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Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

Remembering the week when Maine burned

Sixty years ago, a natural disaster left ruins and some indelible memories

By ANNE GLEASON Staff Writer

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Press Herald File
Newfield residents fought through the night in an effort to save their homes, as the 1947 wildfires raged across Maine in a weeklong inferno.



Courtesy Brick Store Museum
Flames leap over Route 1 in Kennebunkport on Oct. 20, 1947. Across Maine, 150 fires burned that week.



Press Herald File
Scorched trees and homes consumed by fire were a common sight in Maine in October 1947. Here, a National Guardsman stands watch against looting at the ruins of a house in Kennebunkport's Goose Rocks section.

KENNEBUNKPORT — The Seavey family home on Wildes District Road in Cape Porpoise is one of the few in its neighborhood pre-dating the 1940s. In the small neighborhood, near what was once known as Seavey's Corner, 14 homes burned to the ground in the October 1947 fires that ultimately burned about 200,000 acres in southern Maine and the Bar Harbor area. Only eight homes in the Cape Porpoise neighborhood, including the one owned by the late George Seavey, escaped destruction. "Nobody understood why that place didn't burn, but it never did," said Harrison Seavey, a son of George Seavey. In 1998, Harrison Seavey, who is now 82, wrote a book with his sister about the 1947 fire, to preserve the memories for their descendants and record one family's experience with what was Maine's worst natural disaster. Harrison Seavey, whose son now owns the family home, lives in a nursing home in Kennebunk and is among a dwindling number of Mainers who have vivid memories of the October fires. On the 60th anniversary of the fires, the Maine Forest Service and some history buffs are urging younger generations to listen to the stories of residents who lived through the disaster, which some believe could happen again, given the right conditions. The fires were first reported in western York County and in the Bar Harbor region on Oct. 17. The Kennebunkport fire erupted several days later, on Oct. 21. During the week of Oct. 20, a total of 150 fires burned in Maine. In the 1970s, Joyce Butler, a Kennebunk historian, was asked to write a book documenting the stories of people who experienced the fire. She interviewed 50 people, in all regions and with various experiences, for "Wildfire Loose: The Week Maine Burned." "There was no point in my trying to imagine what it was like to go through the fire," Butler said. "(The fire is) of ongoing interest and it needs to be, because it could happen again." Charles Heffernan, 78, was a student at the Conservatory of Music in Boston when fire erupted in East Waterboro, his hometown. The fire began near Newfield on Oct. 17 and worked its way east. Heffernan returned home to help his father protect the family farm. "The fire could not be stopped -- it was just out of control," recalled Heffernan, who lives in Massachusetts. "The air was filled with fire and flaming branches carried by the wind." When it was finally over, Heffernan estimates, about three-quarters of the homes in town had been destroyed. Virginia Bradbury of Cape Porpoise remembers playing cards at the firehouse when she and others went outside and saw the red-tinted sky. "They just didn't know what to do," she said. "It was coming our way." Bradbury, who was in her mid-20s at the time, evacuated the area with her young daughter but received updates from her husband, who stayed behind to fight the fire with others. Their house, which was still under construction, survived. In Limerick, Sam Woodsome, now 74, said he was fortunate to be living on "the safe side of the (Little Ossipee) River." The fire didn't reach his home, but he helped fight the fires with his two brothers and his father, all employees at the Johnson Saw Mill, which shut down so its crew could help out. Many residents in North Waterboro brought their farm animals and furniture to the Woodsome farm, where they were safe. "Everybody helped everybody," Woodsome said. "When they weren't sleeping, they were fighting the fires." A 108-day drought and heavy winds created explosive conditions in wooded areas. Where a spark was provided, fires

erupted. The fire in Bar Harbor destroyed 170 homes and 67 summer mansions, drawing worldwide attention, said Bar Harbor Historical Society curator Deborah Dyer. By the time it ended, 17,000 acres on Mount Desert Island had burned, Dyer said. After the fire, the Maine Forest Service worked to develop statewide fire prevention programs and assisted in establishing town fire wardens to issue burn permits, among other actions. The 1947 fires burned about 200,000 acres in southern Maine and the Bar Harbor region. Kent Nelson of the Maine Forest Service said a fire on that scale is unlikely today, with quicker response times and better forest management. However, Maine still has 700 forest fires on average each year, he said. "There are still a lot of people who are careless with fire. They don't realize how easy it is for their fire to spread, and that (way of thinking) is similar to 1947," Nelson said. "We try to prevent people from getting complacent." Although the number of people who remember Maine's great fire is dwindling, Butler, the author, believes interest in the event will continue. She attended a recent fire exhibit at the Portland Fire Museum and ran into a young man from

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Sanford who spoke with interest about discovering burnt tree stumps around town. "The old-timers were coming in and talking to him about it," Butler said. "The oral history is just ongoing. We need to remember, because it's important." Staff Writer Anne Gleason can be contacted at 282-8229 or at: agleason@pressherald.com

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