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Coverage of Bar Harbor Fire of 1947

WLBZ Radio

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Transcript of a sound recording in MS 608, WLBZ Radio Station Records, Bangor, Maine, 1931-1973

Title: Coverage of the Bar Harbor Fire of 1947

Date: October 26, 1947

Recording number: D 16.79; CD 9, track 6

Length of recording: 12:10

[transcript begins]

JOHN WELLINGTON: Ladies and gentlemen, we're here in front of the Ellsworth City Hall where notable disaster work is being done by the Red Cross and we have in the beach wagon Mr. Zwickert who is Deputy Assistant, I believe, to the Atlantic area, is that right?

ZWICKERT: Deputy Manager of the North Atlantic Area.

WELLINGTON: All right, thank you. Well, we'd like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Zwickert. How many evacuees have you taken care of here in Ellsworth?

ZWICKERT: There have been about 3,000 evacuees come off of Mount Desert, and at one time or another all of them have passed through our hands at city hall.

WELLINGTON: You have an address system set up whereby they can get messages from relatives or friends that are off the island?

ZWICKERT: Yes, we have and it's been working very well. We've had literally hundreds and hundreds of messages that have come through Western Union and by telephone and to date we've been able to reach almost all of them. The reason we don't reach all of them is because everyone hasn't registered yet.

WELLINGTON: Well, that's a point that I think would be good to get across, that people should register if they've been evacuated from the disaster area. About the facilities you have here, they've been donated by the Red Cross or were they donated by the people of the township, or was it a joint proposition?

ZWICKERT: Every organization in the city of Ellsworth has come forth in friendly fashion with donations of every kind for the Red Cross. They have given us buildings for shelters. They have provided space for our mass feedings, and hundreds of people have turned open their homes to take in persons that were evacuated from the island.

WELLINGTON: Well, do you direct the Red Cross activities down on Mount Desert Island from here, the canteens that go down, can you tell us a little bit about that, please?

ZWICKERT: Yes, all of those activities are directed here because as probably most of you know, the island is closed to all civilian traffic and there aren't food supplies and other supplies there that can be drawn upon. So, we purchase the food, prepare it, and load it into canteens to take down to feed not only the people that remain there but also the firemen, the volunteers who are fighting the fires, and any other persons who happen to be on the island. I understand that there are no cooking facilities down there because of the lack of power at this time.

WELLINGTON: Well, one thing that I'd like to know, Mr. Zwickert, is the evacuees, do most of them come out in their own vehicles or are they transported by the Red Cross, or by city vehicles, or volunteers?

ZWICKERT: Some of them came out in their own vehicles but I think it might be said that most of them came out by truck. The volunteers that were working with the Red Cross in Ellsworth took their trucks down into Mount Desert Island and literally loaded people on them. The Coast Guard and other individuals who had boats also helped during that first night of evacuation.

WELLINGTON: Where did they land in Bar Harbor the first night of the evacuation that Thursday night?

ZWICKERT: Right at the bridge. That was the best point to pick people up, and those there we had streams of trucks and all types of vehicles that could pick up the individuals and their families and what few belongings that they could bring with them.

WELLINGTON: This must be quite a mass task here. Can you estimate how many people you have working here besides Red Cross workers, with the volunteers who do secretarial work and pass out food and things like that?

ZWICKERT: It's rather hard to estimate because we have several shifts that are running. We run on a 24-hour basis, as you probably know, and I would say probably several hundred workers who transport food and serve meals, who distribute clothing, and who also help us in the office, of course, to boy scouts who run errands, it's just hard to say, there's so many people here, everybody has been so willing to help. It's been a wonderful spirit right here in Ellsworth.

WELLINGTON: Would you say this would be the largest disaster since the hurricane in '38?

ZWICKERT: For New England, you mean? Uh, yes, I think it probably is, when you add all of the sections of the state together. We have a disaster headquarters at Biddeford, as you probably know, and from there we've received reports that this is an extremely large disaster. The Red Cross has appropriated a half-million dollars, initially, to take care of the relief of disaster sufferers, and of course that, in Red Cross language, is a large appropriation to make at the beginning.

WELLINGTON: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Zwickert, it's very interesting. I've noticed a lot of activity around here and it really is a heartening sight to see everybody pitch in and do their part the way they have been doing and all doing splendid work. I think that the volunteers here in Ellsworth have been doing wonderful work, don't you think so?

ZWICKERT: I certainly do think they've been doing wonderful work. They, all of the organizations, turned out 100%, and I personally can say that there hasn't been a single individual that we've asked to do something that has turned us down. Every organization has workers out and they are working on a 24-hour basis. I was talking with a man just the other day who said to me that he had had about 3 hours of sleep in the last 24, uh, the last 36 hours. He was dead on his feet, but his spirit was willing and he is certainly doing a good job.

WELLINGTON: Well, Mr. Zwickert, in closing, is there any message you'd like to give to the radio audience about this work down here?

ZWICKERT: I would like to say just this, that in every community, I'm sure, in Maine, there is the same excellent cooperation that is given to the Red Cross. It isn't the Red Cross, necessarily, but it's a community spirit that counts.

WELLINGTON: Thank you very much, Mr. Zwickert.

[A few seconds of silence.]

ELLIS O'BRIEN: We're speaking to you now from the fire department building in Bar Harbor. We're going to bring you a picture of the fire, just as it is at the moment. With us is Deputy Chief Asa Wasgatt of the Bar Harbor Fire Department. Chief, can you tell us how the fire stands at the moment?

WASGATT: At the present time within the village limits is quiet. At Salsbury Cove, we're standing by, attempting to kill the fire which [inaudible] Salsbury Cove yesterday afternoon. By nightfall, we hope to have drowned it out with a crew of approximately 100 men and a mile of hose.

O'BRIEN: Would you say that the fire is under control?

WASGATT: At the present time, the fire is under control. We're waiting to see if and when the winds are going to blow.

O'BRIEN: And it's always a question of wind, as it has been for the past week, is it not?

WASGATT: The winds are what have caused us this great disaster.

O'BRIEN: I see. Thank you very much. Here now, is Mr. John Conte, Manager of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company, who is going to tell us how the situation stands with regard to communications in Bar Harbor and Mount Desert Island.

CONTE: At present, telephone communications are that we are fully established and now all communications are normal off of the island. We have all circuits now intact. There were very few minutes during the entire disaster that we were out of communication with Bangor. All circuits were restored at 3:30 this morning. Cables were cut in, and all lines working.

O'BRIEN: So that communication is restored, now, between Bar Harbor and the mainland. Well, thank you very much Mr. John Conte. That's a very encouraging picture.

And now, to give us a somewhat general picture of the state of things in town, and also to tell us a few things about some of the people in town, is a resident of Bar Harbor, Mr. Maurice Gilley, Mr. Gilley incidentally has been working very closely with me during all the time I have been here in Bar Harbor, since last Wednesday. Hello, Maurice.

GILLEY: Hello, there.

O'BRIEN: You want to step up a little closer, here, so we can both get on to this platform?

GILLEY: That's right, go ahead.

O'BRIEN: You've been around today, Maurice, around town?

GILLEY: That's right.

O'BRIEN: And what have you noticed? How did it look to you today?

GILLEY: It's pretty bleak.

O'BRIEN: It looks pretty bleak? How are the people taking it, Maurice, how do they seem to be reacting?

GILLEY: People seem to be, to have their chins up.

O'BRIEN: Their chins up?

GILLEY: That's right.

O'BRIEN: You think the spirits, the outlook and spirit here in Bar Harbor today is one of optimism?

GILLEY: That's right, many of the people are planning to build. I happen to have information, a pretty reliable source, that two of our summer residences whose homes were destroyed are planning to rebuild as soon as possible.

O'BRIEN: I see, I see, well then all-in-all, it's pretty good.

GILLEY: As far as the residents of Bar Harbor are concerned, yes.

O'BRIEN: Yes, well thank you very much, Maurice.

Now here is a person I think can sum up the whole situation, express the feeling of the whole community here in Bar Harbor. It's the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, Mr. Seth E. Libby. How do you do, Mr. Libby?

LIBBY: How do you do?

O'BRIEN: Would you tell me, Mr. Libby, how you think the community of Bar Harbor, speaking in your capacity as chief of the Board of Selectmen, is reacting to this disaster here?

LIBBY: Of course, the feeling here locally at first wasn't very good because they concentrated on the fire, but now that the fire seems to be under control, the spirit really is good. Mainly, there's been so many contributions of money and offers for food and clothing and so many of the houses being totally destroyed, there is chances for a wonderful new building program, and I think there is the best of spirit and there's no question but the new Bar Harbor will be tops.

O'BRIEN: Will be tops. Well, that sounds good. By the way, Mr. Libby, the Governor was down here yesterday afternoon and I understand here was here to see about, among other things, temporary or semi-permanent housing. What can you tell me about that?

LIBBY: The Governor was here with [Adjutant General Carter?] yesterday in regard to the [Juarez?] Administration and [surface?] properties and emergency housing. An estimate of a number to be taken care of was pretty hard at that time to get that figure because at that time Salsbury Cove was still evacuated, but a figure was arrived at and rather than give definite information at this time, I think within a short time, especially after this emergency is over, the Governor with a strong committee here locally will get together in Augusta and really work out a real problem.

O'BRIEN: I see, then, steps have definitely been taken in solving the housing crisis here.

LIBBY: That's true.

O'BRIEN: And then you would say that things look up...

LIBBY: That's right.

O'BRIEN: ...for Bar Harbor, bigger, better, and more beautiful than ever.

LIBBY: That's right.

O'BRIEN: Thank you very much.

LIBBY: Yes, sir.

O'BRIEN: That was Mr. Libby, chair of the Board of Selectmen here in Bar Harbor, Maine.

[transcript ends]

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Fogler Special Collections
5729 Raymond H. Fogler Library
Orono, ME 04469-5729
207.581.1686
um.library.spc @ maine.edu