

The 1947 Fire

The Waterborough Historical Society, October 1978

On Friday, October 17, 1947, Waterboro received a fire alarm. It was evening and the Waterboro Fire Company answered the call to help put out the fire which was between Ross Corner and Newfield. The Waterboro men stayed all night and had their part under control, but at the Shapleigh side the fire was still out of control the next day. By Sunday, October 19, the fire had spread into Waterboro and burned over 1200 acres. There had been no rain to wet things down in 108 days and the woods were like tinder. At times there were high winds spreading the fire. On October 20, Ossipee Mountain was all in flames. Much of the mountain burned Monday night, lighting up the dark sky, silhouetting the burning trees and fire tower against the horizon. The fire coming over the crest of the mountain was like the explosion of cannons! The men who began fire fighting on Friday were still at it day and night, many without sleeping only eating what was lugged to them.

For the first few days Ross Corner was the headquarters of the Red Cross and women from Waterboro kept busy carrying food and coffee for the tired men. The firemen fought hard and saved the homes along Ossipee Hill Road. They had 100 plus oil and dairy trucks with water and hundreds of other men were there with drums, vats, and cans of water, even wet brooms, answering the selectmen's plea for help. A single line of hose was laid 9200 feet through couplings of six pumpers to save several buildings.

By Tuesday the state had stepped in to run the fire fighting operation. Waterboro was still burning but rather slowly and the villages seemed to be safe that day and part of the night. The villages were hustling with life--the Army and Navy had sent out men to police the roads and help with fire fighting. No outsider was allowed to pass through Waterboro. Patrols milled about all night long on the 22nd, as they were working to keep the fire at the west side of Route 202 in South Waterboro. It had burned during the day to Route 202 in East Waterboro and was burning in the area between Route 202 and North Waterboro. Waterboro was waiting expectantly, fearfully, as the fire was approaching them. Men and equipment were parked along the roads waiting for the fire to get close enough to fight it.

And then a "miraculous" back draft shortly after 6 a.m. on the 23rd, diverted the flames from the raging fire and North Waterboro was saved.

The church, several homes, the post office, and general store of this part of town were safe. Meanwhile, almost three score residents and volunteers trapped for more than an hour behind a wall of fire in North Waterboro managed to escape. Confusion reigned as workers and residents fled from the flames fanned by winds nearing hurricane proportions.

Fire was then raging towards a section of Waterboro Center and East Waterboro again on this worst day of the holocaust. Fire trucks and apparatus were trapped by the rapid approach of flames, and all organized resistance was disrupted. Gale winds prevailed

all day long on this Thursday the 23rd, and families fled their homes and volunteers and professional workers battled grimly for the life of the town and nothing puny men could do would hold this forest fire in check.

About noon of this day the fire jumped the road on Route 202 in South Waterboro and swept along the road. The greatest part of South Waterboro was lost, as 58 homes were leveled in the flames. The fire traveled along the roadways, going up the side roads, gobbling up the houses, with the people having only a brief warning to escape with their lives. It had been thought that the fire line would hold at Route 202.

By this time the Red Cross headquarters had been set up in the Grange Hall at South Waterboro. A great deal of food was there and men were sleeping on the floors. They were too tired to eat. Then the Grange Hall was evacuated and the Red Cross moved away as the fire was moving in on both sides of it. There was an exodus from Waterboro one car behind the next, each filled to the brim with belongings and people, headed out the lower end of town. Fire was all around them, coming closer and closer to the homes, with no fire equipment in sight and no one there to fight it. There seems to be no explanation for the lack of firemen and equipment in South Waterboro at the time. So it was Thursday, October 23, the most fatal day. Austin H. Wilkins, Maine's supervisor of forest fire control at that time, gave this graphic description of the happenings:

"It was (an) awesome sight to see the solid walls of roaring fire sweeping over the mountain and across level areas, consuming everything in their path. The smoke hung so thick and heavy for days over the area that it was difficult at times to determine just how near or how far away the fires were. The sun did not penetrate through the thick wall of smoke for over 10 days. Men using trucks, cars, and bulldozers had to use their headlights as much in the daytime as at night." The sound of the rushing fires, sometimes on fronts several miles long, was described as a continuous frightening roar.

Francisia Hamilton of this town writes: "The post master had 57 families to whom he delivered mail on his route and there are only 12 families left. Helen Powell's house went about 5 p.m. (on Thursday the 23rd), and in it she had stored all the lovely rugs that she made through the years, usually she stores them at Watkins in Portland. Dr. Brooks place went, and the new apple storage place Henry Brock had built and all the thousands of apple trees. Tom Wallace's antique house and Bullard's. The fire went down to Goodwin's Mills but spared the homes of that town. Waterboro Center was spared and the YWCA buildings and all that part of the lake still stands as it was (the southern end of the lake.) All the cottages on the other side (NW) of the lake went and the fire jumped the lake and took all the cottages up to the point..... They saved the houses along the Old Corner Road. From the cemetery down, it burned on both sides until you come to the Freeman Smith house. Then it took the lower end of the village (South Waterboro) from Carrie Libby's Town leaving two houses on that side (Route 202), Bernice Field's and the Smith house and two opposite it, Linwood Rollins and Malcolm Smith's. Took everything from the four corners on up. Took the box shop.

20,000 acres of Timberland were burned over, leaving only 4000 acres of unburned woodland."