

DUNE ACRES HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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The minutes of the August 4, 1934, meeting of the Dune Acres Town Board record that "Due to the rapid spread of a forest fire, the meeting was adjourned so the Board members could assist in fighting the fire." Like the ancient Roman hero Cincinnatus who dropped his plow to engage an invading enemy, residents of Dune Acres in earlier times were expected to drop whatever they were doing to fight a fire. There were a great many more brush fires then than at present, partly, no doubt, because there were fewer houses and more woodland. Fires that started along the South Shore tracks had a clear run well north of East Road until about 1960. Moreover, before the NIPSCO and Bethlehem Steel plants were constructed in Baillytown, uncontrolled fires were frequent in the woods and grasses there and could spread into town, carried by a southwest wind. A more distinctive hazard was presented by a Swiss farmer on Highway 12 who kept goats, and who felt that the pasture for his goats would be better if it were burned over in the Spring. Unmoved by pleas and protests, he burned his pasture whether or no, and was considered a distinct menace in Dune Acres.

In this era, up to the early 1960's, when brush fires were quite common, each resident was considered to be a member of the volunteer fire department and every household was expected to have an "Indian Fire Fighter" on hand (a tank for water with connected hose carried like a backpack). The Indian Fire Fighter was very heavy and residents who couldn't handle one were to use beaters -- long poles with rubber flappers at the end, used to beat out the flames. Training sessions were held periodically to instruct residents -- both men and women -- in the most efficient use of these fire-fighting aids. An alert for a fire was sounded by an extra-loud siren located at the Clubhouse, and word was spread by a telephone committee. The women on that committee also took turns in maintaining a fire watch from the Clubhouse hill during dry periods when the wind was from the south or southwest.

The most destructive fire in Dune Acres history occurred on a warm March day in 1949. It is thought to have started when a man burning trash along Highway 12 lost control of his bonfire in a high wind. Babbie Smith, then a new bride at 44 Circle Drive, recalls seeing the fire burning along the South Shore right of way at about ten that morning when she drove into Porter to buy a few groceries. By the time she returned shortly thereafter, Cowles Bog east of Mineral Springs Road was ablaze as far as the guard house. The flames then swept into the woods between the bog and East Road and started arcing. From there the fire moved up the Clubhouse hill, up Crest, Ridge and Circle Drives and through the low-lying back land to the edge of Porter Beach. The woods in the center of Circle Drive were caught up in the flames (no houses had been built in the center at that time) and the Clubhouse caught fire, but the blaze was extinguished before much damage was done. The conflagration was confined to the east side of Mineral Springs Road, since the wind was from due south.

At an early point, fire trucks arrived from Porter, Miller and Gary (the Chesterton truck was unable to respond, but the department there sent sandwiches and coffee for the firefighters). Men from Dune Acres had been called home from work, and the Superintendent of Schools in Chesterton sent boys from the senior class at the High School to help. Altogether about one hundred volunteers from outside Dune Acres assisted in fighting the fire. It raged from mid-morning until late in the afternoon, and for several days trees in the deeper woods were still burning.

Aside from the woodlands, the major casualties were the Studebaker's plant for making cement blocks (located south of numbers 16 and 18 East Road) and a house on Crest Drive owned by Albert Fertsch, dean of the Indiana University Extension in Gary (now Indiana University Northwest). The Fertsch house burned to the ground, and the site has never been built on since. A set of cement stairs still run up the hill from Crest Drive to where the house had stood. Mrs. Fertsch was upstairs washing her hair as the fire approached, and was not aware of the danger. A neighbor rushed in and according to legend found Mrs. Fertsch in pin curlers and unwilling to leave the house so unsuitably adorned. She was brought out reluctantly as the blaze engulfed the house and all was lost, including her pocketbook, left on the hall table.

One might well wonder why more residences were not destroyed, since the fire burned all around many of them. They were saved by the efforts of their owners, who kept them wet during the day, hosing them down as they were threatened by the blaze, and by the volunteers who beat back the flames in the residential areas.

In response to this great fire, the Town Board pushed ahead quickly to provide better protection. Actually, plans had been under consideration before the fire, and two problems were apparent. First, the water supply at the fire station was inadequate for fighting a major fire, and second, better access was needed to the deeper woods to control fires before they threatened residential areas. Hydrants were installed to provide water over a larger area, and a truck with a large water tank and a jeep with small tanks were obtained. Fire lanes were hacked out in the woods to provide access for the jeep. The fire station, built in 1946, was enlarged to house the new equipment. Most of this effort was paid for by public subscription. It was at this point also that the women's telephone and fire watch committee was organized and the siren installed at the Clubhouse. Volunteers did not confine their efforts to Dune Acres, but also responded to calls from other communities. They were often called to fight fires in the swampy areas near where Bethlehem Steel and NIPSCO are now located. Sometimes these expeditions lead to interesting encounters -- on one occasion Jim Halley and Leonard Conklin found themselves fighting a fire in Beverly Shores alongside Senator Paul Douglas.

From the beginning of the town of Dune Acres, fire fighting had been considered a normal duty of all residents. The measures taken after the great fire of March, 1949, were designed to better organize and equip this every-citizen effort. This approach continued into the 1960's. By then, the danger of brush fires (while still very real) had diminished as the Bailly area was cleared of woodland, as had been a number of lots in Dune Acres where houses now stood. Indeed, the number of houses in town had increased so significantly that protection based on resident-volunteers was no longer feasible. And it must be added that the old water tank truck had proven to be a lumbering monster, very hard to handle. The Indian Fire Fighters also were difficult to carry and difficult to use. More reliance and then almost complete reliance was placed on contracts for protection from neighboring fire departments -- first Porter and later Burns Harbor. Three major house fires have occurred in the past thirty years -- at Kelley's, Dyerly's and Nau's -- but Dune Acres has not been threatened during that time with brush fires on the scale of those of earlier years.

Through the years those persons who have served as Dune Acres Fire Commissioners have done an outstanding job in organizing volunteer fire fighting efforts. Even though the town has not had a volunteer fire fighting department since the mid 1980's the tradition of keeping residents alert to fire danger is being continued by John Wilhelm, the current Fire Commissioner. He has conducted a strong campaign to make sure all houses are adequately equipped with fire extinguishers and smoke detectors, and that street numbers are clearly shown. In addition to providing information on fire prevention, he maintains good relationships with fire departments in neighboring communities. Fire is always a threat, of course, but not as much as it was in Dune Acres three or four decades ago.

Information included in this paper comes from The Chesterton Tribune for March 24, 1949, the Record Book of Dune Acres Town Board, Volume I, and from personal recollections of residents.

Dune Acres Historical Commission

Gertrude Conklin
Margaret Doyle
James Newman