

Memories of the 1960

West Prince Fire

by

Happy Valley Seniors.

in

January 2001.

As part of the program for the Happy Valley Seniors on Tuesday, January 9th, 2001, Ethel Newitt read Carl Phillips' poem entitled "Prince County Fire 1960" and invited seniors to tell their memories of that experience. They were asked to bring their memories on Tuesday, January 16th and the following was recorded on tape and now printed here.

Vera Hansen brought a scrapbook and also recalled that their children had colds and asthma, the air was thick with smoke. She recalled that they were asked if they wanted to move out of the area. They didn't want to move unless they really had to go.

Evelyn Palmer brought Vivian Phillips' scrapbook. It was her understanding that men were cutting wood in Portage area when they came across a hornet's nest and decided to burn it, a spark set off the fire which raged from Mount Pleasant, Inverness and throughout Foxley River, out Murray Road to Conway and burned down George and Jean Tuplin's house at the Narrows, also homes of Arthur Adams and Bob Sperry in Conway. All the men and many women of the area helped fight the fire - the army came from Summerside, Gagetown, New Brunswick and Tyne Valley. Some of the men slept in Vivian Phillips' cottage. Two men came to Evelyn Palmer's house at Freeland to wet down the house with water - she had a boiled dinner on, gave them dinner and a loaf of her freshly baked bread which they really appreciated. Evelyn also told of Vi Enman who recalled there was someone had a still in the woods and when the fire came close he'd move it. He kept moving it and moving it but finally the fire came and blew it up!

Courtney Maynard recalled the railway sent a tanker of water to the Port Hill station to help save the station house. Henry Maynard and George Ellis had potato warehouses there and they wet down the buildings. They were told to evacuate the place but decided to stay. When the fire got really close they wished they had gone earlier. The fire travelled along to where Frank MacDougall used to have buildings. It went around the warehouses and up the tracks. Courtney recalled that on their farm they were trying to get some threshing done, they'd just get started and the call would come for men to go fight the fire so they didn't get much farm work done in those days. Courtney recalled how Annie and Edison Williams lived in Tyne Valley opposite where Gerald MacArthur lived. On a day when most residents were packing to move out of the area, Annie went across to MacArthurs - they were surprised and asked why she wasn't packing. She replied that Edison told her not to bother packing! Courtney took Mrs. Russell Birch to his home in Port Hill, she was there for a week or more. Eleanor Birch (later married Mack MacIntyre) stayed in Tyne Valley to work at the telephone office pretty well day and night and reporting on anything that was happening.

Enid Birch gave recognition to Dr. Geoff Robinson for his work in checking all the food brought in to be sure it wasn't damaged by smoke - the Women's Institute ladies worked day and night serving the firefighters and credit must be given to Gertie MacNevin who allowed her lunch room (where the Tyne Valley Post Office is now) to be used as the headquarters for the serving of food, tea and coffee. Enid recalled how her three sons helped fight the fire at night - the family wouldn't go to bed till all were home after midnight. Once her son Edmund got trapped within the fire area and it was impossible to know which way to go. He listened and followed in the direction where he could hear men working and found his way out.

Julia MacLean recalled when they came to the public school in Tyne Valley (where the Day Care now operates). She was ~~standing at the entrance and was~~ advised that Tyne Valley was being evacuated. Before that the big cinders were falling around their barn on Canada Road. She went to the road and brought in the milk cans and filled them with water, by hand. When her children came home from school they thought this was a

very little bit of water to put out the fire! The Valley was evacuated and Julia's Aunt Constance (Conci) came from the Valley to stay at Julia's home. Two relatives, Stanley and Lewis Newman, came from Charlottetown to help. They would go directly behind the MacLean buildings, through a field to the fire - sometimes they'd be encircled by the fire - it would come right up behind them. Lewis became a doctor. These people wanted Julia to take her baby and go to Charlottetown - but she had no intention of leaving her family. Julia's daughter, Louise, was in Summerside School of Nursing - they'd pack her clothes and when she'd get to Summerside and unpack the clothes they would be full of smoke and she'd be very embarrassed. Julia was impressed as she witnessed the army trucks going by, taking loads of men to help fight the fire.

Celie Dennis recalled listening to the radio and they were calling for every able-bodied man with a truck to report to Stewart Memorial Hospital and every patient was being transported in bed on the back of a truck, attended by a nurse or staff person - all were transferred to Prince County Hospital. The water hoses were lying across the road and were protected by planks on either side so that when traffic passed over the hoses, the water wouldn't be cut off from the fire area. Celie also remembers that the sparks would be falling on the pavement - kids who were on bare feet walked on the grass along the side because the pavement was too hot to walk on.

Hazel Colwill reported.....Everyone who lived in West Prince in 1960, has memories of the devastating and frightening fire that summer. My memories include the weeks without rain before the fire when the grass got so dry it would make a crackling sound as it was walked on.

That was the year I returned to the classroom after being a farm wife and mother for almost 20 years. I taught in our home school, Northam, walking distance from our farm home. Schools opened in mid-August then. Shortly after that the fires started in the Portage area and spread quickly. Brooks were low and water needed for fire-fighting, was in short supply.

It was harvest time and at that time the grain was threshed out in the field. That was dangerous, cinders in the air could quickly ignite the tinder-dry straw. It was hard to sleep at night, too hot to close windows and the smoke-filled air was everywhere. There was an outpouring of help when volunteer fire-fighters came from near and far. I recall going with other W.I. members to help preprepare lunches for these fire-fighters. This was done at Gertie McNevin's lunch room in Tyne Valley where the Post Office is located now. Large pots of soup were made by combining all kinds of Campbell's Soups. It made a very tasty and nourishing soup. Sandwiches were also made in large quantities and volunteers transported the food to the scene of the fire. At that time the fire had reached the woods behind Laughlin McLean's house on the Canada Road, near where Donald McArthur lives now. Trucks with sprinklers were watering down the houses on the Northam Road and had reached the school when the wind shifted and they went the other direction. They did not need to come to our house or Dyments.

I remember vividly that wonderful evening when the rain finally came. Never before or since was a shower of rain such a blessing. I remember standing at the old wall phone and answering a call from my worried brother in Brackley Beach. I almost broke down and cried when I told him, "It's raining!". A year later blueberry bushes grew and flourished where the fire had been.

Now, 40 years later, trees have re-grown...life has gone on, but the memories remain. We have learned two valuable lessons: That raging fire begins with one small spark and that rain can be a life saver.

Blanche England submitted the following memories: Every area seems to have had "The Big Fire". Alberton's was many years ago when two men stealing gas lit a match to see what they were doing. They found out! The Anglican Church, and many businesses were burned. I don't recall what happened to the men. All could be a rumour, but the fire did happen.

Our "Big Fire" in the Tyne Valley and Eilerslie and areas happened in 1960 with house and barn losses. At first the base of activity was the Eilerslie Legion. When my husband (Winston England) was "away up in Cape North, Cape Breton", working for the Dept. of Fisheries and away for the week, and our home being filled with fire-fighters, I decided to give up my bed and work the night shift making sandwiches etc. at the Legion.

About midnight, to my surprise, in walked my husband who had been home and found he had no bed to sleep in, so he came to rescue me from all these tired out and exhausted men!

Winston and neighbour Harold Ross, had heard via radio that Eilerslie and area woods were burning, so they packed up and drove non-stop for home.

Another day, Winston drove me to Tyne Valley and the woods on both sides of the road were burning.

This is a photocopy of Fire Area Permits issued to allow passage into the disaster area.

FIRE AREA PERMIT

Mr. Winston England
is authorized to enter the Eilerslie Disaster
Area on official business.

6 Sept 60
DATE S. R. R. R.
for O. R. R.
CIVIL DEFENCE CO-ORDINATOR

Pearl Williams recalls: The end of August 1960 the fire started in the Portage area and spread quickly to many areas. The Legion was used as headquarters for food, meals, sandwiches, etc. Oren Simons came from Summerside to set up a program for young men to go out to look for hot spots. He did a very good job, no one got hurt. I think I am right about this.

The men came in at night, had a meal and went upstairs and slept on the floor.

Burleigh's store kept lots of bread and other goods on hand for meals and sandwiches. Ladies came from Eilerslie, Bideford, Mt. Pleasant, Spring Hill, Bloomfield, O'Leary and Summerside to help in the kitchen on different days. Two women would stay at night to get an early breakfast for the men or come in early in the morning.

Erwin Dennis and Harold Ross know more about the fire-fighting part of the story. Maybe Hubert Hutchinson remembers about the fire as well.