

# Fire

## 24 of May Weekend 1950

My dad and my sixteen year old brother Dick were driving south from Sturgeon Crossing near Tap Creek Hill when they came across a grass fire in a meadow beside the road. It was probably lit from a carelessly tossed cigarette or match. It was a hot, windy day and they were unable to extinguish the fire. The fire was soon in the trees burning northward towards the buildings at Sturgeon Crossing which were just a mile and a half away.

They rushed home. My mother was instructed to load important documents and valuables into our car and to be prepared. If the fire came dangerously close, she was to drive the car into the river flats as far as she could go, preferably into the safety of water.

Dick was sent with the Park truck to retrieve a fire pump from a location on the river three miles away where my dad had been doing a monthly routine test of the unit. I was to be moved to the river and set up to provide water to protect the house if needed.

My dad was busy on the phone calling Waskesiu and other wardens for fire backup.

Dick was again sent with the truck to recruit Johnny Reimer, a local farmer, to come with his tractor and plow a fire guard around the buildings. Carl Larsen who lived across the river and worked for the park occasionally was recruited to help as well.

Carl was sent on foot along a trail that led east from the house to scout the location, size, and direction of the fire. The trail was deeply rutted and the ruts full of muddy water. When the wind shifted and the fire came his way, Carl was forced to take cover by laying in the muddy water filled ruts. The fire passed over the trail and Carl too. He was muddy, wet, and nearly suffocated by the smoke and lack of oxygen, but otherwise unhurt.

When Chief Warden George Davies arrived on the scene, he went to the house to find my dad and instead found my mother washing floors. "%&@## Mabel, what are you doing? The whole ##\$@\* place could burn down at any moment." Her reply, "I just couldn't sit here and do nothing." If the house was going to burn down at least it would go down with clean floors.

Good fortune prevailed and the wind carried the fire a short distance to the east of the house and buildings.

By sundown that evening, there were nearly one hundred fire fighters camped in the Sturgeon Crossing yard, most of them First Nations men recruited from local reservations.

That fire burned all summer and was only brought under control when snow came. The following spring, crews were still digging out ground fires where the fire had gone underground in Indian Meadows.

One of the characters who worked on that fire was Oscar Scogg. Oscar was a very large Scandinavian man who had spent his life as a camp cook. With the help of a small crew of helpers, he was able to turn an area of bush into a working kitchen capable of feeding a large crew of men. A cast iron cook stove was set up. Tents were raised for storage and food preparation. Poles were cut to build tables and benches, firewood was cut, and a long narrow fire pit was dug over which were hung pots, kettles, and a number steel barrels to heat water. To one side of the kitchen, a wash station was set up with a barrel of

hot water, multiple wash basins, and bars of soap. At hand to where Oscar was working was a long willow switch. Anyone coming to his kitchen from the fire line without first visiting the wash station got to know the sting of that switch. His kitchen. His rules.

In those days the Park had no professional fire crew. When a fire broke out, trucks were sent to First Nations reserves to recruit firefighters. It's a tough job and the indigenous men from the reserves were up to the task like few others. However, as they were recruited on short notice, they came to the job with not much more than the clothes on their backs. Fred McEwin, the Park warehouse manager asked my mother to set up a commissary of personal items that could be dispensed to the firefighters.

At the Park Valley General Store, she purchased items like tobacco, work boots, wool socks, leather gloves, and denim overalls. The items were arranged in the back porch of our cabin. The firefighters could come and pick up the items they required and my mom would record their purchases against their payroll account to be deducted from their pay. To my mother's dismay, sixty eight of the firefighters answered to the last name of Bird and many had biblical first names. She didn't speak Cree and she was never sure if the Jacob Bird she was charging was "Jacob John" or "John Jacob".

One of the most popular items in the commissary were denim bib style overalls. The first batch she received from the Park Valley Store came with a pencil in the pocket of the bib. Her supply quickly ran out and the next batch came without a pencil, but everyone wanted the ones with a pencil. When she told her problem to Rene Lemire, the Park Valley Store keeper, he gave her boxes of pencils. Everybody who purchased overalls got a pencil.

## **Fire Patrol on Horseback**

This is one of the stories I remember but I'm not sure who the principal warden was. I suspect it was Harry Genge. While scouting a fire on horseback, the horse and rider were caught when the wind changed and the fire was driven towards them. It's impossible to outrun a fire so the rider turned the horse toward the fire and whipped her right through the fire front and out the back side. The rider escaped with minor burns, but the horse's chest and front legs were badly burned.

The horse recovered but she was badly scared and she walked stiff legged for the rest of her days. Her injuries meant she was not really up to the tasks the warden service would require. A horse that was unfit for service would normally be condemned and destroyed. However, given the circumstances, no one had the heart. She lived out the remainder of her days at pasture at one or another of the warden stations. She spent some years with us when we lived at Silver Grove.

## **Wassegam Lake Fire Mid-1960s**

Again I don't remember the name of the Warden in charge, but my very good friend David Lepp worked on this fire as an assistant warden. The crew set up their camp on the shore of the lake. The wind shifted and the fire was driven towards them. They quickly buried their essentials in the wet sand along the lake shore and spent several hours in the lake until the fire passed. Everything in their camp but the items they had buried were destroyed.