

History Of The Cape George Forest Fire
1947
Taken from the diary of Cameron MacEachern

*Attached copy given to the Cape George Heritage School Museum for display by Violet Haskett, Cape George, Antigonish Co., NS.

August 11, 1947 is a beautiful day in the [peaceful village of Cape George. The day is pleasantly warm with a moderate breeze from the west. The past month as been exceedingly dry; the last rain was on the eighth of July. There was very little snow last winter, scarcely enough to enable the people to haul firewood. Consequently, the forest floor is tinder dry, the fields are brown and seared pastures are burning up.

Horses, cattle and sheep seek the low places, haying has been completed, and the crops were light ones. Gardens and other crops are suffering from the severe drought.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, heavy smoke is seen rising toward the west in the direction of the Georgeville area. A forest fire has broken out.

Between Cape George and Georgeville is a heavy wooded area and which was the scene of extensive lumbering operations during the last seven years, and the woods is full of slash from the cutting.

Dr. and Mrs. W.A. Chisholm accompanied by some neighbors went to investigate. They found that the fire apparently started on the east side of the Glebe Road where it joins the Back Settlement Road. Fanned by the west wind, it is soon out of control and is sweeping towards Cape George and Lakevale. By night fall it reached the east end of the Back Settlement.

Dan A. MacDonald went to investigate. He reports the fire is advancing on a broad front between the Back Settlement and Beaver Roads and that there is a scarcity of water in that area.

After dark men gather at MacInnis Brook by the roadside. County fire ranger George MacChesney is there. Our parish priest Rev. A.J. MacAdams and others. Plans are made to combat the red menace. The breeze has died down but the sky to the westward is aglow. Later in the night, the fire dies down as it has reached the hardwood lands.

By nightfall, we return home but spend an anxious night, for the air is thick with smoke and the glow in the west flares up and is frightening at times.

Tuesday, August 12

The fire is creeping through the hardwood between the Back Settlement and Beaver Road and along the south bank of MacInnis Brook. We prepare to evacuate our homes today. Clothes and furniture are moved from the upstairs rooms to the lower part of the house where they can be removed quickly in case of emergency. Ladders are placed on the roofs of buildings, and every available dish is filled with water and left near the buildings.

Wednesday, August 13

A plane from the Dept. Of Lands and Forest came over today, warning us through the loud speaker that the fire is within three quarters of a mile back of Archie MacKenzie's and Eddie MacEacherns. A large bulldozer and hundreds of feet of hose and other firefighting equipment is brought in.

Thursday, August 14

The situation is somewhat improved due to light winds. The bulldozer has gone out to the Back Settlement today and officials of the Department of Lands and Forests are on hand. Mr. Donald Eldridge, forest ranger, has gone up to the scene of the fire. Other men are on hand and they set up a pump at the brook by the roadside. Some trucks equipped with tanks that will hold from 500 to 1000 gallons of water are on hand also. We feel safer now.

Friday, August 15

This morning we were called out at one o'clock as the fire again flared up in along the Back Settlement Road at Graham's Bridge. Lines of hose are laid from the pump at the brook to John M. MacEachern, Dr. Chisholm's and Harry Baileys (who now occupies the MacInnis house). We sprayed the buildings and then waited for the fire to approach. By mid-morning we were relieved by a shift of wind to the Northwest which caused the fire to change its course. In the afternoon, the fire passed through the woods between Harry Bailey's and Archie MacKenzie's and reached the shore.

Saturday, August 16

There were light showers at 5 a.m., but it cleared during the afternoon and the fire is going again. Men and water trucks stand by Archie MacKenzie's and Eddy MacEachern's. Another prong of the fire swept towards the home of William Delaney and threatened to destroy his buildings. This situation was mastered by the number of men and water trucks that were on hand.

Sunday, August 17

Trucks continued to haul water out to the Beaver Road. They started at 5 a.m. and continued until 9 o'clock tonight.

Monday, August 18

Fire is going strong. It crossed the Back Settlement Road today and is burning at the south end of Hardin's Mountain in Dr. Chisholm's woodlot.

Tuesday, August 19

The big government bulldozer was brought up on Hardin's Mountain today and made a fire break around the fire about three quarters of a mile in all. Men with back tanks were able to keep this fire under control. There were light showers this afternoon.

Wednesday, August 20

Weather clear. Seven men equipped with back tanks patrol the road made by the bulldozer on Hardin's Mountain. We cannot put it out but are able to keep it within the fire break.

Thursday, August 21

More men called out today. A new fire breaks out on the north side of the Back Settlement Road above Graham's bridge. Fires are burning on all of the fronts. Planes come over and warns of new out breaks.

Friday, August 22

Fire still being held under control on Hardin's Mountain. Bulldozer moved to fire back of John Harnishes. Fire situation improved on all fronts.

Saturday, August 23

This morning is fine and clear - no dew. About seven of us, under the command of fire ranger Dan MacIsaac, return to our job of patrolling the road around the fire on Hardin's Mountain. A light breeze is blowing from the south west. About 9 o'clock word reached us by "moccasin telegraph" that a new fire has broken out about a quarter of a mile back of our place. Two of us are sent to the scene, the rest must remain to watch the mountain fire. We dash through the woods with the speed of frightened fawns, and find that the fire is raging out of control. How it started is a mystery, for the nearest fire was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away and there was no wind from that direction for days. Smoke and flames rush skyward as the fire rages though slash and young spruce.

While this was going on, a similar scene was being enacted at the home of Albert Livingstone about a mile and a half to the south. When the fire in the woods back of his home flared into action and menaced his buildings, but me and water arrived in time. Some members of the Antigonish branch of the Red Cross came down and served coffee and sandwiches to the men.

Sunday, August 24

The wind is N.E. today and the fire that broke out back of our place is now being driven towards the Glen. This morning the bulldozer belonging to Chisholm's was out back of Leonard MacPhie's and this afternoon was out the Glen Road to prevent the fire from reaching the Glen and MacDougall's Mountain. Water trucks followed in the road, the fire is travelling slowly though hardwood.

Monday, August 25

Light showers last night but not enough to do any good. Large numbers of men and trucks were out the Glen road and above the stone bridge on Dr. Chisholm's side. Fires are smouldering everywhere. We just cannot put it out, but we try to hold it down at the most dangerous points. It is down underneath the roots of trees and stumps. I guess it is in the squirrel cellars too.

Tuesday, August 26

Morning damp and cloudy - light winds. Men are again in back of Hugh MacEachern's and out on the Glen Road. The situation is well in hand back of Leonard MacPhie's. Light rain this evening but it cleared before dark. Eddie MacEachern died today.

Wednesday, August 27

The same old go. Don Eldridge goes down to the Point to collect men as he has been going since the fire outbreak. Two trucks were sent to the field back of our place to quell fires on banks of Campbell's Brook. Then they were sent back to L. MacPhie's to do the same in Wilkie's Brook (hollows). In the afternoon, trucks are sent out the Glen road to quench smouldering fires. Fires start going strong behind Albert Livingstone's and trucks stand by buildings. By sundown the situation appears serious as smoke appears in all directions and in so many places where the fire was believed to be extinguished.

Thursday, August 28

Morning dawns bright and clear. Our good friend and neighbor Eddie MacEachern died last Tuesday after a long illness. He was buried today and all felt very sad. It was impossible for some of us to attend the funeral, but fire, like death is no respecter of persons.

Fire broke out again back of A. Livingstone's and Albert, who had left to attend his neighbor's funeral, had to rush home. Two trucks arrive on the scene, and this fire is again brought under control. The trucks are sent to the Back Settlement and out the Beaver Road. The fire below Angus MacIsaac's is again out of control and gets up the mountain between the late John Duncan MacDougalls and Allan John MacIsaacs. This fire is heading towards Georgeville.

Friday, August 29

A large number of men are sent to the Back Settlement to try to hold the fire on the mountain. Fire above Hugh MacEachern's in a grove of timber was held in check by Hugh MacEachern and John M. MacEachern alone. They worked with back tanks, and they had to carry water on their back from Hugh's about a quarter of a mile away. Trucks were then sent to their assistance. Ranger Dan MacDonald (Dan Christopher) was forced to withdraw his men from the Back Settlement. A new drive will be made this morning.

Saturday, August 30

Morning broke fine and clear. The wind is south-east. Once again we gather on MacInnis's Brook, as we have been doing every morning, and await our orders. The big government bulldozer is sent to the Back Settlement, along with a smaller one. The trucks load up and we are away. About 11 a.m. the fire gets a breakaway, fanned by a stiff southeast wind. It is soon racing through the tinder dry slash in the direction of Georgeville. The bulldozer cannot get ahead of it, so the men and trucks are withdrawn and sent to Georgeville and Morar. We wait on the road between A.R. MacPherson's and A.J. Gillis's - perhaps we can stop it here. About 4 p.m. the fire breaks through, but we just have to get out of its way. It crosses the road and goes to the shore. The fire has now crossed the Cape from Shore to shore. From St. George's Bay on the east to the Northumberland straight on the west. Tonight, the homes of

A.R. MacPherson, A.J. Gillis and Archie MacIsaac are in danger. Another prong of the fire is heading towards Morar school.

Sunday, August 31

Southwest wind this morning relieved the situation in Georgeville. The fire is now racing towards the Marsh Road and Ballantynes Cove. Light showers in the afternoon lessen the danger.

Six Department of Lands and Forest pump operators, veterans of the recent disastrous Pleasant Bay fire were brought in today. They are James Kennedy, Victor Bungay, Eldon Pace, John Sylvest, Noel Harrington, the sixth I do not know.

All men and equipment are rushed to protect the buildings at John M. MacEachern's, Hugh MacEachern's, Dr. Chisholm's and Harry Bailey's. Lines of hose are laid from MacInnis Brook. A steady stream of water is kept on these buildings. Down both sides of the interval the fire came with a deafening roar. The noise is frightening! The crash of falling timbers, the shouts of the men coupled with the incessant hum of the pumps. Nearer it comes, the buildings are sprayed with falling embers. It creeps nearer to the pumps - seeking as if it were going to destroy that which is trying to destroy it. Can Mr. Beaucannon, the pump man, stand the heat and smoke? It is now within 20 feet of the pump. He brushes the sparks from his shoulders but sticks to the post - if the pump fails, all is lost.

John M. MacEachern's house catches fire, but it is promptly extinguished - the outside side buildings catch - fire breaks out everywhere, in the grass, in the fields, in the fences. A fire starts by the barn but a fire fighter pounces on it. Beaucannon keeps life in the pump - men rush with back tanks.

Monday, September 1

Here we are into the month of September and the situation is getting worse instead of better. This was the worst day of all! The strong north wind got the fire going about 11 a.m. and headed toward the top of MacDougall Mountain. From the north side and menaced the homes of L. MacPhie, Mrs. E. Ballantyne, A. Adams and Cam MacEachern's. Water trucks are standing by all these houses. The situation was so bad at Hugh B. MacEachern's on the Marsh Road, that the truck ordered to stand by our buildings was sent there instead. The cinders were falling like snowflakes today, although the fire was out of sight over the mountains. The cinders appeared to be dead but you could not be sure and had to be on the alert all the time. By dark, one point of the fire came in sight over the mountain back of Wilkie's.

Tuesday, September 2

Today was the worst on both sides of the Cape. The fire got going everywhere on the mountains and in the Glen. The wind was S.E. - the fire swept into Livingston's Cove and crossed the road towards the shore. Several homes in that area caught fire, but were saved. As I write the Hardin Mountain, the Glen and MacDougall's Mountain are all ablaze tonight. Another point of the fire which was smouldering on the back of the little brook north of the Back Settlement Road crept up a ravine through John M. MacEachern's wood lot. This crossed our woodlot to join the fire burning north of the Glen Road. It is an awful sight.

Bob Burgess called about 11 p.m. and said he was going to patrol between here and Livingston's Cove all night and watch the danger spots. My mind somewhat relieved allowed me to lay down in my clothes on the kitchen couch. At 2 a.m. I was awakened by a noise that sounded like fire rushing through spruce. With a bound, I am on my feet and rushing out the door. But oh! Thank God, it is rain coming down in torrents, and that was the noise that woke me. What a grand and glorious feeling. I sat by the window and watched the light on the mountain go out one by one, as the rain continues. This surely is the end.

Wednesday, September 3

Morning dawns bright and clear. The rain this morning lasted for about an hour. It quelled the flames for the time being. The fire fights take advantage and try to get a knockout blow. Crews are working at the Beaver Road and Marsh Road. Also at MacPhie's.

Thursday, September 4

The same old go again. This was a clear morning. Men gathered again at MacInnis Brook, by the roadside and the trucks made their rounds collecting men. There are over 100 men out now. Men from Livingston's Cove, Morar, Georgeville, Cape George Point, Ballantyne's Cove, Cape George, Lakevale, West Lakevale, Morristown and even men from Antigonish and Monastery are here with trucks. This writer is not acquainted with the situation in the Glebe Road and Georgeville area, but they are all menaced by the fire. When the winds shift to east or north, then the homes of John Wells, Dan J. Gillis and Heffernans are in the path of the fire. These houses have been showered with sparks and embers.

The bulldozer from the Marsh Road came over the mountain to the rear of Wilkie's. The plane came over and warned of new outbreaks in the Back Settlement, and back of Archie MacKenzie's.

Friday, September 5

Fine and clear today. No improvement in the situation. Jones goes out the stone bridge road and make a fire break across to the Glen Road. The plane cover over and tells of small outbreaks out the Back Settlement way.

Saturday, September 6

Extra men out on the Glen Road and Back Settlement road. The plane came over in the afternoon and reported a fire breaking out between Neil Gillis's and the Marsh Road. The situation is still serious as fires are smouldering everywhere and the most dangerous points are constantly patrolled.

Don Eldridge went home today. He has to attend the Forestry school at U.N.B. Fredericton, NB.

Sunday, September 7

The efficiency of a bulldozer in firefighting was well demonstrated today. Yesterday evening a spot of fire broke out on the south side of Hardin's Mountain. A scout was sent out at day break today. He located the fire burning in a swamp surrounded by heavy forests. He marks a trail to bring the dozer in the shortest route. Taking advantage of all wood roads to make the

going easier for the bulldozer, he hurries back and guides the dozer in. A truck loaded with water and hoses follows. At 3 p.m. the dozer breaks into the fire and a thousand gallons of water are sprayed on it. This will prevent the fire from spreading tonight and we will come back in the morning to finish the job.

Monday, September 8

Clear and cool today - strong north winds are blowing. Three - 500-gallon truckloads of water are sent to Hardin's Mountain. Fire at this point is believed to be completely out. What a wonderful age we live in today. When we were returning from Hardin's Mountain we had some water left and we were on our way to put it on another fire on a roadside. Then the plane came overhead, skimming low just above the tree tops. "Come back", called the pilot through the loud speaker, "and go up the Glen Road, there is a fire on your right and you can reach it with your hose."

Yes, wonderful indeed! It was Bob Burgess who was in the place and a few hours ago he was here. He went to New Glasgow in the jeep and took a plane from the airport at Trenton. I wonder what my father "Teacher" MacEachern, Jim MacPhie, Alex MacPhie, or George Ballantyne and other good old souls who have gone to their reward would think of this? What would they have said if they were out in these woods in their day and saw a machine come flying through the air, and a voice speak to them as if it were coming from the heavens. Surely they would think it the end of time. A fire on the side of MacDougall's Mountain is reached from the big bridge. It requires 1700 feet of hose to reach it. The bulldozer was sent out to the Beaver Road today to break a road to a fire back of Livingston's.

Tuesday, September 9

Up and at it again. Northwest winds. Trucks continue to haul water out the Glen and Big Bridge roads to pour water on the mountain side. Well, here is the 29th day of this work and the end is not in sight. Twenty-nine days in the woods from morning till night. Crops remain unharvested and nothing else is done. Twenty-nine days of toil, smoke, sweat, heat and flies. As serious as this business of firefighting is, it is not without its lighter moments. We are out the Glen Road at noon. It is very hot. The grub truck comes in and we sit under the trees for our rations of sandwiches and tea. Said one - "How I miss potatoes at noon". "Well", replied his companion, "You might as well get used to it now, for we are not going to have any potatoes this winter." So we continue to pour water on the mountain side all afternoon. At sundown, the grub truck returns again and we return home for the night.

Wednesday, September 10

Today was very hot with a southwest wind. Trucks hauled water to the Glen, Marsh and Beaver roads. About 1:30 a.m. the fire back of Wilkie's got a break away and trucks were withdrawn from other points. The bulldozer was also sent in.

Thursday, September 11

The fire was very bad again today. It was very warm with a south west wind. Two lines of hose are now laid to the fire on MacDougall's Mountain. One is from the Glen Road and the other from the big bridge. There is about a half mile of hose in all.

The situation became so alarming that Miss Alice Carson, teacher dismissed school for the afternoon. The buildings at Ballantynes and Alex Adams were threatened, so the trucks were withdrawn from other parts. The older school boys helped to fight the fire. The Divinity student, Mr. Purchase of St. David's United Church, Cape George, strapped on a back tank and was in the woods with us this evening. There was an awful plague of black flies this evening. They were getting in our eyes and even in our tea - we hope this is a sign of rain. The fire back of Livingston's got going again late this afternoon, but it was checked from crossing the road.

Friday, September 12

This is a hard day to fight fire. Strong south-west winds are blowing. The fire back of Wilkie's is held in check but the woods is abandoned for the day in order to protect houses and buildings.

Saturday, September 13

Situation much better today. Light rain last night. Trucks again hauling water out of the Glen - Big Bridge roads also to Livingston's.

Sunday, September 14

There was heavy dew last night so the fires didn't get going so early this morning. Here it is Sunday again and we are up on the side of MacDougall's Mountain above the Glen early in the morning. This is the fifth Sunday since the fire started that we could not get to church. It all seems so strange these past five weeks. Here we are close to the middle of September, summer is almost over. Surely this cannot last much longer.

Monday, September 15

Heavy rain last night. It continues all day. We think that the fire is over.

Tuesday, September 16

Yes, all is over. It rained all day yesterday. A little smoke can be seen here and there but the danger is past. The rangers are going home today but a truck or two will remain for a few days. After all, we have much to be thankful for. Our homes have been spared and with all the trucks, on the go here and there through the woods, there was not a single accident and on one was hurt. The rangers have done a good job. They are all a splendid bunch of fellows. Don Eldridge, Bob Burgess, Alex Chisholm, Dan MacIsaac are all good sports and not forgetting our own Danny Christopher. You would meet Danny on some forest trail his shirt torn and his clothes tarnished with ashes and soot. He is always the same cheerful Danny. He's in there pitching with his men all the time and always with a smile and a cheerful greeting for all.

The woods are now a scene of desolation. It is estimated that the fire ranged over an area of about 15,000 acres. This does not mean that all the trees in that area were destroyed. No, there is still a lot of our beautiful woods left.

The amount of merchantable timber lost was not great for the fire went through mostly land that had been logged. Thousands of cords of firewood was killed but this will not be a total loss, for it will last for a couple of years and can be used for fuel. Thousands of cords of this wood will rot in the woods though.

No deer or moose were believed to have perished for there were plenty of avenues to escape. One deer was found dead in the Glen but we are not sure if death was caused by the fire or from natural causes.

Now for a word in closing about MacInnis Brook. This is the brook that we feel has saved our homes. Millions of gallons of water have been taken from this brook during the fire, but the brook flowed on the same as ever.

Up on Hardin's Mountain is a spring of water that is worth going to see. It is known as the "Big Spring". We heard the old timers talking about it but we could never find it.

Nature gave up her secret during the fire when the spring was discovered. It is indeed a wonderful spring, hidden among grass and reeds. It is about 6 ft. by 9 ft. on the surface and about a foot and a half in depth. The bottom is of solid rock and the water clear as crystal comes up in bubbles. It reminds you of a glass of ginger ale. This wonderful spring along the mountain flows into the little brook, a tributary of MacInnis Brook. It flows through a narrow gorge with towering canopy of birch, beech and maples. This is why there was an inexhaustible supply of water.

"For men may come & men may go, but I go on forever".