

Account of Sebago Area during the Great Fire of 1947
Frances Lane and Emily Goding

On Thursday the sixteenth of October we drove to Wolfboro, New Hampshire. Hardly anyone was in sight, in Limerick and Limington and old Newfield. The Towns were sleepy, dazed by long summer heat. We had left a dry and faded country-side at Sebago. As we went westward the colors flamed brighter and in New Hampshire they were glorious. We stopped a few hours with friends a few miles beyond West Newfield. Their well was one of the few in that neighborhood that had not gone dry, and we congratulated them. All was secure, however, and more discomfort than apprehension was the result of the long drought. Lunch at the General Wolfe and the delight of a terrace in the sun, overlooking Lake Winnepesaukee and the many-tinted foot-hills of the White Mountains; and then we drove home slowly and by roundabout routes to prolong our pleasure. On Sunday we knew that in Maine there would be no hunting season until there was rain. By then no one thought of lighting an out-door fire: even the morning dews were gone. A neighbor, tired of the clutter of leaves in her door-yard, trundled piles of them away in a wheelbarrow, swept the few remaining bits together on her wide concrete driveway and set fire to them. It was seven o'clock in the morning. In five minutes she was confronted by a determined fire look-out who had seen the wisp of smoke from near-by Douglas Hill and who now brought pails of water to put an end to the tiniest fire. Drought was seen to be full of danger and terror to heavily wooded Maine.

The following Tuesday small fires were reported in New Hampshire and in western Maine, and one which had started mysteriously in a copse back of the Fryeburg railroad station was giving concern. Wednesday a luncheon guest came to the Farm from Portland and stopped on her way at her Sebago Lake camp. Frye's Island in the middle of the lake had been on fire for several days, a wooded but uninhabited place. From our front door we could see the great column of smoke but we knew that the lake shore was untouched and we were reassured. After lunch we decided to drive toward Fryeburg to see the fire-fighters in action. Through Denmark, the nearest neighboring settlement of any size, then toward Brownfield over the Saco River bridge, and suddenly we came to a huddle of cars near the road. We stopped and parked and not too far away we could see in three places concentration of smoke. Even as we watched, fierce flames burst out. We walked in toward the fire over an old cart road through the woods and found four men with a small electric pump set up on a thousand-gallon truck. A hose was attached and we followed with our eyes the line of hose as it was carried by several boys down our side of a deep ravine that stopped our progress. The hose reached the danger point and the engine started. It seemed like a miracle when the thin stream of water appeared and reduced one fierce blaze to hissing smoke. Another thousand-gallon truck came and more hose, but the water was too soon exhausted. Then one man said that they must carry the pump down the ravine to a brook at the foot, a brook by the grace of heaven not dried to dust like most Maine water ways. Every voice but his protested — the pump engine was too heavy, they'd better wait for the trucks to go to the river and be filled, the thing couldn't possibly be carried. The first man was heard again: "Maybe that's so, but we've got to do it. We haven't any other chance." We held our breath while they stumbled down that perpendicular hill-side over slash, and we were ready to shout when almost as they reached the water the engine was

heard to sputter and a new and fuller stream fought three fires in turn. When the crisis was thought to be over we came home, again through Denmark.

That night the wind came up cruelly and in the morning we heard over the radio that the Fryeburg fire had been fanned into life and was near Brownfield, racing toward Denmark. All near-by fire departments with anything that could be used as fire-fighting apparatus were being called, including our own fine new equipment from Sebago. Soon after noon we drove to the outskirts of Denmark and although the roads were clear we kept meeting trucks piled high with household effects, every conceivable kind of thing. Brownfield and East Brownfield, the Maine Central junction, were being evacuated and all the people of Denmark were packing. Two men passed us driving four enormous Percherons, calm creatures and unperturbed; and at short intervals we kept meeting men and boys leading cattle away from danger. Frantic cows in a pasture near us tried in vain to pass their electric fence. Only a mile away from Denmark (which is, as a crow flies, four miles from the Farm and only three from Junior Camp) the woods were already blazing. Later in the day we learned that as we watched that hard fight Brownfield and East Brownfield had burned flat and lost even their three school-houses. Newfield and West Newfield, ancient towns as we count age, through which we had driven a week before with such interest and pleasure, were both in ashes. No one slept that night in Denmark and the fire-fighters never stopped. Before we left we went to the Weeman's general store and helped them pack their money and store accounts ready for evacuation. They were philosophical: everything else could go.

Our drive home to Sebago was both silent and sad. Powerful words paint a clear picture but they cannot stir heart and mind like the sound of crackling flames and the sight of fire as it strips a pine and the experience of watching weary people try to save the little keepsake while they must let the treasure go. As we bumped along the dirt road between camp and Hillside suddenly on our musings there broke a really awful sound. We had been hearing broadcasts of arsonists and other unsavory characters for whom one must keep watch. We were jittery: surely it was the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun or a queer explosion directly behind the seat of the convertible. We were frantic as we tried to investigate everything, and yet the little explosive sounds kept on and on. We had stopped to search and at last we got out. There on the running board we saw a little white pea-been and the mystery was solved. A bag containing sixty pounds of those things had been put in the car so that we might do a little disaster distribution. The bag was broken, and it was on the shelf behind the seat. Relentlessly in an unbroken stream the little hard balls had fallen hitting metal. Unnerved as we were, we almost laughed ourselves sick. We had a good job to the next day retrieving them, but we got almost everyone.

Friday morning as we looked out of our north-west windows at the Farm we saw great billows of smoke stretching from horizon to horizon. In the bright sun light they looked as if they were full of glowing embers, and we were in despair even of the safety of the house and the great barn across the road.

Before the Red Cross could be organized or truck units assembled, we took ten-quart cans of coffee, and donuts and sandwiches back over woods roads into the hills behind the town of

Hiram where the fire now raged. We fed fire-fighters who had not eaten for nearly twenty-four hours. We fed and talked with an old fellow alone in his house from which his family and all their furniture had been taken to safety. The only water that they had in that area came from trucks loaded with hogsheads and any other receptacles for water that could be found. Hiram was saved. For one full week we helped where we could, almost losing hope as we heard radio broadcasts about the Inferno on distant Mount Desert, of Kennebunk and all that thickly populated Biddeford-Saco vicinity, and the danger to all south-western Maine. Sebago, where our Farm is, is untouched; but the volunteer fire department of Sebago, with their fine small fire truck, played a tremendous role in saving Denmark and Hiram and all this neighborhood. It is a little town, its area of settlement widely scattered, and we are thrilled at the businesslike way in which its selectmen and other town officers organized its defense against fire and at the quick mustering of volunteers for every kind of help.

On Sunday the Sebago officials called an emergency town meeting. A twenty-four hour road block was ordered for every road into the township. On our twelve-hour shift (each patrol had two members and we were the only two women) from 7 A.M. to 7 P.M. daily, we stopped all cars into or out of Sebago at the entrance to Junior Camp driveway. We turned back cars not sufficiently identified or having no good reason for entering. We had with us in the Ford everything for comfort — a portable radio, a big box of food, tools (and F.M.L. built a shed right there in the road for Martha), a type-writer, and on the last day even a folding deck chair. Perhaps it was the last-named thing that brought the showers. There is some dispute in high circles over their source. Did the rain come of itself as the meteorologists predicted, was it the results of the dry ice experiment, or are we being saved by prayer (there was a good deal of that, and it was sincere and earnest and self-searching). No one will ever know.

Daily our hearts have lifted when we heard the governor's broadcasts and knew that Army, Navy, Air Force, federal government and Red Cross were ready to help us, sending in great tracks of supplies for fire victims, flying in miles of hose. Wednesday morning the sky was cloudy. Think for a minute of the rare 'weather breeder' in which we used to delight — the cloudless day with not even a white feather in the sky from sunrise to sunset. Never before in our lives have we seen two, three, four days like that, one after the other — yet breeding no rain as their excuse. Recently they have seemed threatening and unwelcome. We actually shouted at the first patter of rain. Today, Thursday, there are still heavy clouds, but there is no rain. One thing is sure. If the sun comes out too soon for safety we shall return to our all-day vigil, and we shall be glad to do it. It's little enough when it is a question of saving Maine.

November 9, 1947

Dear Margie (Isn't this what we used to call you so many years ago? It wasn't Marjorie/Margery was it!) Frances Lane with whom I spend so much time in Maine, and I have heard so many

questions from campers and counsellors that we decided to answer in a wholesale fashion then the Bridgton High School mimeographing students made it more wholesale by double-spacing it, to our horror. The papers have told you much more but I am sending this along instead of a mere note partly because I've thought of you so often since (last page)

your Philadelphia trip. The Norwich visit was utter delight to my family and Margaret says that Mother will never stop talking about it. Only the fires kept me from being there too — another score against them. A friend from Buffalo and I drove up to your door sometime in mid-June but you hadn't yet arrived. She would have liked to settle down here at once, and live there, she was so charmed with it. We shall be here intermittently all winter, I think, and at last we have a telephone (Sebago 26-11) an atrocious wall(?) affair but welcome just the same. We'd love to see you drive into our door-yard. Emily Welch who runs Camp Wabunaki had friends for dinner a month or more ago and included us. One guest came from Sebago Lake and brought Gertrude Greens(?), whom I had hardly seen for fifty years. Isn't 50 an awe-inspiring number. We've seen each other many times since, and Gertrude and "Mally" (Frances Lane) and I happened to drive to Fryeburg together — where there was only a little blaze. So, a week ago, we all drove again through the ruined towns. It wasn't ghoulish curiosity that took us — we are so near that we needed to know the exact situation. Certainly press reports aren't (?) exaggerate it, and we came home saddened. We go so often past a burned-out home in the back country — only a blackened shell and perhaps one wall standing. To see miles of ruins absolutely level with the ground seems unbelievable, but there they are. It seems the sheerest miracle that Mud City was untouched. If it hadn't been a time of such awful apprehension — we almost dreaded to see bright sunlight day after day — how lovely October would have been. I wonder how late you stayed. There is in North Baldwin a little Negro dwarf (??) who helps us when we need it and who keeps house for Emily Welch from time to time. Mally Lane drove up to her 16 x 20 hill-top house last Monday, took a long ladder and a ladder-hook and roamed over the roof making it and the chimney water tight. All girls down safely! and then she stood on the second step of a step-ladder to adjust some minor thing, plunged off and broke her wrist. The fire delayed me first. Now her helplessness will keep me a while longer and then I'll be going to N. for a week or two. Forgive so many words! How I'd love to see you and Dorothy. Affectionately, Emily G.