

McMinnville House Fire

December 26, 1981

On December 26, 1981, I wasn't thinking about emergency preparedness. I certainly wasn't thinking about fire safety. As a 16-year-old, I was just excited to see my big brother who had recently moved back to Oregon from Hawaii with his new wife. My family even waited to open Christmas presents until everybody was together. We had much to celebrate that morning.

But as my family gathered in the living room to open presents in the early morning, I thought I smelled a distinct odor.

"Hey, does anyone smell that?"

My family continued their conversations and went on handing out presents.

"Hey," I said, a bit louder this time. "Do you smell that?"

"What? No. It's just your imagination," said a family member.

A few minutes later, I was convinced that I smelled *something*. I got up and left the living room. Walking through the foyer, my senses suddenly seemed to sharpen. The odor became more distinct. I continued walking through the kitchen and then finally out to the garage. As I opened the door, it took a moment for my mind to make sense of what I saw. Flames were climbing the wall of the garage. As I continued to look at the flames, my mind clicked and I shouted, "WE HAVE A FIRE!" In the next few seconds, my parents, sister, and other family members jumped into action and began shouting orders. Familiar voices calmly provided orders and instructions. "Mom, call 9-1-1." "Phil, find the pets!" "Go room-to-room. Grab clothing and photographs!" After what seemed like an eternity – about seven minutes – fire trucks appeared and took control of the scene. The flames were soon extinguished. Firemen suppressed the fire and kept it from spreading throughout the house. The garage had been burned severely and the rest of the house had smoke damage.

The family and the pets were shaken, but all were safe. The fire had started, as it turns out, from smoldering ashes that had been left in a box in the garage. Earlier that morning, as he had done for years, my father cleaned out the fireplace from the previous night's fire. The ashes from the fire were placed in the garage, and had continued to smolder throughout the night.

Each year, Oregon fire departments respond to fires that are caused by improper disposal of hot coals or ashes. Coals and ashes from fires can remain hot enough to start a fire for many days after the fire has been extinguished. The exact amount of time for complete extinguishment and cooling depends on many factors, such as how hot the fire is, what is burning, and how much fuel remains. To be safe, simply treat all ashes and coals as hot, even when you think they have had enough time to cool. To properly dispose of ashes or coals, the following is recommended:

- If possible, allow ashes and coals to cool in the area where you had the fire for several days. These devices are designed to contain their heat safely.
- When it is time to dispose of the ashes, transfer them to a metal container and wet them down.
- Keep the metal container outside your home and away from any combustibles until the refuse is hauled away.
- DO NOT place any other combustibles in the metal container.
- DO NOT use a combustible container.



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