

Maine Remembers the "Big One"

By Keith A. Smith



Vacationland. A place where rocky shores caress a cold Atlantic Ocean teeming with life. A place where farmers tend to their crops and livestock in sustenance living. A place where extensive forests climax in autumn's kaleidoscope, supporting abundant wildlife and a thriving logging industry. A place where cool clean rivers that run through glacially carved valleys. A place where the rich and famous of the world come to summer in magnificent "cottages", forgetting life's pressures. A place called Maine.

The year was 1947 and people were recovering from the effects of World War II, trying to return to the idyllic life-style they so cherish. They would soon be battling another enemy that would turn beauty into horror.

The winter of 1946/47 was unusually warm with average snowfall. Spring was very wet, making people wonder if they would ever see the sun again. But, as July broke, so did the sun, and the summer was saved. The months of July, August, and September were perfect, with plenty of outdoor activities for everyone. The excellent weather came at a price, and it began to make itself known. September brought empty wells and dry woods loaded with slash from logging operations and blowdowns from a 1938 hurricane. By the end of the month, Maine found itself in its worst drought in three decades. October brought no relief, with fuels becoming dangerously dry, water levels dropping, and farmers fields turning to dust. Maine Fire Wardens, who only had authority in the Unorganized Townships, were

becoming extremely worried because the general public seemed unaware of the very high fire danger. Small fires began to pop up in southern Maine, but were quickly and laboriously extinguished by the town volunteer fire departments. Maine Forest Commissioner, Raymond Rendall, and Fire Control Supervisor in the Organized Townships, Austin Wilkins, decided to reopen the fire towers which had been closed for the season.

On October 7th fires were burning in Topsham, Bowdoin, Wells-Sanford, and Portland, and radio stations were alerting the public to the dangerous situation.

The numerous forest fires were depleting resources. Firefighters were working day and night. Whole communities were pulling together to save what could be saved and to support the firefighting efforts in any way they could.

By October 17th 50 fires were burning throughout the state and volunteer departments heroically battled intense fires that were avoiding control. Crossing town boundaries and hindered by a lack of centralized command, antiquated equipment, rural water supply, nonexistent radio communications, and minimal training, the firefighters fought a valiant but disorganized battle. Maine Governor, Horace Hildreth, announced a partial woods closure limiting hunting but not harvesting operations.

October 18th brought news that two of the fires were now serious.

The Shapleigh Plains Fire had burned 1200 acres and was moving towards Waterboro, and the Topsham-Bowdoin Fire had burned 1000 acres and was threatening Bowdoin Center.

On the 19th, while no new fires had been reported and some of the fires were being brought under control, Maine broke a temperature record set in 1910 with 78° F. All outdoor burning was banned and a haze of smoke covered much of Southern Maine.

New fires were reported on October 20th and, with plenty of fuel and high unpredictable winds, many of the fires turned into crown fires, continuing through the night and threatening homes, farms, mills, livestock, and whole communities. The settlements of Biddeford, Fortunes Rocks, and Goose Rocks Beach were evacuated. Bulldozers had been called in on many of the fires to try and create fireline since direct attack was useless. October 20th began a week of horror state-wide.

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On October 21st extreme fire danger was predicted. The day lived up to its prediction, with gale force winds and a firestorm on all fronts. It flattened whole villages and sent residents fleeing for their lives. The fires were moving so fast that, in most cases, fire was upon people before they knew it. People escaped with only the clothes on their backs as their homes, farms, and livestock burned. Firefighters scurried and continually had to fall back to try

Photo opposite: A North Waterboro home is destroyed during "Red Thursday". Photo courtesy of Guy Gannett Publishing.



Aerial view of Waterboro Fire. Photo courtesy of Guy Gannett Publishing.

and hold a new line. Some were semi-successful in slowing the fires down by using illegal backfires.

Governor Hildreth issued a second proclamation on the 22nd prohibiting all hunting, fires, and smoking in the woods. Commissioner Rendall and Supervisor Wilkins, lacking any authority, could do little but monitor and assist the towns with any resources required. This they did to the fullest extent possible, and neither of the men got much sleep. Fires had grown to enormous proportions; the 3000 acre Centerville Fire had a 10 mile front, the Newfield Fire had grown to 3000 acres, and the Fryeburg Fire to 2000 acres. Towns were desperate for manpower, and volunteers poured in from everywhere, including other states. Communities were still evacuating and some people were relocated two and three times as the firestorms rolled on, burning everything in their path.

October 23rd or “Red Thursday” is a day many will never forget. With over 40 fires burning statewide and a

15% relative humidity, the wind increased to 40 miles per hour turning fires into roaring crown infernos — unstoppable, jumping fields, roads, and rivers. Bar Harbor residents on Mount Desert Island, the summer playground of the rich and famous, were cut off from the mainland and forced to the town pier. The U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy were called in to rescue the inhabitants, as the fire burned up mansions, hotels, and the world famous Jackson Lab. The firefighters put up an unbelievable fight to stop the fire and save the heart of Bar Harbor. In southern Maine, the Fryeburg Fire had crossed into Brownfield and was burning faster than anyone could run, spotting up to a mile away. Manpower and equipment were desperately needed and the evacuation of East Brownfield and Brownfield Center began. The 3000-acre fire in Newfield had finally been brought under control, but, as the wind increased, the fire blew up, sending firefighters fleeing for their lives, and burning up the town of Newfield

and its lumber mills. Many more scenarios played out through the day as the people of Maine were held helpless by the disaster that confronted them. That evening Governor Hildreth declared a state of emergency, giving authority of the fires in the Organized Townships to Commissioner Rendall and Supervisor Wilkins, giving them statewide authority. They then set up the fire headquarters in Augusta and quickly began organizing resources to make a coordinated attack on the enemy. Resources available and/or deployed had become extensive — 600 airmen from Dow Field, 1,400 students from the University of Maine, 400 students from Colby College, 800 students from Bowdoin College, 600 students from Bates College, thousands of volunteers recruited by the Red Cross and American Legion, Maine State Highway Department, Maine State Police, State Fish and Game Department, U.S. Navy, U.S. Army, U.S. Coast Guard, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, National Guard, and other private organizations too numerous to mention. Some provided manpower, some equipment, some both, but all had the same goal — extinguish the fires.

October 24th found Maine reeling from the onslaught. Press from all the national periodicals and radio stations were present, trying to get the story. With that, rumors were widespread and factual information was hard to come by. The worst rumors were of arsonists starting fires and vigilante groups on patrol to stop them. Supervisor Wilkins had taken over the firefighting effort and ordered equipment from anywhere he could procure it. It was another Class 5 day and publisher Guy Gannett loaned out his plane for dry

ice cloud seeding to try and produce rain. The attempt failed. The wind died down enough that fires dropped back on the ground and could be effectively attacked. Some progress was made, and the central command was working well.

Saturday the 25th saw President Truman declare Maine in a state of emergency, authorizing the Federal Works Agency to extend federal aid to the state. This opened up access to excess federal equipment for Maine's firefight. A 25 mile per hour wind made some of the ground fires turn back into crown fires and firefighters battled the new threats with bulldozers and backfires, trying to protect communities in the line of fire. Meanwhile, other communities were getting control of their fires, and by the evening of Sunday the 26th, favorable wind conditions had allowed for some progress. The only uncontrolled fire was in DownEast Maine.

In fact, because of the firefighting efforts, some of the fires were declared out. But, with no rain, the



Flames leaping Route 1 on their way to Fortune Rocks and the ocean. Photo courtesy of Guy Gannett Publishing.

drought continued to turn Maine into a desert.

On October 29th, with 40 fires still going statewide, a second attempt was made at cloud seeding, but before the B-17s could drop their load it began to rain in Maine. The rain wasn't significant, but the danger was over.

On November 8th, it rained again. On November 10th, Governor Hildreth lifted the ban and by the 13th it was snowing. Some of the fires would smoulder for months. The relief efforts now began.

The final toll of Maine's worst fire disaster included 16 dead, 2500 homeless, 1068 homes destroyed, 9 communities destroyed or mostly destroyed, 4 communities seriously damaged, 200,000 acres burned, damage estimated at \$30 million, timber value resource lost \$17 million, and fire suppression costs \$500,000.

That was 50 years ago and many lessons were learned from the experience. Lessons that caused changes in how fires are fought not only in Maine but in the whole Northeast. Authority over forest fires statewide was given to the Division of Forest Fire Control by legislature, ensuring a centralized command. Radio communications have reached a high level of effectiveness. Training internally and externally are now high priorities. Equipment within the Forest Fire Control Division and



Firefighters battling the blaze as it sweeps into a North Waterboro lumberyard burning up 100,000 board feet of stacked lumber. Photo courtesy of Guy Gannett Publishing.

local fire departments have become state-of-the-art and a Northeast Forest Fire Protection Compact was developed with the New England states and eastern provinces of Canada for mutual aid.

The 50th Anniversary of the Maine fires (October 1997) brings to mind the devastation that forest fires bring. And as time goes by, how we tend to forget the pain, loss, lessons, and honor of the people involved.

Maine's Forest Fire Control Division, along with the Maine State Federation of Firefighters, remembered the event with a tractor trailer display at the annual Maine State

Federation of Firefighters convention and parade in Kennebunk. Included was a caravan starting from Kennebunk and ending in Bar Harbor. In conjunction, a videotape has been developed called "October Fury" that has actual footage of the 1947 fires and interviews with survivors and firefighters. The tape was aired in September and October on local CBS affiliates WGME in Portland, WABI in Bangor, and WAGM in Presque Isle, Maine. "October Fury" will also be on sale to the general public with proceeds benefiting the Wildland Arson

Reward Program, Maine Fire Chiefs Association, and Maine State Federation of Firefighters.

The people of the State of Maine hope that this memory stays a memory.

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