



THE BEACHCOMBER

DUNE ACRES, INDIANA

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THE 1949 DUNE ACRES FIRE

By Mike Swygert

Around 10 a.m. on a warm, windy March day in 1949, Dune Acres resident Barbara “Babbie” Smith was driving from her home on Circle Drive to Porter for groceries when she spotted a small rubbish fire between the South Shore tracks and route 12. Smith, who had moved to the lakeside community one year earlier, was not unduly concerned.

Back then, houses straddled each side of U.S.12 and residents along this corridor typically burned trash and brush; so did folks in Dune Acres. Long-time resident Sharon Snyder has noted that burning leaves was permissible and occurred frequently in the 1950s and beyond.

Of course, before starting any fire, one needs to be cognizant of conditions. On this March morning when Babbie Smith drove to Porter, the foliage was dry and dormant and strong and gusty winds were blowing hard from the south, roaring through the trees.

Less than an hour had passed when Smith drove back to Dune Acres. After crossing route 12 onto Mineral Springs Road, she gasped: the small fire along the tracks had morphed into a mammoth wildfire, stretching north to the Dune Acres gatehouse, and east from Mineral Springs Road to as far as she could see.

Overwhelmed and deeply concerned, she drove toward the gatehouse and realized the blaze had entered the woods south of East Road. This was frightening as the intensifying blaze was heading straight toward the area having the highest home density in Dune Acres. Now home, she phoned her husband (who was at work), explaining what was happening and urging him to rush home. She was not alone. Numerous wives called their husbands with the same urgent request.

When residents became aware of the magnitude of the threat, they took action. In 1949, Dune Acres had a volunteer fire department. Upon hearing the piercing siren from the Clubhouse signaling a wildfire, all the town’s able-body men were to go to the town Fire Station. When a brush fire occurred

during the day while men were at work, women became the front-line fire brigade.

But the 1949 fire was no longer a brush fire. The town had only one small pick-up truck with a large barrel to hold water. Most families had at least one metal canister with a pump sprayer and straps to be carried on one’s back. Called “Indian Firefighters,” they were heavy and bulky but useful when fighting grass and brush fires, but not so in forest fires, like the one raging that day.

Obviously, additional fire-fighting power was needed and fast. Calls went out to area fire departments. The Porter, Miller, and Gary departments responded, sending equipment and crews. Chesterton’s fire truck, however, was out of commission. In lieu of men and equipment, they furnished sandwiches and coffee. Of greater utility, more than 100 volunteers came from outside Dune Acres to help, including high school boys excused from classes by the Chesterton school superintendent. By late afternoon, the critical residential section of the fire was brought under control, but not until it had destroyed one home, damaged others, and came close to burning down the Clubhouse.



Indiana Fire Fighter canister in the Dune Acres Clubhouse
- photo by Mike Swygert

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dune acres fall party

open microphone

**october 18,
6pm to 9pm**

A night of fun and entertainment!

Drinks and hors d'œuvres \$20/person

**RSVP to Rick or the security office
by October 6.**

Like to get on the stage? Call or text Rick Demkovich
219 241 5543 or rpdemkovich@gmail.com

Bring your music, your instrument and a smile (we have a piano and can supply sound equipment, amps and microphones). Ten minutes per, or a couple songs each, depending on how many fine musicians we can entice to play.

Entertain and amaze your friends and neighbors!!

UFO Sighting

Just a reminder that the **UFO's** (Un Finished Objects) are still meeting at the Town Hall each Thursday from 9 am -noon.

We have had good participation with quite a variety of projects and, as always, there is a lot of lively conversation!

- by Sue Smith

Thanks to the following people who made this issue happen:

Mark Bapst	Carolyn Mellen
Mary Ann Crayton	Irene Newman
Rick Demkovich	Howard Silverman
Bob Hartmann	Susan Smith
Rich Hawksworth	Mike Swygert

If you would like to contribute a story, photo, poem, art, something from your children or grandchildren, etc, the deadline for the next issue is October 26!

Deer Cull

The Dune Acres annual Deer Cull begins October 15th and goes until March 15th. This effort to control the deer population in Dune Acres is carried out by several Dune Acres hunters who realize the importance of safety, especially in a residential area. This cull is necessary as the deer population continues to grow, causing an increase of deer ticks causing Lyme Disease and the possibility of traffic accidents. The hunters report their kills to the DNR and dispose of the carcasses properly. So don't be alarmed if you hear a gunshot or two - the neighbors haven't gone rogue - just the deer cull keeping our neighborhood safer.



The deadline for the next issue of *The Beachcomber* is **October 26.**

Fall Clean-Up!

We are having our annual fall clean up the week-end of October 25th & 26th. Since we have received a coastal grant for the elimination of invasive species, we are trying to get as many volunteers as possible. *This is a matching grant so volunteer hours really are significant !* As always we will have food and soft drinks for snacks and lunch on Saturday. Join the good times.



This work counts for anyone who needs volunteer hours for school or community service. Nothing looks better than this on a college admission application.!

Please join the fun and be part of our delightful community .

If you cannot work, please consider a donation to the Town of Dune Acres earmarked for environmental so we can hire some workers.

Warm regards,
Robin Tennant
Environmental commissioner

Clubhouse Clutter !

The third floor of the Clubhouse has become a destination for left over party decorations and junk. The Town is concerned about it being a fire hazard so we're going to roll up our sleeves and toss it out or find somewhere else to store it. If by chance you own something that you would like to retrieve before it is tossed, please contact Carolyn Mellen at 787-1900.

Your Septic System

September 22 - 26 was SepticSmart week, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency program intended to encourage homeowners to care for their septic systems. Failure to properly maintain a septic system can lead to costly repairs, groundwater contamination, polluted local waterways, and risks to public health and the environment. This is especially important to communities like Dune Acres, which do not have public sewers. The EPA has provided informational brochures, which are available to residents at town hall. Their most important recommendation is to have your septic system inspected every three years (sooner if you suspect a problem) and have it pumped as recommended by your septic maintenance company, generally every three to five years. For more information, visit the SepticSmart website at <http://water.epa.gov/infrastructure/septic/septicsmart.cfm>.

- by Rich Hawksworth

Recycling

The Recycling & Waste Reduction District of Porter County offers a Master Recycler Course which I am taking. Eight classes and three field trips. It's been great. There are a few new recycling tips:

- Leave lids and caps on jars and bottles;
- No longer necessary to rinse out containers;
- Pizza boxes are not recyclable because of the grease;
- Shredded paper is not accepted.

You probably already know about these but I'll list them anyway. Not accepted:

- Styrofoam;
- Electronic waste
- Hazardous waste;
- Used oil or oil containers;
- Window panes, mirrors, ceramics;
- Medical waste (syringes, needles, etc.);
- Yard waste;
- Food waste;
- Trash.
- Prescription medications;
- Aerosols,
- Light bulbs;
- Paint;
- Batteries. We will soon have a battery recycle box at the Security Office.

Call Mary Ann Crayton 787-8104 if you have any questions.

- by Mary Ann Crayton

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Albert Fertsch, dean of the Indiana University Extension in Gary, owned a house on Crest Drive that burned to the ground. His wife was in the home when it caught fire. BeeGee Snyder recalled: “[She] was washing hair when the house burned down.” Another resident described what happened in more detail:

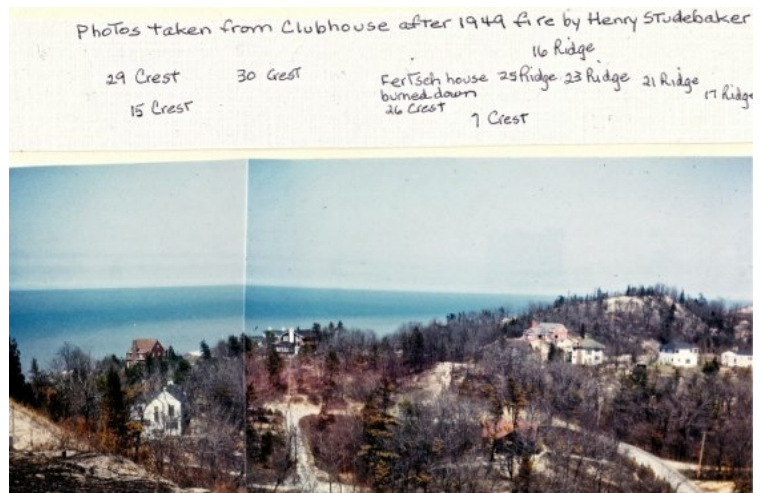
Mrs. Fertsch was upstairs washing her hair as the fire approached, and was not aware of the danger. A neighbor rushed in and found [her] in pin curlers and unwilling to leave the house so unsuitably adorned. She was brought out reluctantly as the blaze [began] to engulf the house . . . All was lost including her pocketbook, left on the hall table.

Homes along Crest, Ridge, Beach, and East roads were most at risk. Virtually all the houses east of the Clubhouse at some point were surrounded by fire, yet they survived. Why? Several reasons: the efforts of residents hosing down their houses, the men and equipment from out-of-town fire departments, and the contributions of volunteers who assisted in various ways including beating down low-level flames that were threatening homes.

A few days after the fire, Henry Studebaker stood on Clubhouse hill with a camera. Looking east, he took photographs that memorialize the extent of the fire: from Clubhouse Hill on the west to the Porter Beach town limits on the east, and from Highway 12 on the south to Lake Michigan, on the north. The pictures reveal a panorama of blackened trees with little ground foliage. But the scene is not a desolate one. The saved homes stand out (but so does the charred lot where the Fertsch house had stood).

Another casualty of the 1949 fire was the town’s only industrial structure -- the block yard, a factory that made concrete blocks and bricks for construction of homes and other projects. Built in the 1930s, it was Dune Acres first (and only) commercial enterprise. The site also included a large shed owned by the Dune Acres Corporation that housed equipment and materials for road building, etc. This “industrial area,” as Henry Studebaker has described it, sat 100 yards or so south of the intersection of East Road and Crest Drive.

It could have been worse. Nearly all the threatened homes were saved and so was the Clubhouse. At the height of the conflagration, flames raced up the eastern slope of Clubhouse dune and continued to advance through trees and brush to the foundation of the three-story log structure. Fortunately, firefighters had easy road access to the top of the dune and extinguished the blaze. Incidentally, log structures do burn down, three in Dune Acres having done so, though not due to wildfires.



Fire Preparedness Tips for the Home

1. **Smoke Detectors:** A home should have a smoke detector on the ceiling of each floor including the basement. In addition, one should be located near the kitchen. Without exception, every year change the batteries.
2. **Fire extinguishers:** It is recommended that every house have two or more 5-pound ABC fire extinguishers, to be placed near the kitchen, in bedroom areas, and in the garage. Check the gauge on each unit every year. It should be completely in the GREEN zone. At the same time, pick up the extinguisher and shake it vigorously for 20 to 30 seconds to loosen the powder. Please, do NOT pull the pin to test it. If you do, it is likely to leak and lose its pressure. Any fire extinguisher that is older than 15 years should be replaced.
3. **Baking Soda:** Keep a box of baking soda in the kitchen in a specific place that is quickly accessible. In the case of a grease fire on the stove, shake the powder on the blaze and it should extinguish the flames.
4. **CALL 911 immediately** when an indoor fire threatens your home or when you see a blaze anywhere in the town or its environs.
5. **Have your home address clearly marked** so emergency responders can quickly find it in case of a fire or other emergency situation.

- Mark Bapst, Dune Acres Fire Commissioner

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The great 1949 Dune Acres fire is instructive of dangers and consequences of various stages of a truly dangerous wildfire. The 1949 fire began at ground level in an area where the combustible fuel consisted primarily of dead, decaying, and dormant bushes and grasses. Sometimes, grass and brush blazes are easy to put out. Moreover, these fires can be beneficial. "Controlled" ground fires -- those set intentionally to rid a forest floor of dead underbrush -- allow vibrant new growth and lessen the dangers of more serious fires.

Nonetheless, both intentionally set and unintended ground fires become serious menaces when strong winds are present. The winds propel the flames faster and further into nearby forested areas. That's what happened in the 1949 Dune Acres fire. Once in the forest, the dangers and potential damage escalate. When flames vortex into the upper branches of trees, what foresters call "the crowns," the land area threatened expands enormously. One's home may be a mile or more removed from the fire's front, but red-hot embers blow off the burning trees and travel long distances, landing on roofs, in gutters, and amidst brush and undergrowth adjacent to homes. Once there, the embers ignite these combustible materials that burn down the structure. A crown fire under requisite conditions can quickly overrun a forested community like Dune Acres. Late fall and early spring are the most likely times for wildfires in our area. Often, the quantity of dry, dead and decaying combustible materials are the highest and the change of seasons means clashing warm and cold air masses are producing high winds. Clearing brush around the house, having fire extinguishers handy, and trimming low limbs off trees all help protect property. Be prepared and never assume a fire like the kind that occurred in 1949 will never happen again in Dune Acres.



After 1949 fire, photo by H. Studebaker
 Foreground: Far left sand, Fertsche house on lot 156-gone
 Center: 25 Ridge, brown roof, below red house
 16 Ridge, red house
 21 Ridge, 19 Ridge
 Far right: 1 Circle

One final tidbit of note: on August 4, 1934, the Dune Acres Town Board was meeting when news came that a fire was approaching the town. The Board's minutes read: "Due to the rapid spread of a forest fire, the meeting was adjourned so Board Members could assist in fighting the fire." Some believed the fire started when a Swiss farmer who raised goats and lived along U.S. 12 burned a small pasture. Apparently, he did this annually. Dune Acres residents considered the goat keeper "a distinct menace."

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Photos by Mike Swygert





I raised this monarch caterpillar to a butterfly
- Mary Ann Crayton



Milkweed for Monarchs

I was so inspired by Mike Swygert's beautiful butterfly photos that I thought I would list some of the important nectar sources for them: blueberries, blackberries, wild plum, redbud, wild strawberry. In the summer, all three of the milkweeds are necessary for monarchs - common, orange and swamp. Other species need Tulip tree flowers, violets, coreopsis, lupine, puccoon, liatris, dogbane, sumac, coneflowers, thistles, vervains, bergamot, and New Jersey tea. In the Fall, asters, joe-pye weed, goldenrods, blazing-stars and iron weeds. Because I love swallowtails, I planted Dutchmen's Pipevine and Prickly Ash.

- By Mary Ann Crayton



Wild Turkeys in the Dune Acres Soccer Field
- Photo by Howard Silverman



Hanging out on the back porch

- Photo by Mike Swygert

Dune Acres Club Members Dedicate Memorial Garden in Memory of Margaret Doyle

"Margaret's Garden" located on the north side of the Clubhouse is in memory of long-time Dune Acres resident Margaret Doyle. Margaret resided at 26 Circle Drive and was very much in tune with the environment and gardens of our town. The named garden results from memorial donations following her death. It includes a stone bench along with an engraved commemorative stone placed among flowers that are planted and maintained annually by Garden Club members.

Bob Hartmann knew Margaret well. He spoke at the dedication about her life and activities when living in Dune Acres, emphasizing that she volunteered and worked tirelessly on behalf of the town. Others at the dedication also shared their memories of Margaret.

Bob noted that Margaret Doyle was a remarkable woman, earning a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and becoming a professor at the University of Minnesota. She was both an avid gardener and a world traveler. She was always environmentally conscious of her surroundings. Several years ago, Margaret and John Newman wrote a history of Dune Acres as part of the town's 75th Anniversary celebration.

Today, Garden Club volunteers maintain "Margaret's Garden." They invite everyone in town to spend quiet time overlooking the Lake while enjoying the colorful flowers (including native Showy Goldenrod, Milk Weed, Blanket Flower, and Coreopsis that attract large numbers of butterflies). When there, please remember Margaret.



From left to right: Dianne Swygert, Susan Smith, Margo Hartmann, Lois Nixon, Diane Payne, Cathy Bomberger, Bruni Wahlers, Bev Hubbs, Bonnie Thomas, and Clarice Gourley.

Photo by Bob Hartmann

A few copies of The Beachcomber, printed in black and white, are



The Fine Print: *The Beachcomber* is published on-line on the first day of each month. All information, news, creative contributions, articles, reports, corrections, suggestions, Letters to the Editor, art work, comments and otherwise are welcomed and encouraged. *The Beachcomber* is a grass roots publication not officially affiliated with either the Town of Dune Acres or the Dune Acres Civic Improvement Foundation, Inc. (DACIF). All content is believed to be reasonably accurate and reliable but not "guaranteed!"

Editorial Board: Carolyn Mellen, Irene Newman and Mike Swygert.

Email submissions to inewman680@aol.com. Please use "Beachcomber," in the subject line.