

Memories of the Fire of 1947

I. "The Fire Had Leaped Across Valleys . . . Blocked the Last Route Out of Town"

Robert W. Patterson, Sr.

*Excerpts from a November 5, 1947 letter written by
the Bar Harbor architect to his mother*

It all started on Friday, almost a week before the finale, with a fire in a marsh back of Hulls Cove [Dolliver's Dump]. They got it under control but the bog was so dry that it continued to burn under ground. On Monday, it broke out again when a strong wind came up, and jumped the road into the woods; and from then on it got worse. It was on Monday that Lee [his son, Robert Whiteley Patterson, Jr.] went into the hospital [for pneumonia], so I did no fire fighting The army moved in also, with several hundred men from Dow Field in Bangor.

The fire lashed back and forth between Bar Harbor and Town Hill, working up to Eagle Lake Road on Tuesday and burning the Outing Club cabin and ski tow [on McFarland's Hill]. On the same day it burned several barns in the interior of the island, and the whole population was, of course, fighting in one way or another. More and more men came in from outside, fire departments set up apparatus from as far as Bangor and even Belfast and Augusta, and the canteens were set up on a 24 hour basis to feed the men in the field. We set up cots in the Casino and I spent most of Wednesday at the fire house on the telephone. Every few hours a new "front" would become critical, and the fire whistle would blow frantically to arouse the men who were trying to get some rest, and the trucks would rush out again. All schools closed on Wednesday, and men from the University of Maine and from all over the state came to help.

On Thursday the whistle blew again about 6 a.m., and from then on things got worse all day. . . . when a few clouds appeared about 3:30, we called Bangor to see if Army planes could drop dry ice and try to produce a shower. The fire had been working to the north all day and Hull's Cove had been evacuated, with the bulk of the equipment concentrated there. The Bangor airport told us they had seen the clouds

and that they had no rain in them, and that in 10 minutes we would have 40 mile wind from the north. We gave the warning, and some equipment started back from Hulls Cove, and in about 8 minutes the wind came.

The wind got stronger and stronger and it blew steadily. Estimates of its speed range up to 85 m.p.h., but I think 60 is about right. Reports began to come in that the fire had reached Eden Street at the Bluffs [cliffs along Route 3 just south of Hulls Cove] and was tearing toward town, and at that point I arranged a convoy . . . to start out of town . . . Then suddenly the phones rang, some motorcycles dashed up to the firehouse, and in a minute the whistle blew the signal for evacuating town!

It was getting dark, and above the trees . . . I could see the fire towering across the whole skyline and literally shaking the earth and the air. The wind was stronger than ever and the fire had reached the group of 20-25 houses just above the [Kebo] golf club house. I have never heard a more terrifying noise, and I hope I never do.

We . . . started down Ocean Drive, thinking we could get out via Northeast Harbor; but at the foot of Main Street we were turned back. Somehow – and I'll never understand how it happened so quickly – the fire had leaped across valleys from the lower slopes of Cadillac, and blocked the last route out of town. Hence we returned to the hospital. Then it was about 6 p.m. and we stayed there like rats in a trap until 10:30. The fire moved in all around the town, and in the darkness it seemed much nearer than it was, although it was close enough. We watched the houses on the hills burn, and then the houses nearer town, and the Malvern Hotel which only took about an hour to burn flat.

There was an approach to panic in the hospital, thanks to one or two who spread the word that we would all be suffocated shortly as the fire got closer, but all in all everyone took it well although it was not a pleasant feeling.

About 10:30 the fire had worked far enough to the south so that Eden Street was open to traffic and we packed up and drove to Ellsworth (many people had meanwhile been evacuated by boat). . . . [Friends] arrived soon after, and said that they and [another family] had also been trapped and had spent the evening on the bar over to Bar Island.

The next day, more troops were moved to the island and martial law was imposed. Both Art [Arthur Brown, Patterson's brother in law] and I were wanted back in Bar Harbor, but it wasn't until Saturday afternoon that the civil authorities prevailed over the military and we were allowed to get back. . . . In B.H., of course, our houses were flat and my office, as well as all but a few sections of Art's Greenhouses.

Actually, we will make out well enough, I think. Our insurance won't replace all we lost, but it will go a long way, and we got rid of a lot of junk. Some things are hard to lose, such as photographs and books, and we find we still think we have things, like an amputee continuing to wiggle his missing toes. But it could be a lot worse.

II. "The Kindness and Care That Make Coastal Maine"

Jack Russell

My parents moved to Mount Desert Island in 1937 to begin careers at the Jackson Lab. They bought a small house at the north end of Echo Lake. I was only four-and-half in October 1947 and experienced those days with the eyes and sensibility of a young child.

Inevitably, my memories are a montage of jump-cuts. Some of these images and moments I surely experienced, but some may flicker in memory because they were projected later through the stories of others. Still, the fall of 1947, the burning time, is for me the beginning of time remembered.

My first image seems strangely pastoral amid those days of danger and dedication. My brother Dick and I stand on our dock at the north end of Echo Lake with my father and the good woman who had just become my step-mother. My father and Lee have full Indian pumps strapped to their backs. Dick and I man the pump nozzles and compete to see which of us can jet a stream deeper into the cove. They leave soon with the wondrous pumps, probably to help tend hot spots in forest already lost to the flames.

I believe that my mother, Tibby, took Dick and me at some point early in the fire up to Beech Cliff to look northeast to the smoke rising from the Crooked Road – before we sensed the full danger or knew all

that the fire would claim. The Beech Cliff Trail was already a family favorite, built in 1933-34 by Civil Works Administration crews from island towns and then CCC boys from across Maine, both under the supervision of our family friend Bob Patterson. More than fifty years later, on my last hike there with her, mother would remember that day at the top of the Cliffs.

These peaceful images are all I retain from before the evacuation.

We left at night. I do not think we were part of the big caravan of cars crawling the long way round from Bar Harbor via Otter Creek and Northeast Harbor because the Hulls Cove and Eagle Lake Roads were closed by the fire. We probably left earlier, once the evacuation whistle blew soon after 4:00 PM on the 23rd, taking our relatively safe route north from the lake on 102 to the Trenton Bridge. I do know that it was dark, for Dick and I saw sheets of flame climb Sargent and Cadillac as we watched, stunned and mute, through the rear window of the old green 1941 Ford.

Like many refugees from the Island, we stayed for a night or two at the Ellsworth City Hall. I remember rows of cots in bright lights under high ceilings and the excitement of an adventure that involved so many people. Halloween was coming, so when my father appeared we took a walk down Main Street to Woolworth's, where exhausted and stressed parents indulged the purchase of a lion mask – saved for many years as a talisman of this time.

The fire was part of my early education in the kindness and care that make coastal Maine a community. My mother, brother and I were taken in for some days and nights by a farm couple. These good people – from Surry, Hancock or Lamoine ... I can't remember – sheltered and fed us until we were allowed to return to the Island. I remember a big black wood stove, a big brown dog, great baked beans, and a fine set of wooden blocks made for me by the farmer as a present for a little boy without toys.

My parents must have done a fine job of holding things together for Dick and me. In one hour, the laboratory to which they had each devoted a decade exploded in flames that consumed most of their research records and their entire research colony of mice. My father and step-mother established the mammalian genetics program at Oak Ridge Na-

tional Laboratory and my mother made her scientific contributions at the rebuilt Jackson Lab, where she led the reestablishment of the mouse colony. In retrospect, all three came to believe that the science lost in the fire actually compelled them to take fresh looks and new directions in their research, but in the immediate wake their sense of loss must have been staggering.

We returned to a new life on an island forever changed. We lived now in a small cottage on lower Main Street in Bar Harbor. The fire had come almost to the road there and for months later I remember almost daily the sound of chain-saws in the burnt woods tending the great wound.

I have one more moment in my jump-cut montage from the time of the fire, one perhaps not logically linked to the great events but still, for me, emotionally part of the passage. One evening that November, in our first weeks in the strange new place, we heard loud noises on the small porch and then a big knock at the door. Mom went to open the door with all four of us kids in tow – ages six, four, two and one. There in the doorway was Allen Salisbury. Allen was a big man and to four-year-old eyes huge, dark and towering – but with a happy face like the sun. “Tibby,” he said, “I thought the kids would like to see my bear!” And with that he stepped aside to show us a large black bear, fresh-skinned but with the magnificent head still glowering at us.

Please understand. Allen Salisbury was the man responsible for much of the physical plant at the Jackson Lab. He had worked with my parents for a decade. His wife, Florence, cooked for the students in the summer program my folks had started at the Lab. When the fire began to look bad, Allen sent Florence and their daughter Nancy off island to family in Trenton. On the afternoon that the wind turned and swept the fire down toward the Lab, Allen Salisbury returned at great personal risk to do all he could to save the mice, the research and the buildings. At the last moment he had time only to save his dogs and his gun. He lost his house, his boat and most of his belongings.

On that porch, long ago, in the cold November night air, beholding wonderful Allen Salisbury and his bear, I believe I knew somehow in my four-year-old mind that an island that could make a man such as Allen

would recover in time from its trial and be a very good place for all of us to call home. And so it has been.



Jack Russell and his wife, Sandy Wilcox, live at the north end of Echo Lake. He consults nationally on strategic planning and political communications. Jack was born and grew up on MDI. He lived away for too many years but came home in 2006.