DAD DIDN'T LIKE FISHING BUT DID LIKE HOUNDS

"I mean, some reason he didn't like fishing though, okay. He liked hounds. That place used to have anywhere from about six hounds to 30 hounds."

MORE ON THE RACCOON AND THE PROPERTY

"That raccoon, we brought her home she wouldn't even fit in the palm of your hand and mom raised her up sit on the back of the chair and comb mom's hair.

Everybody (in Malden) knows, her name was Easter, she'd pickpocket



Todd Deckard's family property destroyed in the Babb Fire.

you. She'd find a pocket go looking for lifesavers and that spearmint gum or the Juicy Fruit right? She'd chew bubblegum.

And she got about 13 years old and then she started getting cranky. She'd have the litter babies, but she killed him because she knew she was in captivity.

We had foxes we had,

we had lots of things on that piece of ground."

ALMOST ATTENDED SCHOOL IN MALDEN

"I was just about to start school right there but they closed down and we ended up getting shipped to Rosalia."

SPELL NAME

"De,ck,ard. Everybody calls me Decker and some other choice names."

THANK YOU

Everybody who pitched in to help with the fires in Whitman County.

The courageousness of first responders and volunteers, and outpour of charity from communities cannot be put into words.

Great Work Fire Fighters and First Responders!

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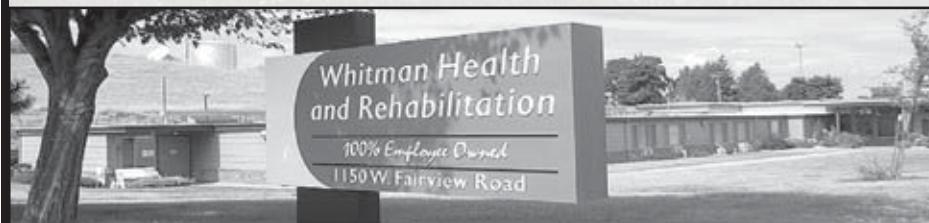
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Sherry Hames

Rural Resident

A rural resident who lives on a farm northeast of Malden

"This is Jay's. Not this house, but the next one. They have a hay shed we were trying to save. Jay and his brother Bruce were up there with a water truck. Jay's wife, Sue, Bruce's wife, Cindy, myself and my husband went up there to the house to see what we could do."

FIRE STORMS IN

"We just got up there to the hay shed. The fire came up and just went poof. We turned and just started running. It was black and we couldn't see. The fire was hitting us in the back as we were running down the hill. It was very scary."



Haybarn near Squaw Road continues to burn on Labor Day.

Motion Auto and its employees want to express their support for the Malden Community and surrounding areas that were affected by the fire.

Great job Fire Fighters and First Responders!

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A firefighter in full turnout gear, seen from the back, looking towards a burning hillside with fire trucks in the foreground.

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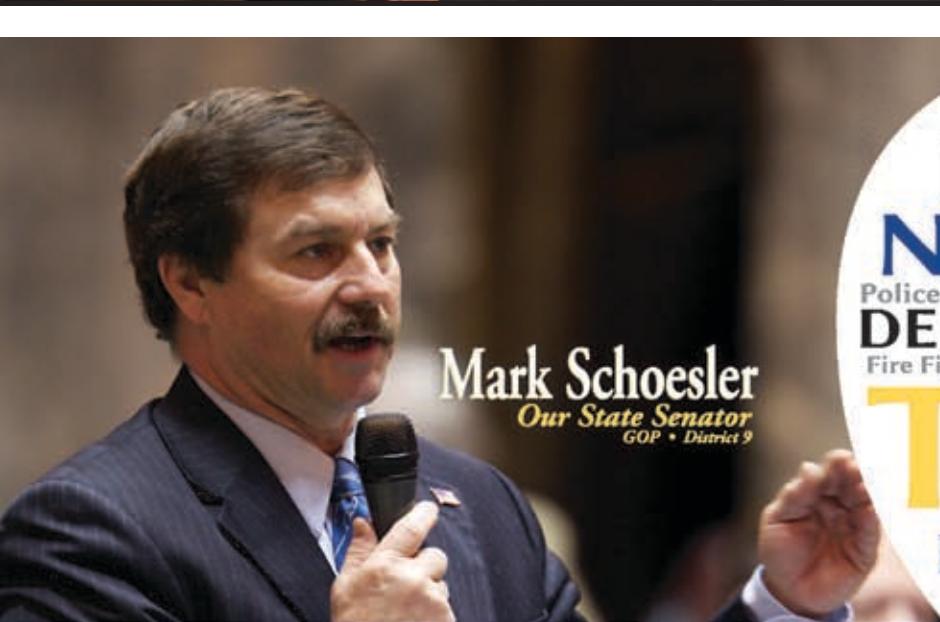
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