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Burnt Ridge & Mount St. Helens **~25 years~**

by: Michael Dolan
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Twenty-five years ago, Burnt Ridge Nursery & Orchards, Inc. was founded with the purchase of 20 acres of logged over brush land. The object was to start a nursery and eventually plant orchards of sustainable fruit & nut crops.

Our location is in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains at 1100 ft. elevation. We are surrounded by massive, distant volcanoes. Mt. St. Helens is the closest, at about 30 miles to the south.

In March of 1980 Mt. St. Helens rumbled to life with a series of earthquakes and ash eruptions, after 150 years of dormancy. A very young volcano, it had achieved its height of 9,677 ft. in only about 3,000 years. Mt St. Helens had formed on the base of a previous volcano that had blown itself apart over 37,000 years ago. In May of 1980 the biggest avalanche in recorded history occurred when the north flank of the mountain gave way in an earthquake, releasing an enormous amount of pent up energy. The blast had 500 times the energy of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. The explosion leveled over 150 square miles of forestland and was heard in Vancouver, Canada, over 225 miles away. A huge amount of volcanic ash spread to the East, turning a sunny day into total darkness 400 miles away in Montana. The ash covered several thousand square miles in parts of Washington, Idaho, and Montana. Lighter amounts spread across half the U.S. in the next few days and eventually circled the earth.

At 30 miles away, our farm was a safe distance from the eruption. The name of our road and farm - Burnt Ridge - comes from a forest fire of a hundred years ago and has nothing to do with Mt. St. Helens.

The volcano instantly lost 1,277 ft. of mountain top in the cataclysm and a huge crater was left - over a mile wide, two miles long, and several thousand feet deep.

Later in 1980 magma pushed to the surface in the floor of the crater and by 1986 an 850 ft. dome had built up in the center of the crater. Then all went quiet until Sept 2004, when a series of earthquakes signaled new activity.

By October 2004 new magma appeared in the crater at the rate of about 12 yards a second. By December 2004 a new dome in the crater has grown over 750 ft. high and encompasses 70 acres.

From our farm we can't see the newly growing portion of the volcano due to the angle of the outer crater wall. If the speed of growth continues at the current rate, it should rise above the crater rim in several years.

On a clear day, with a plume of steam rising from the crater, we have a reminder in the distance of our active and changing planet.