

## Frozen Fire: Carolina's Intermix Ice Storm

The parching air  
Burns froze, and cold performs the effect  
Of fire  
- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

LAST SUMMER, at Alpine, Arizona, I found myself on the far outskirts of the Rodeo-Chediski fire, a monstrous burn that swept over the Mogollon Rim and torched a half dozen communities. Last week, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I found myself within the perimeter of a Piedmont-spanning ice storm that crippled almost all the communities that fell under its white pall. The two events were weirdly symmetrical. They were both the outcome of how contemporary Americans choose to live on the land and, in particular, how they landscape with trees.

THE AWKWARDLY named Rodeo-Chediski fire was the largest in Arizona's recorded history, yet it was matched in size, damages, and media attention by others throughout the West, most notably the Hayman and Biscuit fires in Colorado and Oregon, respectively. It was not their size that gripped the nation by its lapels, however, but the spectacle of mass evacuations before the flames. The fires assaulted more than trailer parks and trophy homes: even large rural towns like Show Low were emptied and hustled to evacuation centers. In nearly every case, despite a decade of warning, this was the first time such a disaster had struck.

Critics quickly pointed out that this scene has been repeating itself for some years, that similar conditions are endemic throughout the fire-prone West, that solutions to the "wildland/urban interface" fire require adherence to building codes, devotion to cleaning up yards, and especially attention to "vegetation" - translate: trees - around structures. Historical photos showed that, in presettlement times, the land claimed by towns had often been more open, more savanna than forest; that the character of settlement had promoted the potentially immolating flora.

Post-disaster reviews morphed into two themes. One emphasized individual (and local community) responsibility for protection; and the other, proposals for the wholesale thinning of overgrown woods within and around towns. All the authorities agreed, these fires would not be the last. The problem was structural. This was simply how western nature worked and it was not responsive to exurban illusions of naturalness. The West would have to accept that free-burning fire was as much a part of its natural heritage as flaming sunsets and live accordingly.

The awkwardly unnamed Carolina ice storm, however, was not unique. A similar storm had clobbered the Piedmont in 1996, although the gold-standard for comparison remained Hurricane Fran, also in 1996, much of whose debris still lay in tangles, uncleared, ready to receive fresh ice. In the past six years, in fact, North Carolina has endured two major hurricanes (Floyd and Fran), two ice storms, a paralyzing 2-foot snowfall (in 2000), a handful of tornadoes, and a countless succession of floods and garden-variety thunderstorms.

North Carolina is obviously a beacon for any kind of cataclysm that involves water and wind. (This past year the place even suffered a major drought.) Surely, unlike those callow Westerners, savvy Carolinians have adapted. After all, large fires happen only during certain seasons and can reoccur only after fuels have regrown, which may take decades. But wet and wind can return weekly; each season has its own specialty storm; each year can repeat the last. Clearly, after more than three centuries of settlement, residents have designed their habitations accordingly.

Of course they have not.

CHAPEL HILL is an old university and amenities town rising out of a new service economy, staffed largely with people from elsewhere. It also stands as a dictionary definition of a leafy community. Literally.

On the Piedmont, trees grow like weeds - an abandoned field soon bristles with woody scrub and loblolly pine, and along watercourses, with an impenetrable thicket of vines and brush. Within the town itself, old trees grace monied neighborhoods and the University of North Carolina campus; new trees crowd any lot where they are not slashed back; they form huge hedgerows between buildings. In the summer, the place is brilliant with greens; in the autumn, bright with chromatic leaves and the glowering olive of its conifers. The trees are celebrated, lovely, dense, useful: they give character to the town, lace it with privacy, and, like Japanese screens, shield its sprawl and pockets of ugliness from casual viewers. American Forests' urban initiative could rightly point to the town as a model of urban forestry, a Woody City on a Chapel Hill. To suggest a massive campaign of thinning would inspire scorn and outrage; its trees are what give the town much of its

charm, and pruning on a landscape scale would damage priceless amenities, to say nothing of savaging property values. These are, of course, exactly the same arguments advanced for allowing an extravagant flora to flourish in the Western "interface."

Ice shatters tree limbs and tops, and snaps trunks, just as fire burns and fells them. When there are houses, roads, and utility lines nearby, the fallen forest wrecks havoc. The denser the mix of woods and works, the deeper the damage. Early towns thrived amid a less congested woods; their inhabitants cleared, chopped, and burned. It is only in recent decades - rather as in the West, and for similar reasons - that trees have become an all-purpose interstitial medium. In the West, the woody sprawl translates into fuel; in Carolina, into clubs and cleavers to hack at porches, roofs, streets, telephone and power lines, a fuelbed for the frozen fire of an ice storm. The solution would seem to call for structural change: to thin the woods, to redesign houses, to put utilities underground. The reply of course is that such a reform would be obnoxious and expensive. Exactly.

What boosts the tree scene beyond a quirk into a mentalité is the city's annual exercise in ecological socialism. All those lovely trees shed leaves, all those leaves pile up, blow around, become gummy with mud, stick to shoes, track in hallways, and gather into gutters like oily rags in a corner, and generally litter lawns and streets. In the past, they could be raked into piles and burned, or if further away from the city center, simply fired where they lay. Such open flames are no longer allowed. The burning must be hidden: the leaves must combust in machines. Thus, residents rake up and pile leaves in windrows along streets, where a special truck sucks them up like a vacuum cleaner according to a preassigned schedule, just as with recycled refuse. The vehicles haul the leaves to a designated facility where they are converted into mulch. The mulch, a suitably organic compost, is then returned to spread under the trees. Unobserved, the putatively natural mix has been lubricated throughout with petrochemicals and passed through a cycle of internal combustion.

FLAMING FIRE and frozen fire, the arid West and the humid East, the wild woods of the Mogollon Rim and the faux forest of the Piedmont, all are facets of the same environmental polygon. The "interface" scene might more aptly be named the "intermix" because its essence is the intermingling of the natural world with the cultural, in particular, the scrambling of trees and towns into an ecological omelette. What is happening is that rural America is being recolonized, this time by an outmigration of urbanites.

This new frontier has overrun the country. It is as typical of western Massachusetts as of western Colorado, as robust in Georgia as in Idaho. In the West, most of which is public domain, the geography often takes the form of an "interface" between private and public land. In the East, it assumes an "intermix" of tangled structures and revanchist woods, both sprouting on a formerly farmed landscape. In the West, the city thrusts into nominal wildlands; in the East, the woods insinuate into the city. Still, there are commonalities that transcend each particular expression: the product of shared ethics, esthetics, and economics, all of which originate from an urban not a rural folk. The tree as ecological talisman - the hallowed hickory, the privileged pine - this too is an urban and industrial conceit.

Each region imposes its own peculiar hazards. In the arid West, fire is prominent, and after more than a decade of drubbing, the local communities have admitted the need to accept that fire will come, probably at some time during their lifetimes, and to organize themselves accordingly. The national perception is that Westerners have heaped the hazard upon themselves, as in truth they have. But the jeremiads can apply equally to oblivious Easterners who welcome the riotous greenery without considering how it will interact with their habitations when the weather turns sour - as it does several times a decade. Compared to Carolina cataclysms, conflagrations west of the hundredth meridian come only somewhat more frequently than asteroidal impacts.

Ice Storm Caroline arrived six days ago. It is implicated, so far, in 13 deaths and 6,200 road accidents. Most residents now have power, although a staggering 18,000 in Chapel Hill's Orange County (out of a working population of 44,000) still lack it (60,000 are still powerless in adjacent Durham). Schools are rousing to reopen. Major institutions at Research Triangle Park - from the EPA to GlaxoSmithKline - are just rebooting. A substantial fraction of city traffic lights remain blank. Downed powerlines, buried under toppled trees, litter highways around the city perimeter.

Cold, hungry, bored, sullen, residents are looking for a quick charge and, then, an institution to blame for what is increasingly difficult to palm off as a simple, remorseless act of God. If they want an analogue by which to understand what is happening, they can look to the well-castigated Western fire scene. If they want a culpable agent, they can look in a mirror.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina  
10 December 2002

*Coda:* A second ice storm struck on 16 February 2003. A third hit on 27 February 2003.

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