**Happenin's 'Round the House**

**Special FIRE Edition!**

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“Did you see the fire?”

Those are words a museum professional \**never*\* wants to hear. Nobody anywhere wants to hear a wildfire is headed their way, obviously, but unfortunately for us nestled here on the shrub-enshrouded hillsides of Newhall, fire is an all-too-present threat.

Still doesn’t make it any easier when a volunteer strolls into your office and asks that dreaded question.

“What fire?!?” I retort.

“The one burning on the other side of the hills here,” he replies.

My quick lurch outside confirmed it: thick steaming clouds of smoke boiled up and over the crests to the west of the Hart mansion. A brush fire. One appearing to head right into “out of control” status.

My boss was already at work, checking in with KHTS, and pulling up the museum’s evacuation procedures, just in case. I kept an eye on the smoke, and watched, in horror, as lines of orange flames started slicing down the hills towards the boundary of Hart Park. I turned to my boss, and we knew in one moment: time to evacuate.

Margi picked up her phone to call the team at the Natural History Museum. The Hart has a detailed evacuation plan for just such emergencies, and the first step is calling in reinforcements. NHM staff – which include artifact handlers, conservators, and facilities managers (heavy lifters) – are sent to the Hart to help with packing and evacuation. They bring the big moving trucks, the packing supplies, and the extra hands. Within moments, we knew they were on their way.

I, meanwhile, rushed back into the mansion where a public tour was ongoing, and rather breathlessly put a halt to it, explaining, “we are preparing to evacuate, so we need everyone here to head on down the hill, and I would recommend leaving the Park too.” Nobody hesitated: the guests filed out, and the tour guide was sent off with heartfelt thanks for bringing the fire to our attention.

Then it was us, and a mansion full of artifacts.

Unfortunately, the museum cannot evacuate every single artifact in an emergency situation. We are limited by time, resources, and the emergency in question. In this case, quick checks outside – where the orange flaps of flames were still visible – meant we had only minutes to pack and get out. At one point, an LA County Sheriff came up and strongly encouraged we drop everything and leave. We decided to stay until we absolutely had to go.

All this said, the Hart prioritizes its evacuation efforts. Certain artifacts are pre-selected as the high-priority; the ones we go for first. If we have time, we target the second-tier after all the first-tier are packed. And then the third-tier, and so on. Therefore, knowing exactly which items we needed to target, our onsite team of four started pulling supplies.

Then it was pack like you mean it.

At the same time, though, it was pack with the delicacy an artifact requires. Yes, we lifted paintings off the walls, wrapped them in acid-free foam, and tied the foam in place with cotton string, but we did it with as much care as if we were handling newborn babies.

It wouldn’t do any good to damage something while we were trying to save it.

So we packed with speed, and care. And then, during our routine checks on the fire’s progress, we learned the 5 had been closed, and we had a quick confab: what were we going to do if the NHM team couldn’t make it? Load as much as we could into our personal vehicles, and the NHM van we use for programs, and head to safety. But until the Sheriffs came up and told us to leave, we were going to keep going.

And we did. We packed and loaded, and packed and loaded. Then, we heard it: the blessed sound of vehicles heading up the service road. NHM had made it. It took them just over 3 hours, but they made it.

Now, a team of four had become a team of 22. Evacuation efforts went into overdrive, and by 10:00pm that night, everything we could save was headed to a secure storage location. The winds had shifted in that time, and the fire was now headed another way, but should anything change again, the Hart collection was safe.

It was a Herculean effort to say the least, and so many folks were a crucial part of it. To list them all here would take up at least 3 more pages. But I hope they all know who they are, and they all know their assistance the night of the Calgrove Fire will never be forgotten. Not by us, nor by the future generations of visitors who will get to enjoy the Hart because they did everything they could to save it.