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The Bar Harbor Fire

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As a preface to an account of the disastrous forest fire that devastated one third of the total Bar Harbor area in October, it should be noted that at the time of the fire no detailed record was kept of fire fighting activities. The men of the department, along with all available assistance from outside communities, were altogether too busy during the period of extreme danger in an earnest attempt to bring the fire under control to give thought to write down for future study the gigantic and, at times, urgently desperate, efforts to stop the colossal destruction. It is a tribute to their work that, unlike the fire fighting in other sections of the state at the time, where confusion and divided command was a handicap, the fighting on Mount Desert Island was exceptionally marked by a central command at all times which coordinated all the various units in a well planned attack.

The following account of the fire is compiled from several sketchy records that were kept, from eye witnesses' accounts, and from data contributed by the Acadia National Park.

On Friday, Oct. 17, 1947 at 4:05 P.M., a call to the Fire Department was received from Dolliver's Dump at the Fresh Meadow which is situated about seven miles away on the outskirts of the town in a northwesterly direction on what is known as the Crooked Road. This dump is on the south bank of a large meadow or bog, which in normal summer conditions, has a heavy growth of marsh grass. The north and west borders of the bog are marked by a fairly wide and deep stream. Upon receiving the call, a driver was dispatched with the Dodge forest fire truck which is equipped with a 150 gallon tank of water and about 1600 feet of 1 1/2 in. hose. Upon arrival, the driver discovered a fire which covered approximately an acre in the dried marsh grass between 30 and 50 feet off the edge of the bog directly in front of the dump. A line was laid from the truck and water pumped from the tank. As we were too painfully aware, the conditions were ripe for a major fire. We had gone several months without rain and all vegetation was dehydrated to a point that any fire, no matter how small, could in a short time, if not soon contained, get completely out of hand. The wind was blowing lightly from the southwest. As soon as the supply of water in the tank had been depleted, it was necessary for the driver to disconnect his line and go approximately a mile away to the nearest water supply (a brook) to fill the tank. On this trip, he notified the firehouse by phone what the situation was and a general forest fire alarm was sounded. The chief contacted the national park which sent a pumper and crew to the scene along with all available men from the department. In the meantime, at the site of operations,
the Dodge truck had returned to the line and, as would be expected, under the circumstances, the fire, unchecked during the truck's absence, was making progress with the wind in a northeasterly direction toward a ridge which bordered the east side of the bog and which contained some small soft wood growth. The men were experiencing great difficulty in dragging the hose through the thick grass and coupled with the rapid progress of the fire and the limited water supply, it was plain that other methods of combating the fire would have to be devised. It was learned from a nearby resident that a wood road which extended through the so-called Shea Farm on the far east of the bog, could permit a pump being taken directly to the brook which bordered the bog on the north. It was found that this road was already enveloped in fire and it was necessary for a pick-up truck loaded with 1 ½ in. hose, men and a Pacific pump to go through the fire to reach the brook. The pump was soon spinning merrily and the crew was able to beat down the fire to a considerable extent on the east side of the bog. Very shortly another Pacific pump from the National Park was boosting the water up the ridge on the east side of the bog where the most fire was concentrated. The fire was contained at about midnight and the job of "mopping up" began. The little Pacific pumps were replaced by the department's 500 gallon trailer pumper. A 2 ½ in. line was laid and wyed off to 1 ½ in. so that 1 ½ in. lines covered both the ridge on the east and the edge of the bog on the south. From this period until midnight, Monday, Oct. 20th, water was pumped continually and full patrols were maintained. No further spread of the fire occurred, the edges were thoroughly wet down and what few hot spots that could be discovered were in the bog. At midnight on Monday the pump was shut down but the lines were kept intact around the entire burn and with the exception of one or two hot spots in the center of the bog, deep in the peat, all was quiet. These were in an area that had been burned over and not considered dangerous. It is significant that these spots never did cause further damage. The total area burned over was approximately 100 acres.

At dawn, Tuesday morning Oct. 21st, a brisk wind sprang up from the northwest and the chief with day crew were patrolling at that time. They found the situation the same as it was the night before except that the wind was whipping up considerable smoke from the hot spots in the center of the bog and the pump was started. Action was taken by hose lines to reduce activity in these hot spots. Other men were patrolling the entire area of the burn and during this patrol, one of them reported a spot fire that had sprung up about two hundred feet from the edge of the burn on the southwest corner. This spot fire which was to lead directly to our disaster, is the source of a great deal of contention, many feeling that it was the start of a separate fire from that just described. Certainly it started a considerable distance away from the edge of the burn which was wet down, at an angle where it would have been impossible for a spark from the hot spots in the center to strike and was discovered directly after it started. There are several instances during our entire catastrophe when incendiariam could be suspected but nothing can be proved. The chief went immediately to the spot, discovered a fire about one hundred feet in diameter spreading with terrifying force with the wind in the extraordinarily dry conditions through a thick growth of spruce and pine. He saw instantly the seriousness of the situation and ordered all available lines relaid to head off the fire which was rushing ahead at an alarming rate. He then went to the nearest telephone and called aid from all the fire depart-
ments on the island and Dow Field in Bangor. Later in the day, aid was to arrive from many more cities and towns including Bangor, Brewer, and Camden. In the meantime, the crew at the scene could not head the fire off for it was impossible to lay hose fast enough to reach the head of the fire. The blaze spread rapidly through the growth of spruce and pine, booming forty or fifty feet into the air with a roar, crossed the Crooked Road and headed for a farm owned by Paul Russell. At this point, the department, with the aid of re-enforcements that had arrived along the Crooked Road, was able to save the home of Thomas Ryan which was situated on the side of the road on the easterly edge of the fire. By now the fire was completely out of hand and battle lines had to be back up to the Norway Drive to the southeast. By this time a large convoy of soldiers numbering about two hundred men had sped in from Dow Field and they set up headquarters at the Hugh Kelly farm on the Norway Drive. They were accompanied by units of the Dow Field fire department. The soldiers were equipped to some extent with shovels, axes, rakes and a few back tanks. They also had a spotter plane which radioed reports of the progress of the fire to a jeep on the ground. Because of the dry conditions, water and plenty of it was necessary to stop the fire. A pumper was set up at the Beaver Dam brook on the junction of the Crooked Road and Norway Drive and the water via 2 ½ in. line was boosted up the Drive to a Park pumper which sent it along to the crew that was attempting to stop the fire on the west side of the Norway Drive. The woodland here was fairly well spaced with several large pastures and chances were excellent that the fire could be kept from jumping the Drive. However, we were to have another bit of hard luck that was to dog us from the start to finish. The barn of Hugh Kelly on the east side of the Drive suddenly caught fire from what was apparently a flying ember. Eye witnesses state that a spot of fire about a foot in diameter suddenly appeared on the roof of the barn and, in the matter of seconds, the barn was a roaring torch with flames shooting high into the air. The main fire at the time was at least two hundred yards away on the west side of the Drive and we now had a two pronged fire of gigantic proportions - one on each side of the Drive. On the east side directly in the path of the new fire was several acres of dry slash that had lain for a number of years from various lumbering operations. When the fire got into that, we had a fire that was a fire. By 1:30 P.M. the first prong of the fire extended southward through the valley of the Old Mill Brook and along the west slope of Young’s Mountain while the second advanced southward toward Long Heath and Sunken Heath, west of the Norway Drive. It was thought that an attempt at extensive backfiring might be made but it involved too much human danger as by now a large force of men were in the woods and water was scarce. As the afternoon wore on, it was plain that Eagle Lake would have to be the next big stand. The wind continued strong from the northwest and the fire marched up McFarland’s Hill and threatened to cross the Eagle Lake Road. The main body of men and equipment were transferred to Eagle Lake Road. The fire, under the influence of the strong northwest wind, was crowning severely and despite all efforts, did cross Eagle Lake Road at about 4 P.M. and entered national park land west of Eagle Lake. A half hour later the flames appeared over the crest of McFarland’s Hill. There was, by now, a heavy concentration of men and equipment on Eagle Lake Road working under heavy smoke conditions. The advance of the fire south of McFarland’s Hill threatened several farm buildings and fire fighting efforts were directed in saving
them which were successful. During the night of the 21st, the fire worked around the south end of McFarland’s Hill, through the woods between the north end of Eagle Lake and the Eagle Lake Road, eastward as far as Duck Brook and for a short distance across it. It also crossed the Eagle Lake Road to the north side, swung around the north end of Brewer’s Mountain and worked northward and eastward to Duck Brook and New Mill’s Meadow. A pumper and large force of men with considerable hose were employed in making a stand on the New Mill’s Meadow Road to prevent the fire from crossing the road. Tons of water were poured on both banks of the road to a considerable depth all that night. It was determined that this would be our first line of defense with How’s Park, which is included in our hydrant system, to the eastward, our secondary. About 2000 acres were burned that day.

At day break, Wednesday, October 22nd, the fire situation was as just described. The day was clear and the wind was from the northwest, moderate velocity. The wind freshened as the day wore on, fanning the fire into activity on all fronts. The national park forces at Aunt Betty’s Pond were engaged in an effort to cut the fire off there while other forces were seeking to stop the fire on a line running westerly from the head of New Mill’s Meadow to Half Moon Pond and the Breakneck Drive. During the afternoon, high officials of the National Park arrived and in conference with Chief Sleeper, it was decided that park forces should attempt to hold the fire in the Aunt Betty - Southwest Valley section and that they would have full charge of fire fighting activities within the park. Meanwhile the wind had freshened and the fire advanced rapidly southward forcing the crew at Aunt Betty’s Pond to withdraw with their pumping equipment to Bubble Pond. It was decided by the National Park to attempt backfiring, which proved successful in halting the advance of the fire and by early evening the crew was back at Aunt Betty’s Pond and resumed pumping. About 2,250 acres burned that day.

The morning of Thursday, October 23rd, the most fateful day in Bar Harbor history, brought with it a moderate southwest wind which eased the situation in the Aunt Betty’s Pond sector. The fire appeared corralled as all lines were holding well. On an airplane survey by the chief it was found that conditions were favorable on all fronts although some fire activity in the vicinity of Young’s Montain was causing heavy smoke. At about 10 o’clock in the forenoon the wind increased from the southwest to such an extent that it proved impossible to hold the line to the north on New Mill’s Meadow, Half Moon Pond, Breakneck Drive sector. This brought about threatening conditions to Hulls Cove and men and equipment were rushed there to effect evacuation and prepare a defense of the position before the fire came within reaching distance. The main part of the village of Hulls Cove was saved though four houses were lost in the subsequent fighting. The fire was noted here by jumping in erratic patterns.

Soon after three o’clock in the afternoon, a wind change occurred. Without diminishing, it began to veer from southwest to west and with increasing velocity swung into the northwest. The velocity of the wind has been variously reported at 40, 45, 50 or more miles an hour. One report from a reliable source has it that the Coast Guard clocked that wind at between 63 and 70 miles an hour in Penobscot Bay just west of us at 4:00 that afternoon. No matter what the velocity, it’s a wind that anyone on
Mount Desert Island that day will never forget. It is remarkable that many people were not burned to death for the fire, stirred to a full inferno by the gale, descended upon the outskirts of the town of Bar Harbor, jumping hundreds of yards at a time, sweeping all before it. Many crews were lucky to escape with their lives. One fireman reported that he looked up and said it looked as though two gigantic doors had opened and towering columns of roaring flames shot down upon his position. He and his crew with truck were just able to pull out even though surrounded by fire in the matter of seconds. A preliminary warning had been issued the day before to residents of outlying streets of the town that preparation for evacuation should be made and as the evacuation signal (7) was sounded at the firehouse, all townpeople immediately proceeded to evacuate. The sole means by land was by way of Seal Harbor via the Ocean Drive or by the regular Route 3 road. The Army did a wonderful job loading people and belongings into trucks, jeeps, etc. and warning of the danger to persons who had failed to hear the evacuation signal. Many people were able to escape by way of Seal Harbor before the fire shut off that means of escape.

It is reported that the fire crossed the Seal Harbor road at the Jackson Laboratory at ten minutes of five and probably went over Great Head into the ocean at around seven o' clock. Our terrain presented us with one odd quirk in the progress of our overwhelmingly swift, fiery disaster. The inferno was directly west and south of us before it came into the north end of the town proper. This can be attributed to the fact that as the roaring flames crested over Paradise Hill in Hulls Cove, losing much of their forward fury on the lee side of the hill and further slowed down by the Bluffs to the north of the town, they came into the town to the north about the time that the main blow-up was roaring into the sea well south of the town. The catastrophic spread and intensity of the conflagration is indicated by the fire's sudden enormous expansion from approximately 1900 acres at 4:00 P.M. to over 16,000 by midnight on October 23rd.

Those persons (about 2500) who failed to escape by way of the Seal Harbor road were gathered together in the Athletic Field where it was thought the maximum safety was to be had. However, when it became apparent that the best means of escape would be by water, they were transferred to the municipal pier and many took advantage of the shelter of the Shore Club. Right here it must be stated that the courage of the Bar Harbor people cannot be excelled anywhere in the world. With the bay whipped into mountainous waves by the gale wind, with their town being apparently obliterated at their back, with no sure certainty that any of them would get out alive, they calmly awaited rescue without the slightest show of panic. Calls had been made to the Coast Guard and Navy for aid which brought immediate results. Both agencies rushed destroyers at full steam to the harbor and the most immediate help was from lobster boats which the Coast Guard recruited from other sections of the island. About 400 people were taken by these small boats, under difficult conditions, due to the heavy seas, to the mainland before the road to Ellsworth was opened on the north side of the town by fire fighter action.

As soon as it was obvious that all Hades had broken loose, when the wind shifted to gale force into the northwest making mandatory a retreat from Hulls Cove and outlying fronts, plans were put into operation to save the main section of the town. The outskirts of the town had to be abandoned
to a fiery fate. Mountain Avenue, Forest Street, Eagle Lake Road, Harbor Lane, Prospect Avenue, Brookside Avenue, Oak Street, Upper Eden Street, were in this sphere and because of their position in relation to the fire could not be defended. It would have been certain suicide for anyone to have attempted any kind of a stand within their radius.

The De Gregoire Hotel at the junction of Eden and West Streets, and the entrance to the town, was afire. It was here that the first successful big stand was made. A crew under the direction of the Camden and Surry fire chiefs stopped the fire from progressing along West Street toward the wharf where the townspeople were gathered awaiting rescue and also stopped the fire from advancing along Eden Street toward Cottage Street. Two big factors account for the success in stopping the fire from wiping out the town. Firstly, the wind stayed constantly to the north or northwest (if it had shifted but slightly to the west, the whole town would have gone as no one could stand directly in the face of that inferno). Secondly, Bar Harbor has a water system that is more than adequate for its needs and which proved itself that night. Fire crews were stationed at the DeGregoire, along Eden Street to Eden and Mount Desert Streets, at strategic spots throughout the town. It was the job of the crews at the DeGregoire, along Eden Street and Mt. Desert Street to stop the fire from entering the town. The secondary crews, within the town, wet down buildings, protected the hospital where all patients had been quartered in the fireproof wing, and generally looked out for fire outbreaks behind the main points of attack.

While the crew battled at the DeGregoire, the crew at Mount Desert and Eden under the direction of the Brewer and Bucksport chiefs was fighting as desperately to stop the spread of the fire. A successful stand was finally made at the junction of Mount Desert and Spring Street at the Sampson property. Some of the horror that these men lived through can be understood when it is stated that the Belmont Hotel, which is in this area, was in the cellar just twenty minutes from the time it caught afire.

In the meantime, as soon as it appeared that the firemen had stopped the fire at the DeGregoire, a bull dozer was sent out Eden Street toward Hulls Cove to clear whatever debris might be in the road. This was about nine o'clock and shortly thereafter the heroic people on the wharf, led by an army jeep, wended their way in a long caravan over this road to Ellsworth and safety.

The battle for the vital heart of Bar Harbor had now been won and it was possible to dispatch crews to the outskirts of the town to the south to secure whatever stands that could be made. The fire had stayed on the east side of lower Main Street on Strawberry Hill as far as the Mount Desert Nurseries where it had crossed the road and had gone to the sea just south of Sol's Cliff. A crew was set up to keep the fire within these boundaries. The historic fire battle of Bar Harbor had reached its climax and the gigantic job of "mopping up" was about to begin.

The morning of October 24th dawned beautifully clear and quiet as though nature was seeking to make up for the terrible things she had done to us the night before. The boundaries of the fire were as described in the preceding paragraph. A strong defense was set up at Sol's Cliff where the
fire could have been blown back into town if we were to have a southeast wind. Crews continued to cool off the ruins in town with hoselines and patrols began to function to put out the most dangerous "hot spots." The worst was over but we were still apprehensive that a new strong wind would cause us further trouble. The Navy and Coast Guard boats arrived in the harbor before eight o’clock and crews were immediately sent ashore with equipment to aid in the fire fighting.

When the fire was declared officially out on November 14th by the National Park officials and the chief, the fire had burned a total of 17,188 acres - 8,364 in the town of Bar Harbor, 74 in the town of Mount Desert and 8,750 in National Park land. The estimated damage by valuation was $586,125 in the National Park and $11,218,565 in the town of Bar Harbor. Approximately 23% of all property with an assessed valuation of one and one-half million dollars was destroyed, including 170 native homes and 67 summer cottages. Three deaths, directly or indirectly attributed to the disaster, occurred. One, an elderly man, who had been placed aboard a truck to be evacuated had dismounted to seek a pet, failed to get out of the danger area and was burned to death. A young girl was fatally injured in a truck accident during the mad rush of evacuation and a man dropped dead at the pier before evacuation, probably due to a heart condition.

A great injustice would be done if individual heroes were picked out for special mention. In this report all names are omitted except where they serve to establish locations. It would be impossible to relate all the outstanding acts of heroism that were performed by so many groups and individuals. In a general way, it can be mentioned that the firemen who worked until they could work no longer by ordinary standards but who could still find some hidden reserve to keep them going many hours after they should have dropped, deserve praise, so do the valiant women and men who served thousands of meals at the firehouse and various canteens on a twenty-four hour basis - plenty of good hot food was always available under the most trying conditions - so do the hundreds of volunteers who despite no experience in fire fighting, fought effectively and bravely at all times, so do the army, navy, and coast guard who used a considerable amount of valuable equipment most effectively, so do the national park with its trained personnel especially suited to forest fire work and who did such an excellent job of stopping the fire in the park. Special mention should be made to the city of Ellsworth and surrounding towns which did so much for our evacuated townspeople during their stay off the island and the Red Cross for alleviating the suffering caused by the fire. The police, State Police and National Guard deserve praise for handling the evacuation.

During the most desperate part of the fire battle there was never enough equipment to go around and one spot would have to be robbed to serve a spot that needed it more. With the various shifts in the wind, constant changes had to be made in the location of equipment and personnel. The fire house was the clearing house of all operations and was the scene where all conferences of chiefs were held and where all plans of attack were made. In warfare a battle, the size and scope of our fire, would have been planned months in advance with the careful stockpiling of men and equipment to meet all conceivable contingencies but we did not have the opportunity of such a happy situation and were forced to improvise the
attack as we went along, keeping in mind that the locations most seriously threatened had to have first consideration.

Besides the Bar Harbor department, there were fourteen other fire departments actively engaged with pumpers and men in fighting the fire. Listed alphabetically they are: Bangor, Brewer, Bucksport, Camden, Castine, Dow Field Dept., Ellsworth, Northeast Harbor, Old Town, Otter Creek, Seal Harbor, Southwest Harbor, Surry, Winter Harbor. The National Park flew in 41 of its top personnel trained in forest fire suppression from all over the United States. The Maine Forest Fire Service was represented and did much to solve problems allied to forest fire fighting. The Army supplied hundreds of men, trucks, jeeps, bulldozers, planes, sleeping equipment, fire fighting equipment. The Navy and Coast Guard supplied trained fire fighters, many “Handy Billy” portable pumps, walkie talkies, considerable hose which was flown into the Bar Harbor airport, clothing for fire fighters. The department laid approximately 28,950 feet of 2 1/2 in. hose and approximately 28,800 feet of 1 1/2 in. hose during the fire. This does not include hose used by other agencies. About 1500 men fought the fire. With the great shortage of equipment, several novel methods were devised to combat the fire. One of the most effective was patrols on hot spot duty. It consisted of pick-up trucks upon which were mounted 275 gallon oil tanks, such are used in home oil installation, filled with water, several buckets and a crew of men. Such improvised fire trucks made regular patrols of the fire area and did fine work in suppressing hot spots. Several large oil delivery trucks of about 1000 gallon capacity equipped with portable or sump pumps were pressed into service and did good work.

One exceptionally interesting pump hook-up was engineered by the national park. Water was pumped to the top of Cadillac Mountain by five 500 gallon trailer pumps from Eagle Lake - a distance of three miles to a height of 1530 feet.

Two extensive fire breaks were made during the fire by bulldozers. One protected Town Hill and the other extended from Icy Hill to Bubble Pond, 150 feet wide, as a protection to Seal Harbor. Neither were put to a fire test and with wind conditions as they were, especially on October 23rd, it is certain they would have been ineffective. Some bulldozer action was used in the town by the chief especially where pasture land presented a good opportunity.

This report has covered our twenty-nine square mile disaster only in the broadest and most general terms. It would be possible to write a book on any one of a dozen phases of the struggle if a detailed account was to be given. Of the thousands of people who either fought the fire or escaped from it, all of them have their interesting and, in most cases, thrilling stories. One thing they all cannot but be impressed with and that is with the utter helplessness mere man can possess when confronted by the full fury of nature on the loose. It is an experience they will never forget.

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