

The Peninsula Times Tribune

MONDAY
October 28, 1991

FIRESTORM KILLED PALO ALTAN

Trailblazer
was visiting
with friends

Tracie Reynolds
PENINSULA TIMES TRIBUNE

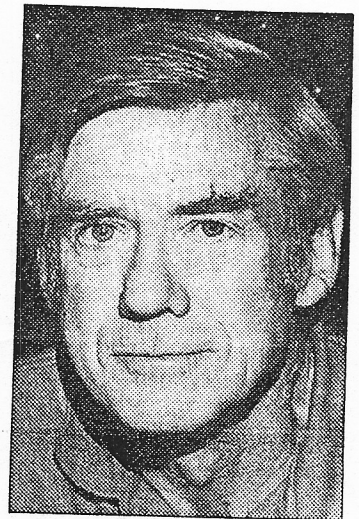
Leigh Ortenburger, the Palo Alto man credited with demystifying the treacherous Grand Teton Range for

■ Victims at church — A-6

mountain climbers, died a week ago Sunday in the Oakland hills fire, according to the Alameda County Coroner's office.

Ortenburger, 62, was in the East Bay visiting friends Gail and Alfred Baxter when the fire swept through an exclusive, tree-shaded section of the Oakland foothills, said his daughter, Carolyn. Ortenburger, an avid mountain climber, apparently was unable to escape the swift-moving blaze.

At last count, the fire killed 25 people, destroyed more than 3,000 houses and apartments and caused an estimated \$2 billion in damage. Gail Baxter also per-



Leigh Ortenburger was ready for more challenges when he was killed in last week's East Bay fire.

ished in the blaze, but her husband survived with burn injuries.

Although Ortenburger earned a living as a mathematician and statistician for GTE, his heart belonged to some of the world's most challenging mountains.

When he was only 19 years old, Ortenburger read in an encyclopedia that the Teton Range in Wyoming posed

Please see **KILLED**, A-8

KILLED/Palo Altan who blazed mountain trails was a victim of East Bay firestorm

UED FROM A-1

one of the most difficult ascents for mountain climbers.

So, being a person who liked to find things out for himself, Ortenburger thumbed his way to Wyoming and scaled the range while only a novice climber. It would be the first of many trips to Wyoming.

"I'd never seen a rope and knew basically nothing about real climbing," he said in a 1990 interview with the Jackson Hole News.

Each summer for the past 40 years, Ortenburger visited Grand Teton National Park gathering information for his guidebooks and research projects. In his books, he had chronicled more than 1,200 climbing routes.

His first climbs in the Teton range included one summer in the 1950s when he ascended the

direct North Face, West Face, North Ridge and the direct South Huttress of Mount Moran.

"It's a place of distinction and beauty. He had a desire to know things completely," his daughter said.

The accomplishment turned Ortenburger into an internationally known climber, and he would later lead 10 expeditions in the Cordillera Blanca Range in Peru. He also ascended the Andes in South America.

In 1960, Ortenburger was among 16 climbers from the United States, New Zealand and Great Britain chosen to join Sir Edmund Hillary's expedition to the Himalayas. Ortenburger, who then lived in Los Altos Hills, was selected from hundreds of applicants yearning to climb with the first man to conquer Mount Ever-

est.

Ortenburger settled in Palo Alto in 1957 after serving two years in the Army. He continued to do some climbing at Yosemite National Park, but something always drew him to the Teton Range.

"What we were doing was mountaineering, a tremendous shift from rock climbing as it is today," he once said. "Today's rock climbers aren't willing to make a four- or six-hour hike to the base of their climb. That would have seemed ridiculous in the '50s."

At the time of his death, Ortenburger was working on four research projects, his daughter said.

He wanted to write a second edition to his "Climber's Guide to the Teton Range," a comprehensive

handbook for mountain climbers considering scaling the range. He also was working on a historical look at exploration of the range, a history of the names of the surrounding area, and a book of photos of the mountains in Peru. He spent almost six months a year in Wyoming collecting information for his writings.

Ortenburger's climbing was stalled in 1990 by a twisted ankle, but he had said that after the injury healed, he planned to tackle mountains again.

Ortenburger is survived by two daughters, Carolyn Ortenburger of Menlo Park and Teresa Ortenburger of Davis; and two brothers, Robert Ortenburger of La Jolla and Arthur Ortenburger Jr. of Fairview, N.C.

A Memorial Service will be held Nov. 9 at 2 p.m. at the Palo Alto Cultural Center, 1313 Newell Road. Ashes will be scattered privately.

Donations can be sent to the American Alpine Club, 113 E. 90th St., New York, N.Y. 10128; the Teton County Historical Society, P.O. Box 1005, Jackson, Wyo. 83001; or Wilderness Finders Inc., c/o Marin County Sheriff's Department, Civic Center, San Rafael 94903.

Gordon Piper

December 5, 2010

For my Deep Springs College classmates

Remembering ORT



*LEE LEIGH CURT
at DS 1987*

From

Curt

CURTIS M. KARPLUS

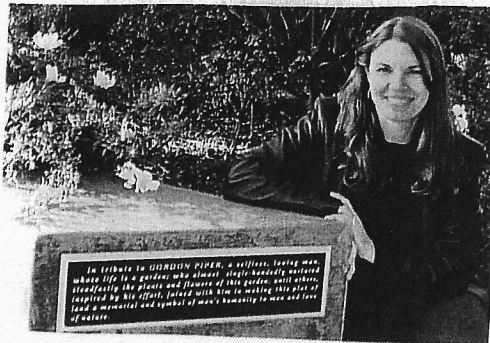
gu... to the top of the Matterhorn. 1990 spent two weeks in Sri Lanka for the Asia Foundation, helping to launch continuing legal education there.

My son, Mark, and his wife, Susan.



12/25/07

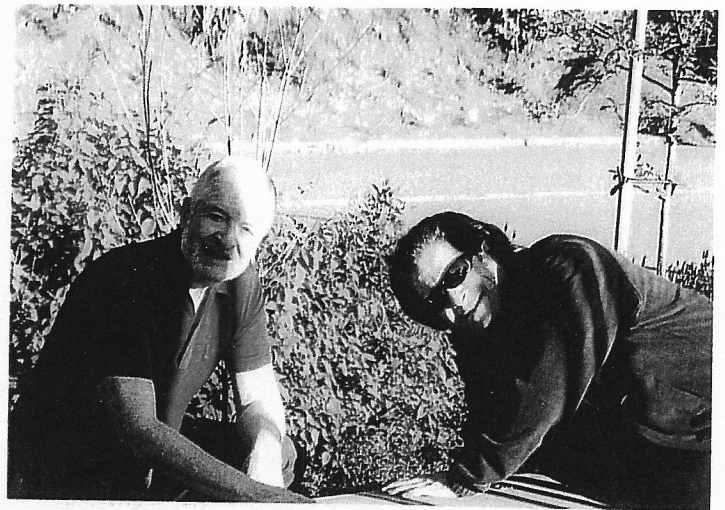
Gordon Piper (standing behind Ort's dogwood tree) spearheaded the creation of the Garden and tends to it almost daily with other Firestorm survivors.



Susan next to the plaque honoring Gordon Piper.

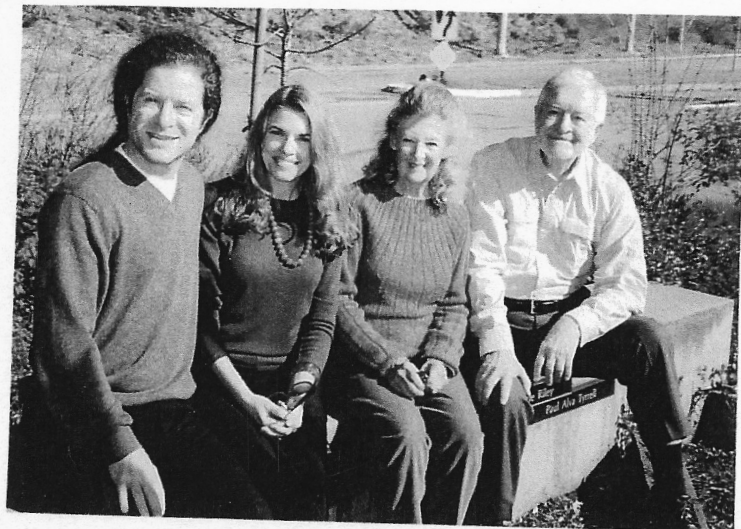


CMK holding the piton and the medallion that reads, "In memory of Leigh Ortenburger."



ORT. → Mark is attaching the medallion to the piton, which is embedded at the base of the wall, near the tree, just behind where Leigh's name appears on the wall.

Miles Everett and his wife, Nanette.



Nourishing Ort's tree

2/27/10

Bay Area

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Friday, December 3, 2010 | Section C



Oakland hills resident Gordon Piper checks on the metal sculpture in the Firestorm Memorial Garden, vandalized in October. Photos by Michael Macor / The Chronicle

OAKLAND

Outwitting thieves at firestorm memorial

By Carolyn Jones
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The firestorm memorial in the Oakland Hills — struck twice by vandals who stripped it of valuable metals — is about to get some protection.

The graceful, understated sculpture, most recently vandalized in October, will be

surrounded by security cameras, motion-sensor lights, warning signs, a fence and extra-thorny rose bushes. It will also be refurbished with steel instead of bronze, which has been the metal of choice for thieves.

If someone tampers with the artwork, sirens will blast and lights will flash. The Oakland

police, a private security firm and neighbors will be instantly alerted.

"If they want to take it, they're going to have to work for it," said Gordon Piper, who lost his home in the 1991 firestorm and helped commission the sculpture. "Or better yet, we can catch them in the act."

Memorial continues on C5



A dogwood tree was donated in memory of a fire victim.

FROM THE COVER

Outwitting thieves becomes a fine art

Memorial from page C1

The memorial, erected in 1993, has been seriously vandalized and stripped at least twice of its valuable metals. In October, thieves sawed off eight 6-foot bronze rods and bent two others.

In 2008, thieves stole one rod, bent nine and made off with 25 stainless steel plaques bearing the names of firestorm victims. Afterward, neighbors raised funds to fix the rods and replace the stainless steel plaques with granite.

After October's incident, more than \$7,500 in donations poured in, \$6,000 coming from AAA of Northern California.

The insurer was deeply involved in the aftermath of the firestorm, covering 239 homes and 350 cars damaged or destroyed by the fire. The disaster cost AAA of Northern California \$100 million and remains the most expensive loss in the company's 100-year history, said company spokeswoman Jenny Mack.

"The vandalism at the

memorial really hit home for a lot of people here," she said. "We were very touched by the story and wanted to help."

The all-volunteer Oakland Landscape Committee will pay the \$55 monthly security bills, as well as continue maintaining the half-acre native plant garden surrounding the sculpture.

The sculpture features about 50 thin, tapered rods symbolizing eucalyptus trees, a major contributor to the fire but also among the first trees to regenerate.

Gail Fredell, the artist who designed the sculpture, and Berkeley blacksmith Dan Dole collaborated once again on the sculpture to plot its repair.

Dole said that since the economy has imploded, metal theft from public artwork has skyrocketed.

"This metal is like dangling an enticement to these desperate people who are grasping at straws to survive," he said. "They don't care at all about the artwork. All they care about is getting a few bucks."

A few bucks is all

they're getting. Each bronze rod would bring in about \$30 from a scrap metal dealer, but cost about \$500 to replace because of labor and installation, he said.

Still, it's worth the effort, Piper said.

After the latest vandalism, Piper said he thought hard whether to fix a sculpture that seems irresistible to thieves.

"Do you quit or keep going?" he said. "I finally decided, life has its ups and downs, but you have to keep moving your feet forward."

He was also concerned that as time passes, newer residents might not remember the fire and might not know the critical importance of disaster preparation.

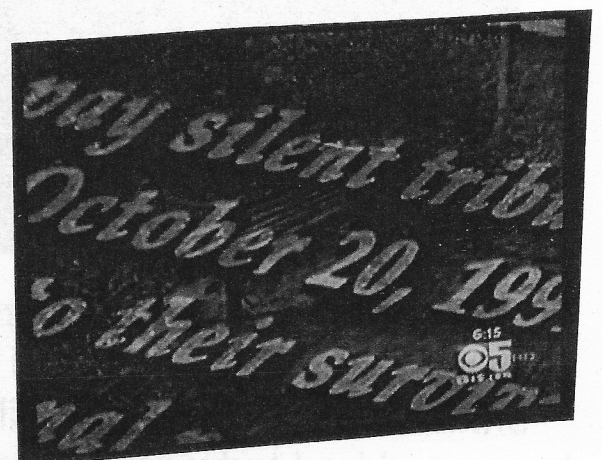
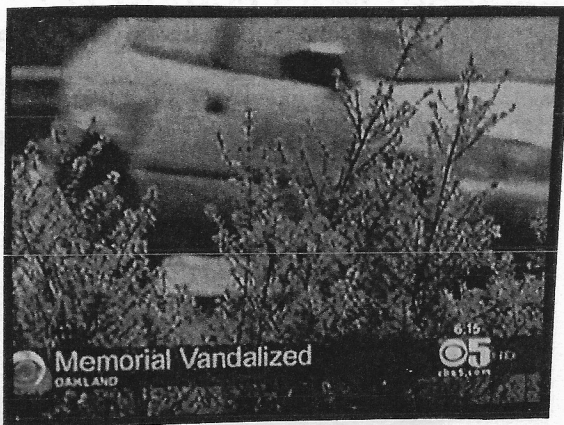
The memorial should be a constant reminder to all hills residents to keep brush away from their homes and have a disaster plan, he said.

"This is the East Bay, and there are a lot of dangers," said volunteer gardener Ed Strauss of Berkeley, who was helping Piper plant daisies on Tuesday. "We have earthquakes, fires, mudslides, narrow roads. And crime, too."

E-mail Carolyn Jones at carolynjones@sfbay.com.



The start of the two-minute coverage on the **Channel 5** KCBS 12/3/10 6:00 p.m. Evening News of the previous day's vandalism showed the intersection at the top of Tunnel Road from where one drives uphill to Hiller Highlands. The 10/26/91 Firestorm wiped out all of the over 500 two-story homes in that community and took 25 lives.



was it really worth it, for what you gained out of it, to create this much sadness in everyone who knew someone who died