

Fleeing Disaster  
Writing Our History  
© Gail Burk - - January 2021

We have been living a lot of history lately. I hope you will write about how the recent wildfires impacted your life. By focusing on what personal items we chose to rescue, we can ease into writing about other aspects of the experience. You can begin by writing a brief piece about what you chose, or would choose, to save. I encourage you to start writing your story now, while the experience is still fresh.

Here are some questions to get you started:

1. If you recently had to evacuate during the CZU Lightning Complex Fire, what was the first item you rescued?

Why did you choose that item?

What is the provenance of the item?

Include a photo of the item.

2. How did you store the item while you were evacuated?

What difficulties did you encounter in securing the item - - size, weight, need for haste, etc.?

3. What item(s) were chosen for rescue by other members of your family?

4. If you had to evacuate again, would you choose the same item? Why or why not?

5. If you have not yet experienced an evacuation, what would be the first item you would save?

Why would you choose that item?

What is the provenance of the item?

Include a photo of the item.

6. Perhaps you did not have to evacuate during this year's wildfires, but have been affected by earlier disasters, such as the floods and mudslides of 1982, or the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989. What disaster did you experience?

Where? When?

7. What was the highest priority item you rescued in that situation?

Why did you choose that item?

8. If you suffered disaster losses, what single item do you wish you could have saved?

What is the item that was lost that you miss the most?

Why?

Have you always missed that item, or has the loss of the item grown or changed in importance over time?

How to choose what to save represents only one small aspect of fleeing disaster. I hope you will keep writing on this theme, as there are many other aspects of fleeing a disaster to consider. Below are some additional questions to inspire you keep you writing your own history.

9. As part of recording your experience of this, or another, disaster, describe what you saw, heard, smelled, felt, as the disaster unfolded.

10. What happened first? Next? How did you realize that disaster was imminent? How did you remain informed as the disaster unfolded?

11. Over the days, weeks, and months following the disaster, how did your emotional reaction to it change? How was your daily routine forced to change?

12. If you had to evacuate, where did you go? How did you choose that place to be safe? What other options were there?

13. How was your evacuation complicated by various issues - - having to deal with the needs of an elderly, very young, or medically fragile family member? The need to find shelter for pets or large animals? The circumstance of having to evacuate during a pandemic?

14. How had you and your family prepared for disaster and evacuation? What would you do differently next time?

15. How did you stay in touch with family members during your evacuation? Both extended family in other geographic locations as well as members of your own household who may have had to evacuate to other sites?

16. What help did you receive during and after the disaster? Who helped you? What assistance was most helpful? What was least helpful?

As you continue to explore these aspects of fleeing disaster, more questions will likely arise. Jot down those additional questions as you write, so you can return to answer them as you record more memories of your experiences.

Think about revisiting these and other questions over the coming months or years. Your responses may change with the passage of time. You are writing about your own history. Your descendants will thank you!