



INVESTIGATION

The Wildfire, the Hunter, and a Decade of Conspiracy Theories

It started when a local man went on a hunting trip. It ended with 250,000 acres of forest burned, a rumor about an illegal weed farm, no clear answers, and plenty of suspicion

BY JOSEPH BIEN-KAHN

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IN THE SUMMER of 2013, the Stanislaus National Forest was as pretty as a postcard. Pristine lakes gleamed bright blue

against the dramatic, glacier-carved granite cliffs, and from certain angles you could believe the Ponderosa Pines went on forever. But this was a precarious kind of beauty: By August, the forest, which borders Yosemite National Park, had gotten less than half the rainfall that it'd normally receive. Steep mountainside was covered in desiccated brush, and by the middle of the day, the rocks were hot to the touch. The air smelled like parched dirt. Conditions were so dangerously dry that the United States Forest Service had made it illegal to start a fire anywhere in the area.

As the afternoon of Saturday, Aug. 17, reached its peak heat, a 31-year-old named Keith Matthew Emerald was hunting deer in the canyon below Jawbone Ridge, where the Clavey and Tuolumne rivers meet. Emerald had grown up nearby, and he knew the area well. He wore a green backpack and a goatee, and he carried a bow.

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Around 3 p.m., an ember touched the mountainside and sent a flame up the ridge. All that parched brush worked like kindling, and soon the endless pines began to be set ablaze. A few hours later, CAL FIRE pilot Jerry Bonner landed his helicopter on a large flat rock near the Clavey River's north side and airlifted Emerald to safety.

At that point, the Rim Fire — which started below Highway 120's Rim of the World Vista lookout — seemed controllable. Then, on Aug. 19, two days after the first spark, the wind changed direction, and the fire escaped the narrow canyon, quintupling in size in a single day. It would eventually burn 257,314 acres of forest, making it the third largest in California history to

that date. Emerald would be arrested and confess to starting it; a grand jury would indict him based on evidence that he'd set a small campfire to burn some trash and let it escape his control. Two years later, in 2015, after coincidentally timed deaths torpedoed the government's case against Emerald, the charges against him would be dropped.

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Looking back now, a decade later, the Rim Fire feels like a prelude to disaster — a cleared throat ahead of an End Times scream. After 2013, California entered its megafire era. What had been a generational burn in Tuolumne County began to tumble down the list of California's largest wildfires — it was leapfrogged in 2017 and in 2018, and five more times in 2020, and again in the summer of 2021. After a relatively quiet 2022 fire season, a rainy 2023 has forecasters predicting a later, but possibly more intense fire season. And what had seemed like a West Coast problem has enveloped the rest of the country this week — as wildfires rage through Canada's forests, the skies above the Northeast have been stained yellow and the air made thick with smoke.

To date, no one has been held responsible for starting the Rim Fire. Officially, the cause of a fire that cost \$127.3 million to fight and burned more than 250,000 acres of forest is still unknown. And it made a noise that still resonates in the communities it scorched.

In the days and weeks after the fire went huge, questions began to fly: Why couldn't the feds contain it? Were they merely incompetent, or was something more nefarious at play? Why would someone like Emerald — a seasoned outdoorsman, a local — do something so reckless? Or was someone else to blame? Someone else *had* to be to blame, right?

Well-meaning questions calcified into conspiracism, and conjecture into commonly accepted truth. By the time the case was dropped, it was already impossible to tell what was real; the suspicious circumstances of the dismissal only fomented paranoia and distrust that still linger.

Outside of Tuolumne County's 2,235 square miles, if the Rim Fire is remembered at all, it's a story of a reckless hunter who managed by fluke to evade the law. Inside, it's one of a lawless drug cartel, or a group of careless tourists, or a corrupt government — anyone but the man who confessed to starting the fire.

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For the years I spent talking with Forest Service employees, ranchers, lawyers, bartenders, and other affected townspeople, I heard every version of the story. Then, after almost two years of rebukes from those who might know Emerald, I came across an email that led to a resume with a phone

number for the hunter who it seemed had up and vanished. I called it, and he called me back, and after our 30-minute conversation, I felt closer to understanding how the Stanislaus Forest burned that August 10 years ago. And more than that, how everything that followed went so very wrong.



Chris Loh, the owner of the Iron Door saloon as well as the Spinning Wheel Ranch in Groveland, California, on Aug. 22, 2013. MICHAEL MACOR/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/GETTY IMAGES

THE RIM FIRE'S BURN ZONE SITS north of Yosemite and almost due east of San Francisco, just below California's bent elbow — a vast expanse of wilderness speckled by small, conservative-leaning mountain towns. One of them is Groveland, which boasts 600 residents, a surprisingly good pizza joint, and the Iron Door, which claims to be California's oldest saloon. For decades, the bar has been owned by the Barsotti family; their daughter, Corrina, now runs it with her husband, Chris Loh. In 1983, when the five-year-old Corrina arrived in Groveland, the place felt light-years from her early childhood spent wandering around backstage at Grateful Dead shows. When her Asian-American husband showed up from Oakland after college, his alienation was even more acute. "It was so openly racist at that time, you know?" Loh tells me as we walk from behind the bar to the dining room in back.



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But the Lohs made Groveland home; when the Rim Fire burned through the area, it destroyed multiple buildings on their land. Since then, while serving beers to locals and firefighters, they've heard every possible theory about what *actually* happened in August 2013. Groveland's favorite watering hole was the social network where information spread. "When you have a little rumor in a little town," Chris tells me, "it has legs and it runs."

None ran faster or farther than the one about the illegal weed farm. Less than a week after the Rim Fire started, Twain Harte Fire and Rescue chief Todd McNeal explained to a community meeting that the fire was "highly suspected" to have started at an illegal marijuana-grow operation in the forest near the point of origin. At the time, locals tell me there were many covert weed farms in the surrounding forests — it seemed everyone had a friend who'd seen an elaborate grow op on a hike — so the theory held purchase. A video of McNeal's presentation was shared to YouTube and shown on many local news broadcasts. It would be a week before the U.S.

Forest Service released a statement implicating an unnamed hunter's escaped campfire, and by then the marijuana farm rumor had spread throughout the county: on Facebook, at local bars, over the phone.

The Lohs heard a slightly different variation of McNeal's theory from a local family, who also own property not too far from the point of origin. That story, which I was told a handful of times during my reporting, was that the Drug Enforcement Administration had busted a Mexican grow operation in the area and chose to burn the seized marijuana on-site rather than lug it from the steep canyon. The DEA then supposedly lost control of the burn, sparking what would become the Rim Fire.

Corrina's neighbors had told her that they spotted the seized marijuana from their property and called the local power equipment shop to see if anyone had rented a chipper. According to their telling, no one had. "They have to either burn it or they have to chip it ..." Corrina trails off with a raise of her eyebrows. Chris leans over to remind her that I'm recording our conversation. Corrina shifts in her seat and adds, "I don't know if that's true. It's just hearsay ... but that's what I heard."

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At the same time the grow-operation story was spreading, a second theory circulated. Marty McDonnell owns Sierra Mac River Trips, which leads rafting and kayaking tours down the Tuolumne. He was at his office, a quarter-mile from the Rim of the World Vista, where he saw the first plumes of smoke from the canyon and called the fire in. From his view up on Highway 120, he was close enough to see the CAL FIRE helicopter fly into the canyon.

Less than an hour after the rescue, a friend in the Forest Service told McDonnell that a hunter had started the fire. But minutes later, according to McDonnell, the friend called back and said the case was now subject to a gag order, so McDonnell couldn't repeat what he'd just heard. McDonnell tells me he believes the authorities wanted to keep Emerald's name a secret to avoid corrupting evidence and also to shield the fire starter from furious community members seeking revenge. "There were people who were so unbelievably pissed off about this fire," he says. "The Forest Service was protecting the guy because they worried that if the news got out of who had started it, then someone would just go kill him."

In the days that followed, many in the community circled around the theory that the Sierra Mac River Trips kayakers who'd been camping in the area had started the blaze. The group had spent the night quite a bit upstream, according to McDonnell, but he believes the theory caught on because the only people who frequent the steep canyon are boaters or hunters: "And the hunters were saying, 'No, it couldn't be a hunter. It had to be a tree-hugger type.'" Angry friends and acquaintances approached McDonnell for information, insisting that the fire starter was a member of his kayaking tour. He tried to tell them it had been the hunter saved from the point of origin. But no one believed him.



Corinna Loh gets her first look at the remains of a four-bedroom home at her family's Spinning Wheel Ranch resort in Tuolumne County on Aug. 24, 2013. PAUL CHINN/THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/GETTY IMAGES

Like all compelling conspiracy theories, the DEA story and the kayaker story were built atop a layer of reality. Federal agents really had done a wave of raids on weed farms in early August, including one on Aug. 7 at a location five miles from the Rim Fire point of origin. A group of kayakers really had been camped near the Clavey River that day, too. A sheriff's spokesperson told Sonora's *The Union Democrat* in 2014 that the seized marijuana was transported off-site and destroyed with a wood chipper, and they "never used anything incendiary" to destroy marijuana onsite. Meanwhile, law enforcement has found zero evidence that kayakers started the fire.



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But the rumors spread faster than the truth, especially the ones that placed blame on outsiders, rather than Emerald: A Mexican cartel, tourists, federal agents. The logic of *Here vs. There* and *Us vs. Them* became the lens through which every new development and theory was interpreted.

“It’s so hard to trust what we hear from the government, as far as I’m concerned,” Chris Loh says. It’s lunchtime, and people are starting to trickle into the saloon and toward the bar. “When I talk to other people, especially old local families, they’re on that kid’s side.”

ON A CLEAR DAY, THE VIEW from the Rim of the World Vista is breathtaking, but in October 2020, smoke from a nearby forest fire has turned the sky a washed-out brown and given the thick, warm air a peppery scent. It’s fall in California, which means much of the state is on fire again.

Shaun Crook sits waiting in his white F-250, his unmasked face covered

with a thick red beard. We meet so he can drive me into the canyon to see where the fire burned through the sprawling ranch where the Crooks have been logging pine, fir, and cedar trees since the 1970s.

On that Saturday in 2013, Crook was at his son's soccer game. He saw a Forest Service bulldozer drive by and knew right away a fire had broken out. But as we head down the winding highway toward the Tuolumne River, he says, "It was just a little puff of smoke." The next day, when his family climbed up to a lookout high above their ranch to get a better view, the fire still looked to be under control — "like a couple [of] planes and a helicopter could have put the whole thing out."

Crook still doesn't understand how a campfire became a massive blaze. The Rim Fire cost the family millions in damage and forever changed the face of their pristine ranch land. Like many of his neighbors, he's focused the blame for the blaze outside the county lines. His theory is that the Forest Service was hesitant to use chemical fire retardant, because the area was a protected wild and scenic river. That rumor was powerful enough that U.S. Congressman Tom McClintock sent a letter on Dec. 10, 2013, about it to Regional Forester Randy Moore, which asked, in part: "Were there any circumstances in which the application of aerial retardant was restricted due to any of the foregoing land designations or other statutory or regulatory factors?" Moore responded a week later in no uncertain terms: "Aerial retardant was never halted for any reason between August 17 and August 19." In fact, 120,000 gallons of fire retardant were dropped between Aug. 17-19. In total, more than 2 million gallons were used during the first 20 days the fire burned.



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But Crook finds the official story implausible. And he blames logging-averse environmentalists for the broader set of conditions that allowed the fire to start and spread. Crook, who serves as second vice president of the California Farm Bureau Federation, an organization that advocates for farmers and ranchers, believes the widely held view among his peers that local ranchers know what's best for their local forests' health. To him, the idealists in Sacramento can't see the realities of the forest because they're distracted by protecting the trees. When we talk, he wears a green trucker hat that reads: "Log It, Graze It, Or Watch It Burn."

We cross the Tuolumne River, and Crook parks on the edge of his family's ranch. He points back toward the canyon, where the mountain is covered in dry brush and the skeletons of burnt trees. Halfway up, where Forest Service land ends and the Crooks' begins, the brush is cleared and small trees stand growing in orderly lines. To him, every half-burnt tree

surrounded by dried shrubs looks like kindling for the next big fire. “There’s certain environmentalists that think the burnt landscape is the most precious,” Crook says, shaking his head.

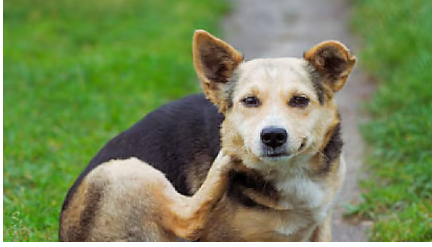
For the Crook family, the fire’s toll was 100 heads of cattle, about 500 acres of timber, and a handful of structures, including a cabin built in the 1800s. He chokes up as he tells me about what it was like when it all burned: Charred cow carcasses strewn across the decimated land, his grandfather walking right up to a still smoking fencepost to secure it in the ground. He feels cheated that his kids will never know the ranch of his youth.



Shaun Crook JOSEPH BIEN-KAHN

Two months before meeting Crook, I was connected with another rancher who had lost dozens of animals and acres of land. He and his wife recounted their harrowing fire story. At one point, the rancher told me that he’s not a violent man, but can’t find it in his heart to forgive Emerald. “I don’t like to go to a place where I would shoot somebody on sight,” the rancher said, “but the loss and hurt is so big, I’d shoot the sucker.”

Crook, though, says he’s not angry with Emerald. “I mean, I knew Keith when he was younger,” Crook says. “He was my brother’s age. And there are people in his family that’s been here forever. He would’ve known better.”

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As we talk that day, driving through the mountains, Crook's thoughts about the fire's cause seem to vacillate. Either Emerald was framed. Or if Emerald did start it, it shouldn't have been anything notable — the environmental policies and the failures of Forest Service firefighters are what cost the Crooks their land.

But one fact stays consistent to Crook: Whatever sparked the Rim Fire, Emerald is not the man to shoulder the blame.

ACCORDING TO THE GOVERNMENT'S FILING, this is what happened on Aug. 17, 2013, and the weeks that followed. After Emerald was saved from the Rim Fire's point of origin, he was driven to his father's home near Coulterville by a Forest Service employee. From there, Emerald's friend Tanden Olson drove him back to grab his truck. During that drive, Emerald allegedly told Olson he'd started a campfire that escaped up the ridge and began the enormous blaze.

But when Emerald talked to investigators, the story shifted. First, he said he'd slipped, causing a rock slide that sparked the fire. A week later, he claimed that marijuana growers started the fire after seeing him and mistaking his camouflage for a law enforcement uniform. Investigators returned to the point of origin on Aug. 31 and Sept. 1st and found "no evidence of a rock slide" and that the specific conditions for a rockslide-sparked fire did not exist. Investigators also did ground and aerial reconnaissance and "did not locate evidence of marijuana cultivation located in or near" where the fire started.

On Sept. 3, Forest Service Special Agents Mike Grate and Kent Delbon asked Emerald to meet them at the Tuolumne District Attorney's Office. He

arrived without a lawyer. The agents told Emerald they believed he'd started the fire accidentally, but that the D.A. and the U.S. Attorney were readying charges due to his contradictory accounts. If Emerald confessed, they said, it'd be unlikely he'd be charged or held liable. It appeared to them that Emerald's gravest concern was backlash from his impacted community: When Delbon promised to do everything in his power to keep his name out of the papers for several months, Emerald agreed to confess.

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Emerald explained that he'd started a campfire by lighting pine needles and twigs on a sandy beach over which he heated a can of soup. Afterward, he buried the can and burned some trash from his backpack in the campfire. A warm gust of wind carried embers onto the nearby vegetation, blowing the fire uphill. Once it ran up the steep slope, Emerald was unable to put it out. Emerald's confession was captured on video, and in a signed affidavit. Law enforcement were certain they had their man.

In August 2014, Emerald entered a plea of not guilty in the U.S. District Court in Fresno. Then, as he awaited trial for charges that could lead to up to six years in prison and \$510,000 in fines, two witnesses the federal government's case relied upon died. On Feb. 2, 2015, Olson drove off a steep

embankment while working construction; he died 16 days later from traumatic brain injury. On March 6, 72-year-old helicopter pilot Bonner died of a heart attack.

On May 1, the federal government dismissed the charges against Emerald. Kevin Rooney, the former U.S. Attorney who prosecuted the case, tells me he believed — still believes — that Emerald was guilty. But his hands were tied: “Our witnesses were gone.” Long after the fire sparked, the strange deaths reignited the local rumor mill.



A firefighter from the Colorado-based Long Canyon Fire Department monitors a back fire while battling the Rim Fire on Aug. 22, 2013, in Groveland, California. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

TO THOSE WHO INVESTIGATED THE CASE, it’s long been clear that Emerald is to blame for the blaze. But through the years I’ve spent trying to understand what happened to Tuolumne County after the Rim Fire, Emerald has remained an apparition. A bartender told me he remembered feeling strange the first time he served Emerald after his name was publicized, but he hadn’t seen him in years. A school administrator who knew Emerald’s uncle refused to connect us. A local who’d grown up in Sonora, a nearby town, told me Emerald was off the grid: “Sonora people tend to do that when they’re in the news too much.”

On the Monday after Thanksgiving 2020, I call Emerald on a number I found after a year of looking. It rings through to voicemail. I leave a

message, explaining that I hoped to understand what it felt like to have his name tied to a fire that destroyed the forest where he'd grown up and so many of his neighbors' homes. At 2 p.m., my phone buzzes. Emerald is calling me back.

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He speaks in the slow, almost-Southern timbre of rural California.

He makes sure I'm not recording the call, but then he answers every question. And yet, he refuses to fully explain himself.

Emerald says the people who know him know he wasn't to blame for the Rim Fire and that he "could give a shit" about what strangers think: "If a bunch of hippies think I started it, I couldn't care less."

He begins by reminding me that wildfires are big business in the region — with the overtime for firefighters and the work for bulldozer drivers, construction workers, and more — and then says he believes a DEA burn or tourists on a rafting trip were to blame for sparking the blaze.

I ask him why, then, had the government decided to focus their case on him? "Because when they questioned me, I told them to go fuck themselves."

Emerald, who tells me he'd dealt with dirty police since high school, paints a picture of a corrupt prosecution that coerced him into a false confession. He

says “they had no evidence” and were trying hard to argue that he was the only one in the area. Right as the case was readying for trial, he tells me, his lawyer shared photos Emerald had taken that showed a group of rafters near the point of origin. He claims that’s what caused the government to drop the case.

Why not show the government the exculpatory photos sooner? I ask. He says he kept the photos secret until that moment, because he wanted to expose government corruption.

Rooney has no memory of the 11th-hour photo reveal. But even taken at face value, Emerald’s ploy failed. The charges were dropped without any statement clearing Emerald’s name. In 2017, when he tried to get his record expunged, the government filed into the public record 100 pages laying out the entirety of their investigation, and a judge dismissed Emerald’s request.

Emerald explains the Rim Fire to me as a story of the government desperately searching for a scapegoat to pin a costly fire on. “They need someone to blame it on if they don’t manage the forest,” he says.

He expresses a deep distrust of institutions, and a belief that everyone is out for themselves at the end of the day.

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He’s written pages and pages about his experience, Emerald tells me, but he’s worried about the liability of accusing the government of crimes in print. “I’ve gotta cover my ass,” he says.

Before hanging up, he says that whenever he does decide to share the *true*

story — or at least his version of what happened on and after that August afternoon — he'll make sure he's the one who gets paid.

(In a fact-checking call with *Rolling Stone* on last week, Emerald said that all of the details in the court filings are wrong, including that he started any fire in the forest. He declined to elaborate in the four-minute phone call, before saying he wouldn't be answering any further questions and then hanging up.)



Flames from the Rim Fire consume trees near Groveland, California, on Aug. 25, 2013. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

THE DAY AFTER SEEING CROOK'S RANCH, I drive to the tiny historic mining town of Tuolumne to grab a coffee with B.J. Hansen, a local reporter who wrote a book about the fire. Hansen has a boyish face, with gelled blond hair set firmly in a part. He has spent a lot of time thinking about the speculation that's arisen in the years since the fire. "The reason rumors got so wild was because the Forest Service didn't release a lot of information and details early on," he says. "And so, without that information, and being a little quiet about how they were fighting the fire early on, whatever rumor you wanted to say could fit that narrative because they're not confirming or denying that it's true."

Former U.S. Attorney Rooney agrees: Looking back, he regrets not sharing more with the community about why the case was dropped, leaving a narrative vacuum that the county's residents filled. "In retrospect, if that

county is really upset, we should have realized that and reached out and maybe had a public meeting,” he says.

For the past decade, even after the indictment, Emerald has managed to successfully avoid the press. Soon after the fire, Hansen tells me he’d gotten Emerald on the phone for just 60 expletive-filled seconds before he hung up. Not long after, Emerald changed his number.

Hansen has heard every variation of every theory over the past decade, and he believes the simplest one: that Emerald started the Rim Fire. But his understanding of why the charges were eventually dropped — based on details he learned in off-the-record interviews with “people at the Tuolumne County government level” — is fascinating. “The indication was that the defense was going to push back and make this trial more about how the Forest Service wasn’t competent in fighting this fire in the first place,” Hansen says. “That even if he did start the fire, it shouldn’t have gone to 257,000 acres. It should have been a few-hundred-acre fire, and nobody would even really care about this.”

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Hansen tells me he’s heard from his sources that once the witnesses died, it gave the government an out. “There’s a strong belief among the people who I’ve talked to in the community that it made it convenient to, at that point, just drop the charges, as opposed to going and having an all-out fight about whether they fought this fire the way that they should have fought the fire,” he says.

What Hansen tells me — based on his anonymous sourcing — is explosive, so I check it with Rooney. He disputes Hansen’s version of events. Throughout our conversations and emails, Rooney is consistent in his assertion that the witnesses’ untimely deaths alone were what led his office to drop the charges. “I recall the defense pushing for discovery regarding where every airplane had been at any given moment and documentation providing that degree of detail did not exist. I do not recall the defense claiming or hinting that the Forest Service had made mistakes. However, claims along those lines are not uncommon although their relevance may be highly disputed,” he writes me via email. “Finally, my memory is that the Forest Service would have preferred the prosecution to continue despite the loss of the witnesses.”

To fight a fire the scale of the Rim Fire, especially at a time when fires that size were still incredibly rare, was a logistical and strategic challenge. On top of that, there are factors like the wind that even the best firefighters cannot control. It’s not hard to imagine that a Monday morning quarterbacking defense attorney could shine light on missteps that the government would rather not be highlighted. That’s why Hansen’s theory is attractive — it neatly squares the circle of the two dominant narratives: that Emerald and the Feds both shoulder some blame. To his reading, Emerald started the fire but prosecuting him wasn’t worth the trouble of an adept defense attorney underlining the ways that the blaze could have — and perhaps should have — been contained.

AS I LEAVE THE TOWN OF Tuolumne and head back toward Sonora, I see four motorcycles with Trump flags driving in the opposite lane. They lead a caravan of trucks — more than 110 in total — honking and waving flags. Tuolumne County is an island of red in an ocean of blue. During many of my conversations, the men I speak to bristle with a sense of persecution and righteous indignation; those feelings become especially palpable whenever their forests burn.

Less than a month before I arrived there in the fall of 2020, false rumors that antifa from Portland had set the Oregon wildfires spread online. The story gained traction because it fit neatly into a narrative: The city-dwelling liberals from *there* were bringing their depraved destruction out *here*. The FBI Portland Twitter account shared an official statement debunking the claim, but not before the theory spread.



U.S. Forest Service firefighters look at an incident map as they take a break from battling the Rim Fire at Camp Mather, near Groveland, California, on Aug. 25, 2013. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

This is a fire story, but it's also a conspiracy story. To the Lohs, who'd worked at grow operations up north during college, a drug bust gone wrong rings most true. To Crook, it's yet another example of outsider environmentalists misunderstanding what it takes for humans and forests to coexist. To almost everyone, except those who've pored over the government's evidence, the idea that the hunter saved from the point of origin started the Rim Fire just isn't satisfying. Evan Royce, who was on the Tuolumne Board of Supervisors back in 2013, still believes the truth of what sparked the fire and the investigation after is hidden. "It was just weird. I definitely question the integrity of it," he says. "It's hard to make a hardcore accusation, but when your intuition is telling you something's not right, it's

kind of like, ‘OK, let’s see if we can figure this out. Let’s ask some questions.’ And that’s kind of as far as we got.”

Hansen has seen the evidence, and he’s talked to every major player in the story. He spent years after that initial spark trying to understand how a small campfire turned into a generational disaster for his home county. His book is a meticulous re-creation of the months that followed, but even he can’t help shake the feeling that there must be facts still hidden — how could the Rim Fire have grown so large, and how could the charges against Emerald have been dropped?

For many in the area, the public face of the Forest Service was Susan Skalski, who held the position of forest supervisor of the Stanislaus National Forest from 2008 through 2014. When I call Skalski and ask if she can think of any regrets about her handling of the Rim Fire, she pauses for a few breaths. “I can’t right off the bat. I’m sure there were some,” she says. “Maybe I’ve forgotten now.”

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Skalski was more than 30 years into her Forest Service career on that warm, dry August day. She’s aware of the second-guessing of her agency’s response to the fire, but she hasn’t lost any sleep over it. “People in the community and people elsewhere can say and believe what they want, but I don’t spend a lot of time on it. I’m fact-based and was also privy to the facts in my role, so I didn’t spend any time dealing with that kind of stuff,” she says. She’s not surprised that theories took root in the region. “It happens all the time with everything. We can see it happening in a really big way now with all the politics going on. It’s just amazing some theories that people will come up with.”

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It's admirable for Skalski to be so unbothered by the criticism. Still, I press on. She, more than anyone, embodies the feds to the locals of Tuolumne County. Why, in her view, had the area been so ready to forgive the man rescued from the scene of the crime? "I think what people were surprised at was that it was a local person. Not even so much that it was a hunter, but that it was a local person," she says. "We all knew how dry it was out there, so they're like, 'Why would you do that?' I don't know — that could've been a disappointment to find out it was somebody local as opposed to somebody coming from a city out there."

Of all the explanations, Skalski's rings most true. We say we tell stories to understand the world, but the ones we choose to believe often fit into our existing understanding of it. A local kid should've known better than to start a fire on the hot, dry afternoon of Aug. 17, 2013. A terrible accident with untold costs was too simple an explanation. And so, many other stories began to be told.

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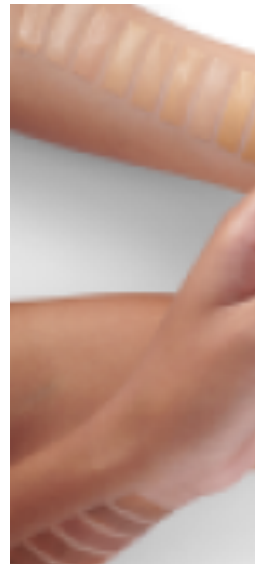
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