

And Then There Was One ...

The “Miracle House” Survived the Firestorm That Destroyed Everything Around It

As he drove away from his Laguna Beach, Calif., neighborhood on the morning of Oct. 27, 1993, Bob Lawson caught a last view of his house.

“It was totally under smoke. The police radio yelled that the fire had hopped the canyon and was coming up to our hill. It was reaching speeds of 1,000 feet per minute,” he said.

The fire about to envelope Lawson’s neighborhood had begun in a rural area of nearby Irvine and had spread from canyon to canyon, turning into a 2,000-degree firestorm. Before it was controlled, the fire had destroyed more than 300 homes in Laguna Beach.

Lawson had been called out of a business presentation in Anaheim back to his Laguna Beach neighborhood that afternoon shortly before police closed the Pacific Coast Highway leading into the area.

“I had grabbed the computer, backup tapes, key family papers, family photos, passports, the bird and the cat. My wife was trying to find the kids at school,” he said.

Lawson and his family evacuated to Newport Beach, but were again forced to move as the fire progressed. They

ended up in Santa Ana that evening, “watching Laguna bum on television. That night we thought our house was gone,” he said.

Up in Smoke

All other houses in the vicinity of the Lawson house were destroyed—except the Lawson house. “Now, our nearest neighbor is one-third of a mile away. The next morning you could count all the houses left standing on the top of Skyline Drive on the fingers of one hand,” he said.

Prior to the fire, Lawson and his wife Elaine had done extensive renovation recently, attempting to fireproof and windproof their three-bedroom, two-bath, 2,200-square-foot house as much as possible.

They had removed most of the bushes under the eaves, cut down timber on their lot, installed a whole-house fan, double-pane glass windows and fire-resistant masonite siding.

Lawson’s house was one of a handful of what local residents are calling “miracle houses” that survived the fire due to a combination of fireproofing renovations including, in Lawson’s case, the installation of a fire-resistant Celotex® Presidential Shake™ Shingle roof.

Unlike many of their neighbors who had covered their roofing shingles with metal that kept firemen from wetting them down or extinguishing them after they caught fire, the Lawson’s chose instead to install the Celotex-brand roof.

“A burning tree from my neighbor’s yard fell on my

Facingpage: Bob and Elaine Lawson's Skyline Drive home in Laguna Beach (upper right quadrant of the photo) was the only home in the immediate area left standing after the Oct. 27, 1993, firestorm because they equipped their house with fire-proofing features.



roof," Lawson said. "My roof didn't ignite, but the neighbor's house burned."

Presidential Shake shingles come with a Class-A fire rating, and are manufactured with a fire-resistant granule surface to handle sparks, flying embers and direct exposure to flaming objects.

More Than Good Looks

The Lawsons felt it would complement their other fire-proofing efforts. But the choice of roof was also determined by other needs.

Presidential Shake is wind-resistant, has the appearance of hand-split cedar shakes, comes with a 40-year warranty and carries the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

The roof's 150-mile per hour wind resistance was important to Lawson because of the frequent high winds in the Laguna Beach area. The hills in the area, which are between 500 and 1,000 feet high, accelerate the already high winds, so that winds in excess of 100 miles per hour are not unusual.

"One of the reasons I bought this [particular] roof is that I was always replacing shingles. When the winter storms come through, the wind comes from the south and accelerates over my roof," he said.

The product's double shingle sealant application pro-

vides twice the protection against high winds damage, sealing not only the tab but the base of each shingle.

Lawson also had an unusual need for a roof of unusual strength. "I wanted something that wouldn't break. I have ham radio antennas on the roof, with coaxial cable running to them, and I'm frequently up there changing the arrangement. I wanted the roof to be something I could walk on without hurting it," he said.

Finally, Lawson and his wife gave Presidential Shake Shingle high grades for appearance. "We had done extensive renovation on the house, and had put lots of our own money into other improvements, so we wanted a roof that would reflect our investment," he said.

In the wake of the firestorm, the other interests seemed secondary to Lawson, but he can now return to a house that not only resisted fire and wind, but one that serves his other needs as well.

"I've [contacted] the roofer to let him know his work survived," Lawson said. "He did a different kind of roof down the hill and it didn't fare so well." □

About the Author

The Celotex Corporation, based in Tampa, is a national manufacturer of roofing and building products for residential and commercial use.