

Noted Fire Expert Urges City to Learn from Fire

■ Author of Los Angeles County Guide to Fire and Watershed Safety in Chaparral Areas Puts Heavy Emphasis on Education

One of the things that Klaus Radtke finds most striking about a walk around the burned areas of Upper Las Flores Canyon is that denuded areas expose the remains of chimneys from a fire in the early 1940s.

"Once again, nature has managed to repeat itself," noting that last week's blaze shared many attributes with the November 6, 1943 fire that also was started near Old Topanga Canyon—that time by downed power lines.

Sections of the current brush fire path also experienced wildfire in 1936 and 1942. A 1958 blaze went down the edge of Topanga.

Indeed, Radtke notes that 1958 experienced

three fires similar in some respects to the recent multiple blaze phenomenon—the Warner fire on Nov. 28, the Liberty conflagration on Dec. 2, and the Sherwood blaze on Dec. 28.

Those fires singed Malibu's western and eastern flanks much as Greenmeadow and the Old Topanga burns did. Prior to these, however, central Malibu had been hard hit by the Newton fire on Dec. 26, 1956.

Radtke's facility with fire dates is not just idle curiosity. Acknowledged as an expert on chaparral habitat such as Malibu's, the retired Los Angeles County forester and wildland resource scientist wrote the handbook that Los Angeles County dis-

tributes to inform residents about urban/chaparral interface.

Radtke grows serious about the recent conditions that were ready for conflagration. "We had mature chaparral—some dating back to the 1930s—that was a prime ignition source."

When areas burn over regularly—such as in an environment when controlled burns are used—there is a higher live to dead fuel ratio and fires are easier to contain.

An adamant advocate of the C-215 "Super-Scooper" and mega-doses of water for fighting fires in developed areas, Radtke has locked horns with county fire executives who he sees as more concerned with protecting their turf



REPEATED MESSAGE—Noted fire ecologist Klaus Radtke has conducted seminars and workshops throughout the nation on how to interact with nature in an environment where fire is a dominant and immutable natural force. Radtke's research indicates that Malibu will face fire in one location or another every 7 to 10 years and there is no substitute for preparedness.

than their own firefighters and the people they are charged to protect.

EDUCATION

Radtke puts the primary emphasis for fire loss minimization on education and the responsibility for that on the individual.

He shrugs as he describes the number of homes in the Big Rock area evacuated with no water left out in buckets or trash cans for ember control.

He conducts seminars in which he urges people "to

water reserves—tanks of 500 to 1,000 gallons, the larger the better and preferably with a pump and/or gravity flow.

"There is no excuse to spend a million dollars on a home and not spend \$750 on a water tank."

Fire hose hookups and enough miscellaneous items for community volunteers or neighbors to save a home even if the owners evacuate are also on the list.

The logic of neighbors

can "be more of a danger than the chaparral." He says there should be no woody vegetation within ten feet of a house, what he calls the primary defensible space.

He says the City of Malibu has a unique opportunity to tighten up building codes and its fire code and to implement practices that will make a difference when Malibu is struck by fire again within the next decade.

"The changes are not