



Chelsea Fast Wolf, 14, left, looks for her mother's purse Wednesday at the remains of her family's home on Red Shirt Table. The house, which was destroyed in a fire, was the home of 15 children. (Photo by Ryan Soderlin, Journal staff)

Fire shrouds future of 'Rez Mansion' family

15 children left homeless

By Kayla Gahagan, Journal staff Thursday, July 31, 2008

Mary and Varden Fast Wolf's two-story house on Red Shirt Table, isolated and squared off by a border of cottonwoods, surrounded by goats and grasshoppers, was the home of 15 children, most of them in foster care and then adopted by the Fast Wolfs.

The Fast Wolfs always felt the house was large enough to leave the door open for others who needed a place of rest, a good night's sleep.

That home caught fire Tuesday evening and burned to the ground, leaving the Fast Wolfs and their 15 children, the youngest 5 years old, wondering where they will go next.

"I did all my crying last night," Mary Fast Wolf said, walking the perimeter of the foundation of the house Wednesday afternoon.

It had been 12 hours since the fire, and the house was like an open wound on the prairie, oozing wafts of see-through gray smoke and licks of fire rising out of hot ashes. Heavy, humid air weighed over the scene, overpowering even the crisp burn stink that swirled with the smoke. Mary suspects the fire was started by an electrical problem in the house.

She covered her face and then stared at what used to be the kitchen, remembering the larger items they lost -- a washing machine, two wood burning stoves, beds, a 10-person dining room table she was particularly proud of because it allowed the whole family to crowd together in to one room for a meal.

"The kids sat there and the older kids sat there," she said. "All of it is gone. It hasn't really set in yet."

Some of her daughters walked the property, pulling charred DVDs from the ashes, jumping when glass jars exploded in the heat of the fire and the stuffy July day. Twelve-year-old Kim stepped into a hole of ashes and burned her sandled foot, blisters rising off her dark skin.

"I'm in shock," Breeze, 19, said, pointing out her bedroom in the corner of the house. The family's dog and some of her recent photos were saved after one of the kids crawled back in through her bedroom window to save them.

The family spent Tuesday night at a relative's house nearby. Rus Korzeniewski, director of program services for the Black Hills Chapter of the American Red Cross, met with the family Wednesday.

The size of the family is making relief efforts a challenge, he said, particularly in trying to find hotel rooms so close to the Sturgis motorcycle rally. The family probably will stay in a Rapid City hotel for three nights this week. They received food, clothing and other items from the Red Cross for their immediate needs, he said.

Breeze said Tuesday night was difficult.

"The flames were so big," she said, describing the fire and dropping her head to wipe away tears. "I was afraid if I closed my eyes to sleep, it was the only thing I'd see. It was."

But in between moments of pain, there has been some laughter.

"Hey Mom, go find the meat, it might be cooked," said Chelsea, 14, pointing to the freezer and prompting giggles from her sisters.

But the family has not lost sight of what the future holds. For many of the siblings, Mary and Varden Fast Wolf are the only family they know, and the house, a place they have lived in for 10 years, has meant stability.

"This was the only place we knew," said Breeze, who was adopted 10 years ago.

Mary Fast Wolf stood in front of what was the living room, one of her favorite places in the house because it was large enough for the kids to run around in.

"I have happy memories," she said, trailing off. "I have happy memories."

She held it together all morning, she said, so the kids would not worry.

"I may seem calm, but inside here," she said, tapping on her chest, "I'm hurting real bad."

Breeze said she has grown attached to this family, however it grows and changes. She sat and watched Mary, the woman she has grown to call "mother" over the past decade.

"This means everything to me," she said, watching her sisters move about the place they used to call home.

"All our memories were in this house, but I have no choice but to move on and look past it."

People interested in helping the family can call the Black Hills Area Chapter of American Red Cross at 342-4010.

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