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# Fire Fighting in Falmouth

*Early times through 1947*

Gordon F. Todd

*This review and research are dedicated as a salute to many robust and daring fire fighters who have risked personal safety and donated large amounts of personal time to minimizing the ever-present menace of fire in Falmouth and other communities. I have never been a fire fighter, but I am privileged to know a number of men who have fine records of public service in that field, including my son John. And Woods Hole Station 2 is just across the street, happily.*

## I

When Falmouth, then an area called Suckanesset, was first settled in 1660, open hearth fireplaces were built promptly. Soon beehive ovens were added. Open fires were used outdoors for many purposes: burning brush, rendering oils, roasting, and evaporating sea water to produce small quantities of salt. Fires were lighted with flint and steel, sometimes with the help of a little gunpowder, and by saving live coals from earlier fires. Inevitably, accidental fires resulted from faulty or creosoted chimney flues, clumsy disposal of live coals, backdrafts, careless use of candles, lanterns and lamps, smoking, high winds, spontaneous combustion in hay mows and errant lightning strikes. Someone's house or barn would be set on fire and often nothing could be done about it because neighbors lived at some distance, water supplies were sometimes limited, family help was scanty and drought and high winds compounded the hazards. Families could lose everything, including horses and livestock, with no insurance.

In those early days there was no equipment for fighting fire except buckets of wood, leather or canvas.<sup>1</sup> When the dreaded alarm was raised by shouts or bells, everyone seized a bucket and ran to the source of smoke or the glow in the sky. A bucket



Typical canvas/leather fire bucket, kept empty, hung under cover on porches or shelters. Rhode Island origin. Courtesy John D. Todd.

brigade was formed in line, starting at ponds, wells or even rain barrels. Hastily filled buckets were passed along and heaved on the fire or adjacent barns, roofs or brush. Occasionally a building was saved, or time was won for the rescue of people or animals. However, the prime concern was to prevent the fire from

spreading to adjacent structures. The bucket brigade was kept up as long as needed, or until water was exhausted, or until bucket passers could do no more. What an added calamity when the water source was dry or frozen!

An example of a major calamity was the burning of the Barnstable County Courthouse on Oct. 22, 1827 in a high wind, when the building and most of the land records were destroyed. There was no effective way to fight that fire.<sup>2</sup>

A Falmouth report of the 1830s tells of a fire in the night when wedding guests were awakened by the stamping of horses in the barn. A bucket brigade



Antique Falmouth badge, worn by the captain of the 1897 Chemical Engine. Donated to WHHC by Raleigh Costa. Courtesy WHHC.

saved the house, but the animals perished. The writer commented, "After all these years Falmouth is not supplied with a proper Fire Department. Heaven help and protect us, and fill all hearts with generosity and the necessity of a properly equipped fire apparatus."<sup>3</sup>

Another report of an undated fire was made by John Jenkins concerning his house on the Falmouth Green: "FIRES. People had leathern fire buckets hanging in their front yard. One morning our barn, directly behind the house was on fire, threatening our house and the next. The church bell rang, men came with their buckets women with clothes baskets. A bucket line was formed from the nearest pumps, two men on the house roof and others on the shed quenched sparks, etc. Women and children carried out furniture to the village green. Father, ill in bedroom was carried out on a mattress to my uncle's house across the street. House saved, everything carried back. In the evening a sea captain came and said to my mother 'Chloe, all of you sleep easy tonight. Some us'll stand by and see that all's safe'."<sup>4</sup>

There is a newsprint record of an 1844 fire at the "Crocker Homestead" or Succanisset House, then owned by Elijah Swift, on the south side of the Green. There was a wedding in preparation, and the fire was confined to a porch where the wedding cake had been placed. The fire was put out by a bucket brigade which formed to the pond in the hollow between the Hatch and Shiverick Houses - but the cake was scorched!<sup>5</sup>

The Succanisset House figured in another record in the 1840s when the barn burned leaving five horses dead. A bucket brigade saved the house and large oak tree, located on the present site of St. Barnabas Church.<sup>6</sup>

By 1857-58 the town had grown to 2600 inhabitants. In 1858 the Webster House, later Naushon House, on the land in Woods Hole now known as Juniper Point was destroyed. It was rebuilt in 1882 and burned again!<sup>7</sup>

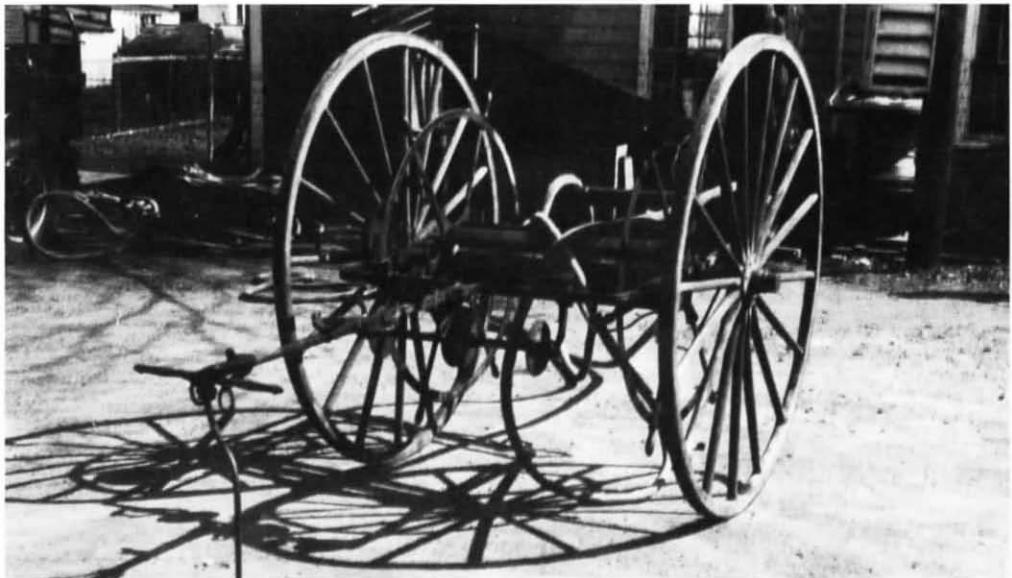
Private owners of means were in some cases able to take preventative steps during the Victorian era by building large water tanks in towers on high ground and filling them in summer with pumps operated at

first by windmills, later by steam engines. Highfield Hall, the summer mansion of a branch of the Beebe family, had a high octagonal tower which housed a very large water tank, kept filled by a windmill pumping from the north-west side of Locust Street and up the hill; a steam pump later replaced the windmill.<sup>8</sup> But the town was growing, and not everyone had high ground or convenient ponds at his disposal or within his means.

A few private owners and associations began to acquire light hand-powered pumps and hose lengths, capable of drafting water from wells or low tanks and directing hose streams.<sup>9</sup> The larger ones required a husky crew of several men to move into position and develop effective pressure. Many a rookie was knocked flat by letting his chin or wrist get in the way of the fast-moving hand-powered brakes, or bars! In built-up sections these associations developed a club-like style, with feelings of pride, camaraderie and prestige among those accepted by the group. Older boys were sometimes admitted.

In 1860 all roads were unpaved, the town contained less than 3000 inhabitants,<sup>1</sup> living mostly on farms, waterfront dwellings, and small village clusters. Much land was devoted to pasturage, plantings and woodland. There was no chance of what is now known as mutual aid fire assistance between villages. Woods and brush fires were an ever-present menace. On April 5, 1863, John Henry Robinson's house burned to the ground.<sup>10</sup> The coming of the railroad in 1872 added new threats to brush and woodlands.<sup>11</sup> The 1887 forest fires which burned 25,000 acres in Bourne, Sandwich and Provincetown were fresh in residents' minds,<sup>12</sup> and still by the latter 1800s no town-organized fire protection existed.

Progressive minds were eyeing fire fighting methods which had long since been in practice on the mainland, arguing that Falmouth and surrounding villages should create some basic system commensurate with their limited fiscal abilities. For some time, Town Meeting had annually appointed Fire Wards, or Wardens, in all sections.<sup>13</sup> Now it seemed time to deal seriously with the need for a Town Fire Department.



Antique Falmouth Fire Department hand-drawn hose reel, ca. 1899. Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.

## II

After many discussions and postponements, the Town Meeting of 1897 voted to spend \$700 for a minimal Fire Department. \$694 bought a chemical unit which forced water by means of gas pressure generated by mixing sulphuric acid with soda, forcing a hose stream to play as directed. This first unit was hand-drawn. Also, a hand-drawn wagon, or "truck" for ladders was acquired, now preserved in Station 2, along with four extinguishers and a supply of acid and soda. A house for storing them was built, all in 1897. At that time there were 1501 taxpayers.<sup>13</sup>

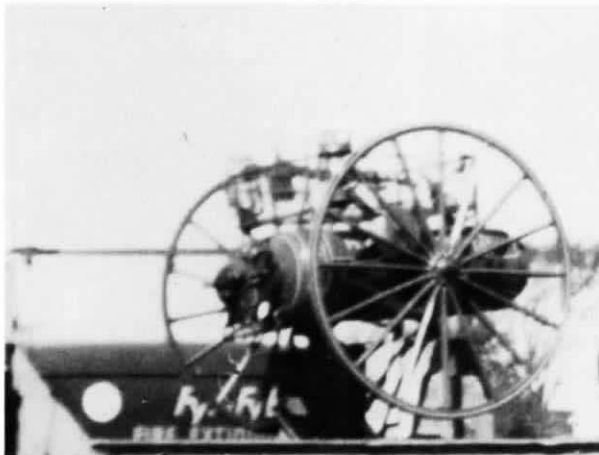
The newly formed department was directed by a Board of Fire Engineers, among whom George E. Dean was reported as Chief in 1902, serving for two years. Members of this board, including the Chief, were paid \$2 per year! Volunteers made up the fighting force, paid for time worked.<sup>14</sup>

By 1899 the town owned five No. 3 Hose Reels, consisting of 6-7 foot hand-drawn reels for 2 1/2 inch unlined hose wound on an internal reel. Five thousand feet of hose was also provided, with

fireman's badges and tools. At first, Hose Reels were housed in rented quarters for the most part, in five locations: the Lewis Village Stable, the old Primary School beside Swift's Grain Store on Palmer Avenue, at Quissett, West Falmouth and Woods Hole.<sup>15</sup> The Palmer Avenue site still survives, bearing a sign, "Amber Waves".<sup>16</sup> On April 28, 1900, the Parker House on Main St. was destroyed.<sup>17</sup>

In 1902 there were five Fire Engineers, or Fire Board members, and the town spent \$1072 for the new department. That year the town also purchased the Falmouth Water Co. and two smaller companies which served outlying districts. Hydrants were available in Falmouth Village itself and Woods Hole; in other villages there were town wells.<sup>18,14</sup>

By 1905 the force had built up to 95 Call Men under Chief Wilfred E. Godfrey, then in his second year. A fire alarm consisting of an old school bell was put on the tower of Town Hall, and the first electric Gamewell call boxes were placed on Locust Street, Main Street, and Gifford Street, followed two years later with one at Woods Hole.<sup>19,20</sup> In 1906 there were 1376 taxpayers.



Antique 1897 hand-drawn Chemical Engine of first Falmouth Fire Department, shown at a muster much later. Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.

Volunteers were the mainstays in these years. For example, Hose Reel No. 5 at Woods Hole was manned exclusively by volunteers for the next 17 years. These men were paid \$2 to pull the awkward reel over the dirt roads, connecting hose to hydrants and bringing a water stream to bear. Oscar Hilton's or Walter Luscombe's horses were sometimes used to pull the reel, if available.<sup>21</sup> That reel was kept in a Hose House on Water Street, at that time called Main Street, about where the Black Duck restaurant is now. The Woods Hole fire alarm was the bell in the nearby Congregational Church, and is now on the grounds of the Bradley House Museum; the church building survives as the Market Bookshop, Under the Sun, and From Far Corners shops.<sup>22</sup> Another bell, dated 1855, also served in Woods Hole.

A Hose House had come to Teaticket in 1904, and one to Falmouth Heights in 1905, for a total of seven in town. Each Hose House was manned by 9 to 12 men who grasped the pulling ropes and hauled the hose reel to the fire on the dead run. The term "run" is part of the fire fighter's language today, even though all rolling equipment has long since been motorized. Records of the time speak of many small or controlled fires in brush or structures, and a few fires causing large losses.<sup>19,20</sup>

By 1910, Chief George W. Jones had replaced Chief James M. Watson (1906-1909) and the force consisted of seven Assistant Fire Engineers and 99 Call Men. The Chief's pay was still \$2! Telephone connections had been established in 1906, and the Falmouth Village alarm was improved by a steam whistle on the electric light station.<sup>23</sup> It was now possible to blow signal blasts to identify fire locations. The town owned no horses for Fire Department use, but on occasion rented them when needed. Another Hose Company, No. 8, was established in East Falmouth in 1906.<sup>19,20,24,25,26,27,28</sup>

After 13 years of operation the Fire Department had experienced a number of bad fires as well as numbers of successful saves. In 1907 several total losses were recorded, including the Cape Cod Laundry, burned during a snow storm, Meehan House in Sippewissett, and Gonsalves' Barn in Waquoit. Major saves were accomplished at Dr. Brown's House in Falmouth, and Dr. Peebles' on Shore Street in Falmouth. A similar pattern was encountered in 1908 and included the saving of the Chinese Laundry on Walker Street, Falmouth. On April 12, 1909, the Casino and Post Office at Falmouth Heights were destroyed; then in July the workshop and engine house of Dr. Donkin burned down. Firemen were understandably frustrated when the fire site lay beyond the reach of hydrant connection or available water supply. Low hydrant pressure was also a problem in some cases since the principal source of town water was Long Pond. Stormy weather compounded all problems. The new Fire Department experienced great successes and failures.<sup>19,20,24,25,26,27,28</sup>

During the next ten years, 1910-1920, No. 9 Hose Company was added in North Falmouth, 1912, and the old chemical unit was moved there. Another milestone occurred when Hose No. 5 at Woods Hole was moved across the street to a one story building next to Liberty Hall, which latter is now the Community Hall. 1912 saw the loss of the old Masonic meeting place on East Main Street,<sup>29</sup> and the loss of the Teaticket School on Jan. 30 in a bitter windstorm.<sup>30</sup> There was also an MBL fire, a partial loss, on Aug. 18. Hose Company No. 10 was established at Waquoit in 1913. The department had been buying rubber lined hose to replace plain cotton hose, having found that wear and tear plus rot caused by residual chemicals had played havoc. By this time, the department had a total of 10 companies, nine Hose Reels, a chemical pumping engine, a hook and ladder and 64 extinguishers.<sup>31,32</sup> Oscar Hilton's



Ford Chemical, October 1921, with Farrell, Perkins, G. Denham, Deputy Denham, Captain Corey, Robbins.  
Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.



First Falmouth Ladder 2 Chemical, on Reo chassis, vintage 1922. Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.

Model A pickup sometimes pulled the #5 hose reel with two men dangling from the rear box!<sup>33</sup>

In 1915, G. W. Jones finished his term as Chief with a force totaling 131 men. H. V. Lawrence was Chief from 1916 through 1919. The Woods Hole alarm was improved with the installation of an electric siren on the Hose House, "which seems to give satisfaction." In 1917 there were heavy fire losses, estimated at \$24,650, from destruction of the Ray Wells Garage; Sarah Ostrom House, Waquoit; Bacon House, Davisville; Fenno Stable, Quisset; Davis House, Davisville; and Bertha Moody House, West Falmouth. 1918 was more of the same with losses estimated at \$57,364:

Draper Hotel, Menauhant, June 13, \$38,000  
no hydrant

Keith Garage, Quissett, July 15, \$6,142

Bowman Blacksmith Shop, West Falmouth,  
June 26, \$4,000

Sabens Barn, Falmouth, lightning

Baker House, West Falmouth, Feb. 16, \$2,500  
no hydrant.

Again, sites beyond reach of hydrant service contributed heavily to losses in these years. The Chief promptly requested a major review by the New England Insurance Exchange for recommendations, a timely move.<sup>34,35,36,37</sup>

The Insurance Exchange made extensive recommendations, including employment of four full time men, medical examinations, better record keeping, specifications, building inspections, more fire boxes, and alarm tappers in the homes of officers. Lastly, it recommended that an automobile powered combined chemical unit and hose wagon be located in Falmouth Village, and that the Fire Chief be full time and salaried. From this moment, Falmouth began another new phase in its fire fighting development.<sup>37</sup>



Typical Tapper of early period, made by Gamewell Co., brought alarm signals into officers' homes. Restored by John D. Todd. Courtesy John D. Todd.

### III

In 1919 Ray D. Wells became Chief, a post he was to occupy with distinction for many years. W. H. Denham was named Deputy Chief and Clerk of the Fire Engineers Board. A small automobile powered chemical unit on a Ford chassis was purchased for \$1,400, and an automobile powered Ahrens-Fox 750 gal. pumper with a chemical tank and hose truck was purchased for less than \$5,000. While these new pieces of apparatus were getting into operation it was found that fire losses were less than half the two previous years!<sup>38</sup>

Also in 1919, Hose 5 arrived, a reconditioned double combination Maxim hose and chemical truck which had been heavily subscribed privately in Woods Hole and Penzance Point. Falmouth also acquired a motor-drawn trailer carrying 600 feet of hose, supplementing older equipment. Three hose reels were kept in reserve. A Forest Fire lookout was built near Brick Kiln Road, and Ford Chemical Cars patrolled woodland roads in risky seasons.<sup>22,39,40</sup> The old 1897 hand-drawn Hook and Ladder was now housed at Woods Hole.<sup>41</sup>

1920 Unit Locations were:<sup>39</sup>

- Hose 1 Teaticket
- Hose 3 Falmouth
- Hose 4 Quissett
- Hose 5 Woods Hole
- Hose 6 W. Falmouth
- Hose 7 Falmouth Heights
- Hose 8 East Falmouth
- Hose 9 North Falmouth
- Hose 10 Waquoit
- Chemical 1 Main St. Falmouth
- Engine 1 Main St. Falmouth.

1920 brought 49 alarms and \$57,135 fire losses. Falmouth was trying hard, but in spite of the major build-up in equipment, losses were the heaviest to date. The principal loss was on the windy night of March 17 when the Machine Shop of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries caught fire and ignited a wildfire which spread across the street to destroy the Mess Hall of the Marine Biological Laboratory. This spectacular

conflagration threatened the whole Woods Hole village as the wind drove the flames, and low hydrant pressure required difficult pumping connections to sea water. Later, fully carbonized shingles were picked up high on the Woods Hole Golf Course!<sup>42,39</sup> Nevertheless, the better equipment and maturing organization certainly saved the Water Street and Eel Pond buildings from destruction.<sup>39</sup>

The Fire Department now employed a master mechanic, a night man, eight engine men, 11 Engineer Officers, and backed them with 103 Call Men. 24 years of growth had cost the town about \$44,000. There is no way to guess how much had been saved by this investment, not only in terms of dollars, but also in terms of human dislocation, personal loss, misery and threat to life of the 2,361 taxpayers and their families of that time and preceding years.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1920-1930 decade, more self-propelled units were bought and gradually the original hand-drawn



Deputy Denham and Chief Ray Wells, with Ferris, Perkins, E. Geggatt, Barry & Rhodes. Ahrens-Fox Engine 1, 1920, at Falmouth Station. Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.





Maxim Combination Chemical Hose 5 of Woods Hole, vintage 1919, at Falmouth Station, 1921.  
Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.

Hose Reels were either sold or put into reserve. In 1922, a Ford truck was placed at North Falmouth. The antique hand-drawn Hook and Ladder was stored when a Reo motorized Ladder truck was added at Headquarters in 1922.<sup>43</sup> The need for more dependable hydrant pressure was repeatedly emphasized in Town Meetings as the number of taxpayers doubled to 5,067 in 1930 while annual fire losses increased 36% in the same period.<sup>39,44</sup> Grass and brush fires were on the increase, some the result of sparks flying from railroad locomotives, while others were deliberately set by incendiaries. Chimney soot and oil stove fires were also frequent. Faulty wiring in residences and automobiles was a growing factor, as were automobile collisions. The department also had to cope with automobiles blocking roads and hydrants as spectators raced to watch the fires. False alarms had become a needless and dangerous problem. Quiet Cape Cod was changing rapidly.<sup>39,45</sup>

The Woods Hole Fire House was raised in 1920 to house the Maxim Hose 5, and in the process of construction a large recreation room was created upstairs which continued to serve multiple purposes of meetings, social events, Yacht Club gatherings and sleeping quarters. An overhanging porch served as a post for observing passing traffic on Water Street, with many an audible snappy comment hurled back and forth over its railing.<sup>22</sup> A hose-drying tower was added.<sup>33</sup>

George Ferris was hired as Company 5's first permanent fireman, supplementing his duties as school janitor, Special Policeman, and drawbridge tender.<sup>46</sup> He later became Falmouth's Fire Chief. Fire fighters' uniforms in Woods Hole at that time were fishermen's slickers and sou'westers.<sup>22</sup>

With motorized engines came the ability to render mutual aid to other towns and areas which requested

it. Cases in point were Bourne, Osterville and Mashpee in 1922, and a bad forest fire in Sagamore in 1923. Such aid was indeed mutual, for no billings were sent to towns which were able to return similar service when requested.<sup>45</sup>

Falmouth's Chief Wells began to draw a salary of \$666 in 1923, while his Deputy W. H. Denham, who was also Fire Department Clerk, drew more. There was an increase of full time men in accordance with Insurance Company recommendations. Call Men were relied on heavily, but some were beginning to encounter resistance from their employers when they needed to drop everything to answer alarms. In 1923 there was the first competition between all Town Fire Companies, and Hose Company 5 of Woods Hole won for greatest proficiency.<sup>45</sup>

Improving the alarm system continued to get attention, aimed at reliability, audibility and speed. To quote Chief Wells, "All large fires in the beginning

are, in most cases, small ones, and delay of any kind in extinguishment of these fires means a larger fire than should have been." Where the Gamewell pull-box system was active in Falmouth and Woods Hole, the Fire Company knew at once where to go. But in outlying areas only the telephone link existed, with likelihood of delays in calling and dispatching, sufficient to allow a head start to a new blaze. Following a recommendation made in 1923, the town began to connect all stations with an alarm telegraph system. As far as audible alarm equipment went, the Falmouth area was served by both an electric siren and a Gamewell air whistle. Woods Hole had an electric siren in 1922, and West Falmouth received one in 1923.<sup>43,45</sup>

Rescue action on the roads and along the water were becoming a regular function, supplementing the long-standing tradition of rescue from fire itself. Such a case happened at Woods Hole when George Ferris, with help from Oscar Hilton, rescued a "drowning



Ahrens-Fox Ladder, vintage 1931, and 1929 Falmouth Station. Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.



Forest Fire Lookout, Brick Kiln Road. Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.

Romeo" who had fallen overboard from a trysting spot aboard a boat and had been swept under Dyer's Dock in a severe storm - neither rescuer nor rescuee being able to swim!<sup>22,46</sup> In January of 1924, Woods Hole Firemen gave shore-side assistance to the crew of a six-masted schooner which had grounded nearby and soon broke up.<sup>46</sup>

Inspections of public buildings on a weekly basis began in 1924. There were 129 fires, many of which had been set, and there were five mutual aid responses. One Fireman was injured twice in separate active duty incidents and was compensated \$600. Total losses came to \$26,757, of which the most costly was in Maravista.<sup>47</sup>

In 1925 there were 42 Call Men. At Woods Hole the alarm was a large bell in the hose tower, supplementing the electric siren. Fire losses were similar to the previous year, including two buildings destroyed by arson. Fire drills in schools averaged one minute evacuation time. Constant-reading gauges were installed in the Stations to monitor hydrant pressure. Some units were held in reserve for forest fire work.<sup>48</sup>

1926 was notable for the loss of the Washburn summer residence valued at \$125,000, including jewelry, due to the unavailability of water on Washburns Island in Waquoit. This was the highest unit loss to date by far. Fortunately, an elderly parent was rescued. There was also a very bad forest fire in Hatchville, deliberately set, during which the North Falmouth truck overturned. Then, in September, Fireman Gilbert H. Denham was killed in the line of duty in a grade crossing accident. It was a very bad year.<sup>49,50</sup>

Several more trucks were put in commission in 1927. One was a new Maxim Pumper, placed in North Falmouth in May, designated Engine No. 3. In June a 1000 gal. Ahrens-Fox Pumper was located in Woods Hole; it can still be seen at this writing in Station 2 on Woods Hole Road, or rolling sedately along town highways in parades or ceremonial situations. The pump is reportedly made of bronze and has been outstanding in its durability and efficiency. Miss Tinkham, a well-known independent lady of Woods Hole, spoke effectively in Town Meeting urging its

acquisition. Alarm service was speeded up with new Gamewell Dual system. The old Ford Truck of 1919 vintage lost its steering while responding to a call at the Fay Estate and turned over, injuring Fireman Fred Fish. A high standpipe water reservoir was built on the edge of the Woods Hole Golf Course to insure high water pressure in local mains and hydrants. A striking statistic emerged from the 1927 report: 91% of the total loss figure of \$27,329 was of incendiary origin!<sup>51</sup>

1928 equipment was all motorized, thanks to effective support by Town Meetings and able presentations. Three Fire Stations were then in operation: Falmouth, North Falmouth and Woods Hole. Falmouth was now alerted by a compressed air whistle, and a recording punch register and telephone switchboard came to North Falmouth. Motorized equipment in operation was listed:<sup>52</sup>

- 2 Combination Hose Trucks
- 3 Triple Combination Pumpers (1 Maxim, 2 Ahrens-Fox)
- 1 Ladder Truck (the original Reo-powered Maxim, all worn out)
- 1 Combination Hose with Booster Pump
- 1 Service Truck
- 1 Forest Patrol Car, Chevrolet
- 1 Forest Fire Fighting Truck with hose and pump
- 1 Single Tank Combination Truck with pump cans, extinguishers, tools.

A diaphone compressed air horn was installed at Woods Hole, and thereafter there was little chance of being unaware of an alert.<sup>52</sup>

After much planning, a new Central Fire Station and Headquarters was built next to the old site in Falmouth and was operational in September 1929.<sup>53</sup>

Two new Fire Stations were added in 1930, in East Falmouth and West Falmouth. Another Maxim Pumper with a 500 gal. capacity was placed at East Falmouth. Manning now consisted of a Chief and

Deputy, two permanent Captains, two Acting Lieutenants, three Call Captains, four Lieutenants for 63 Call Men, plus a few full time Station Men, clearly a forward step in the development of the Department. In 1930, 103 runs were made responding to forest fires caused by drought and a number of cases of incendiarism. In addition to a rash of grass and brush fires, a blaze was deliberately set on Sept. 28 in high winds which burned 4,835 acres and took seven days to put out. Building losses were small by comparison. A program of fire break cutting was carried out, and Falmouth's first motorized ambulance was put in commission by the Board of Health.<sup>44,54</sup>

For the first time in 12 years there was loss of life in an automobile collision in Teaticket when two men perished as their gasoline tank ruptured under the dashboard. There was nothing the responding Firemen could do.

Fires at sea are special and terrifying events. The Woods Hole Coast Guard would be called for burning ships. Periodically, the Falmouth Fire Department was called on for help at dockside or across the water on neighboring islands such as Washburn's or Naushon. Since Falmouth had no fireboat, firemen had to be transported by private boats, such as Sumner Hilton's well-known Playmate.<sup>33</sup> Town Ambulance crews stood by on the dock to render secondary aid and transportation for victims of fires and accidents at sea.

During this decade total building losses were about \$361,000. The average per year had increased by 36% above the previous five year average, but this was primarily because the number of taxpayers had doubled, accompanied by a growing number of summer people and automobiles. Keeping up with this growth had become a mounting challenge to the Fire Department. Not noticeable, until Town records are studied, were the large number of small fires which could have been very serious had they not been stopped by Firemen.



East Falmouth Station and Maxim 10-wheeler in the 1940s. Courtesy Falmouth Fire Department.

As the decade closed, hard Depression times had crept in. Voices were raised objecting to Fire Department costs. It was fortunate that Falmouth had already made great strides in organization and heavy equipment before denials of requests were made. As it was, old workhorse Ladder #1, dating from 1922, was beyond effective repair, breaking down constantly from 11 years of hard service.<sup>44</sup> However, there had been just enough time to build the department to a high point where its services were prized. Insurance rates reflected the increased security of a good fire department.<sup>55</sup>

Fire Departments are not measured solely by equipment, facilities, budgets, or tables of losses and saves. People make it all work. Since the early times, men and women came running to give their best to control their friend and enemy, fire. There is a very strong instinct in vigorous young men to join forces in events involving action, stamina, danger and challenge. Volunteer fire fighting serves these ends

fully. No day was too long, no night was too late, no cold too severe to deter their tumbling out and racing to the scene in time to take part in the event. In this manner a close-knit Company of reliable comrades was built up, all of whom had earned their membership "under fire" on occasion trusting each other with their lives. Outsiders were not welcome on a moment's notice except in support roles. This camaraderie continued as men aged. Hopeful teen-aged boys were allowed to train and try out if found reliable, and often became full-fledged stalwarts. It took daring, strength, sobriety and ability to fit properly into the Company. When the fire alarm sounded, everything else was abandoned where at all possible, and members sped to the site to play their expected role in this type of combat. In between fires, the Fire House became a social center for insiders who often were tale-spinners or political oracles. At the same time, training sessions and care of equipment were attended to.

#### IV

As the decade of the 1930s began to move across the calendar pages, momentous events were approaching. All too soon it was apparent that business of all kinds was continuing to sag seriously, New England was losing its textile industry, and the whole country was in the throes of the Great Depression. Voices in Falmouth affairs advocated cutting budgets, including the Fire Department's, and Town Meeting rejected requests for newer, stronger equipment and replacement of worn-out hose, in spite of repeated statements by Chief Wells that severe wear and tear had impaired effectiveness. Some voices advocated cutting back on the workforce, and it took some doing to hold the line.<sup>56</sup> The line was held, and existing equipment was patched up with moderate, but temporary success. As an example, the 1922 ladder truck was converted to a forest fire truck in 1931.<sup>57</sup> The unceasing threat of small fires continued, yielding some years of commendably low losses, and one year of extremely high loss. In 1936 the fire loss of buildings was \$156,236, resulting from the burning of the Silver Beach Theater, the Draper residence on Penzance Point, and seven others, with two deaths and 13 injuries. Much of this trouble was ascribed to very late discovery and lack of adequate water supply on site. The Draper fire was fought in 14° weather and firefighters had to cut a hole in the harbor ice to make salt water pumping possible.<sup>58,59</sup> Fireman Daniel Hatton earned a medal for a successful ice rescue in 1933. Losses from fire in the latter decade were at low levels.<sup>60,58</sup>

Beginning in 1936, Civil Service procedures governed qualification and appointment of new men in the department. Administrative matters had grown considerably with the growth of new responsibilities, as had emergency runs and rescue calls in response to drowning and accident cases. Radio communication was introduced in 1937, and in spite of much static it

proved to be an immediate benefit. Two-way radios were in use by 1939. Gratifyingly, by 1940 some downtown blocks had installed sprinkler systems, as had the Cape Codder Hotel. East Falmouth Engine 5 was in collision in 1940, and all units were admonished to proceed with reduced speed when returning to Station. A new resuscitator was in use by the First Aid Squad in 1940.<sup>58,61,62,63</sup>

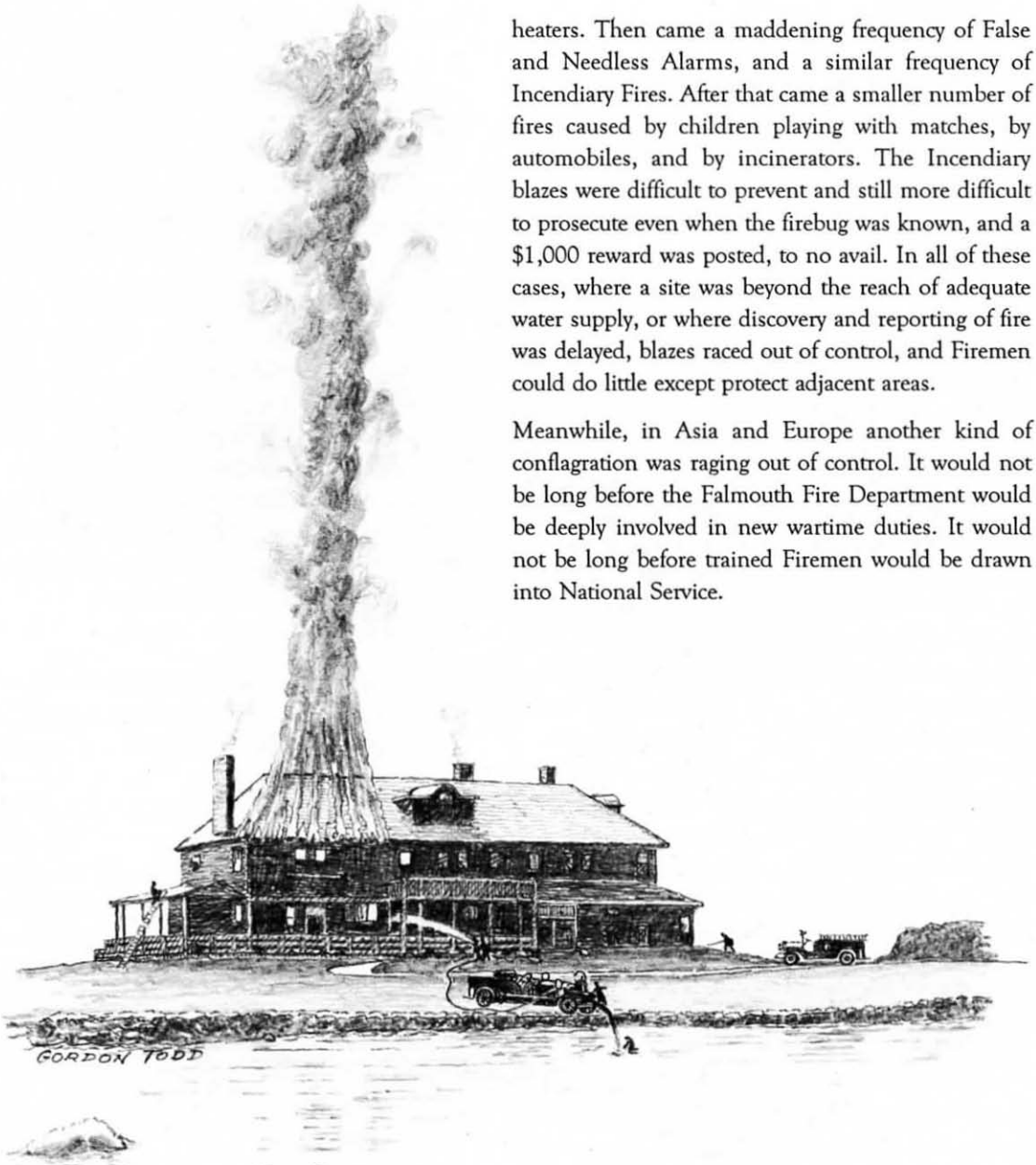
It was not until 1938 that a new Maxim Ladder Truck for Woods Hole, and a replacement Water Tanker and a new Pumping Engine were bought, no doubt related in part to the general business recovery which had taken hold, and the huge losses of 1936. Throughout the decade the fire fighting force remained quite stable, with the addition of a few special purpose men, and the initiation in 1938 of an experiment of enlisting and training a Junior Firemen group of 20 high school boys, a step which would prove of great value in following years.<sup>58,64</sup>

The notorious 1938 Hurricane hit Falmouth on Sept. 21, causing considerable destruction and distress to boats, piers, waterfront buildings, trees and wires. When the storm approached, all hands were mustered and many rescues were made, notably three children at Maravista who were saved by Capt. Mullen, Lieutenant Fisher, Callman Fred Gaskell, and Captain George Ferris.<sup>64,46</sup> Fire Alarm communications were put out of action as wires went down and boxes were corroded by salt spray. The drawbridge on Water Street in Woods Hole was jammed out of operation as salt water flooded the area. A temporary footbridge had to be built over the entrance to Eel Pond Harbor; it was a long time before vehicle traffic could resume, requiring the Fire Department trucks to detour the long route around Eel Pond in order to reach Woods Hole Road.

A year-by-year survey of principal causes for fires of the 1930 decade reveals a steady pattern. Most prevalent were chimney fires. Next came faulty oil burners and

heaters. Then came a maddening frequency of False and Needless Alarms, and a similar frequency of Incendiary Fires. After that came a smaller number of fires caused by children playing with matches, by automobiles, and by incinerators. The Incendiary blazes were difficult to prevent and still more difficult to prosecute even when the firebug was known, and a \$1,000 reward was posted, to no avail. In all of these cases, where a site was beyond the reach of adequate water supply, or where discovery and reporting of fire was delayed, blazes raced out of control, and Firemen could do little except protect adjacent areas.

Meanwhile, in Asia and Europe another kind of conflagration was raging out of control. It would not be long before the Falmouth Fire Department would be deeply involved in new wartime duties. It would not be long before trained Firemen would be drawn into National Service.



*The Anchorage*, on Penzance Road, Woods Hole, owned by M. C. Draper. It burned on February 12, 1936, during renovation. A very delayed alarm was sounded at 6 a.m. on a windless morning with the temperature at 14°F. This illustration is based on the eyewitness account of Geoffrey G. Whitney, Jr., who drove Woods Hole Hose 5; Woods Hole Engine 2 also responded. Firemen drafted seawater from a hole drilled in the ice of Great Harbor. "Smoke plume rose straight up." Illustration by Gordon Todd, 1992.

## V

The War Effort caught up with the Falmouth Fire Department in 1941. Suddenly, preparations for Air Raid defense was the order of the day. Chief Ray Wells was named Chief Controller of Civil Defense for Falmouth and the Islands. Local plans were made for mobilization of trucks and resources. Nearby Camp Edwards needed aid several times as artillery practice caused brush and woods fires. At that time the department listed five Pumpers, three Hose Trucks, two Ladder Trucks and one Water Tanker as principal units. Local fire losses were light, but a major aid response was made to Marshfield when 100 or more buildings were destroyed. Mutual aid was also sent to Forestdale and Mashpee. One of Falmouth's units overturned in order to avoid a collision, fortunately without serious injury.<sup>65</sup>

In 1942 Chief Wells was given leave to enter the Armed Services. William Denham was named Acting Chief, with George Ferris as Acting Deputy. Capt. A. B. Mullen and Private Leighton Peck also took leave to enter the Armed Forces. It had become very hard to get replacement men and materials because of the war priorities. However, losses remained moderate. A Brush Breaker Truck was acquired in 1943, and several aid runs were made to Mashpee. By this time, 22 former Junior Firemen were in National Service, and 12 new ones, aged 15-17, were enlisted in the department. Five fires of note were: C. Abbott Cabanas, Coonamessett Airport, J. R. Augusta's in Teaticket, Buzzards Bay Gas Co., and Samuel Dean Residence.<sup>66,67</sup>

1944 was another year of light losses in Falmouth. Acting Chief Denham issued a long list of fire prevention rules. The Call Man Force numbered 62, supported by eight Juniors. The fire loss was the lowest in years at \$16,719. The 1944 Hurricane struck hard on September 14, and once more severe damage was done to the Fire Alarm system as well as to private

property. In 1945, the same sized Force was maintained, new cellar pumps were added, and the recently established Department FM Radio WQTX was reported to be doing well, with superior range and clarity. One Hose Truck had to be retired. Principal fires were the Crosby residence in West Falmouth and the Breakwater Hotel in Woods Hole, a partial.<sup>68,69</sup>

1946 saw many Veterans return from military service, including Lieutenant Colonel Ray Wells who resumed as Chief, with George Ferris moving up to Deputy as W. Denham retired. There were now 10 Firemen and 70 Call Men plus a few Juniors, directed by 17 Regular and Call officers. Fire losses were heavy at \$51,670, but the sole total loss recorded was Cummings' at Falmouth Heights on July 5. The new fog nozzles were now in use, a major improvement in technique. A move was made to limit maximum work-week hours to 70!<sup>70</sup>

Then in 1946, the Quissett Volunteer Fire Department was privately organized and trained, led by Freelon Morris and manned by local residents DeWitt Jones, Philip Alton, Kent Swift, Robert Morris, Wallace Meigs, James Fernandes and others. A surplus military Jeep and trailer was acquired, carrying 55 gal. water drums, some hose and Indian spray packs. Later, a Dodge moving van was converted to a red Fire Truck with a pump, 600 gallons of water and booster hose. This post-war private group was fully recognized by the Falmouth Fire Department, was trained the same way as Town Firefighters by Lieut. Leighton "Pat" Peck, was connected to the Falmouth Alarm system, and responded to alarms in the Quissett and Woods Hole areas, taking orders from regular Fire Department officers. The QVFD became skilled enough to be called into standby duty in Town fires, and in cases did valuable active firefighting and mutual aid service. In between duties, the QVFD turned out on festive occasions such as 4th of July parades and weddings, accompanied by high





Quisset Volunteer Fire Department Jeep and trailer, about 1946. Courtesy Robert Morris and Freelon Morris.

jinks and even a saluting cannon. Later, around 1962, the group disbanded and turned its equipment over to the Falmouth Fire Department. The truck was converted to a Lighting Plant unit.<sup>71</sup>

1947 had building loss of \$32,933, of which the largest total loss was the Julia French Williams residence at Nemasket Beach in a near-hurricane gale which gusted to 70 mph on Nov. 12.<sup>72</sup> During this fire, a ceiling collapsed due to a hot air explosion, trapping Call Man Edward Tavares who was protected by spray for 20 minutes until he could be extricated by using hydraulic jacks.<sup>73</sup> Such were the hazards of firefighting! Once again, this November storm damaged the Fire Alarm system seriously.<sup>74</sup>

On October 22, 1947, in prolonged dry conditions, a major danger of woods fire was issued, at once patrols were set in motion as the department was put on Standby as a precaution.<sup>74</sup> It was soon justified.

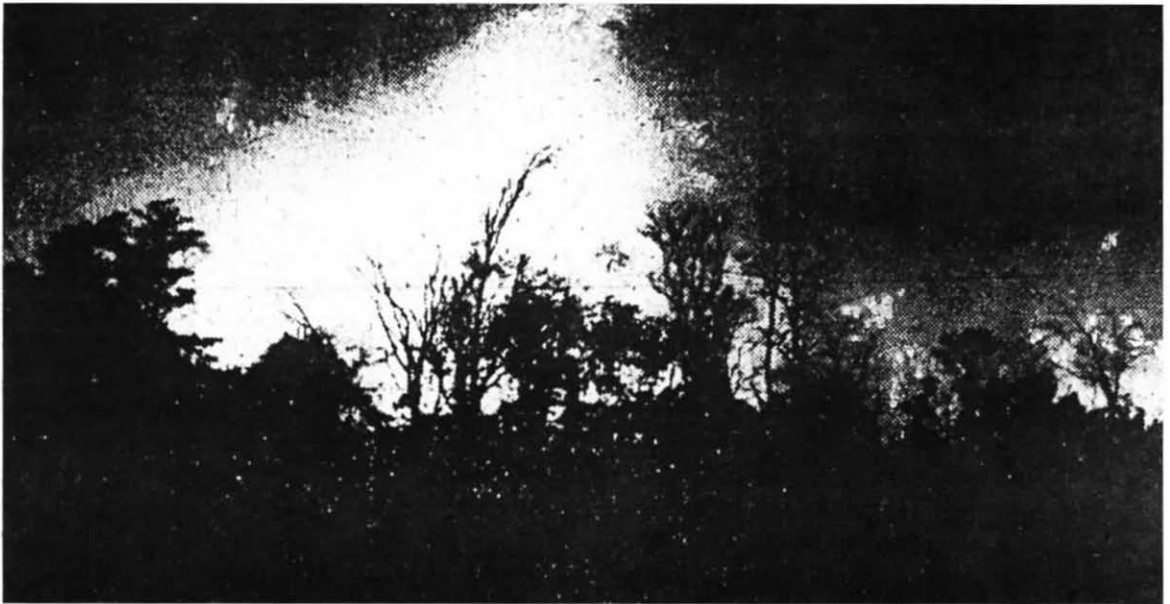
## VI

Late October had brought Indian Summer to Falmouth. The Beebe Woods highland was bone dry, and there was a pleasant whiff of burning leaves in the air. Late sailors and gardeners were enjoying a last wrap-up of the 1947 season. Joan Caulfield and Claude Rains were billed at the Elizabeth Theater.

And by the 23rd of October it had not rained for 39 days.

On Thursday a brush fire was signalled. Falmouth firefighters responded at once to several locations on the west side of the Beebe Woods in Sippewissett. They found fire centers, possibly incendiary, spreading rapidly before the southwest wind and called a Second Alarm. By nightfall the fire was advancing up the rising ground, out of control. It was all-night duty, and a losing battle, for by morning the fire remained unchecked. By Friday noon it had advanced southerly with a wind shift and had grown to a full forest fire, creating higher winds by its own updraft, reaching for the Miles Pond area. Flames were now leaping woods roadways, in spite of defensive backfires, and were climbing up the high ground. A shifting pall of eye-reddening wood smoke lay over the town. Friday merged into Saturday with renewed fury and a General Alarm.

Fire Chief Ray Wells had called for help from neighboring firefighting units and six of them responded in force. The town itself mobilized with all kinds of support and home defense preparations. It seemed that every ladder and garden hose was positioned to cope with the flying embers which were now falling everywhere. Sandwiches, coffee and



The Beebe Woods Fire, October 31, 1947. Courtesy The Enterprise.

aspirins were provided by the Red Cross Canteen to fatigued firemen on the front lines who became so weary that they hardly knew what they consumed. The high, gusty wind shifted again. Now the leaping flames surged across an emergency firebreak which had been hastily bulldozed from Two Ponds to Deep Pond (The Punchbowl.) Whole trees were consumed in a flash, and firebrands sailed upward, landing on the town to the east. Some residents prepared to flee, others redoubled their efforts in defense of their roofs and grounds. The Highway Department manned 35 trucks in support.

Chief Wells now deployed his forces for a last stand. Engine 1 and Ladder 1 defended the Vattier Snyder House west of the railroad track which had been seriously threatened the day before. Engine 2 and Ladder 2 from Woods Hole were placed behind Highfield Hall. Engine 4 from West Falmouth was stationed west of the Theater. Engine 5 from East Falmouth made its stand behind Tanglewood Estate. The Cotuit pumper waited near the two hydrants

served by the great octagonal water tower on the high point. Further north, protecting the Buzzards Bay Gas Plant, were the Bourne truck, the Dennis truck, a Cotuit unit, a Forest Patrol truck, and the town Brushbreaker. On came the wall of fire with its awesome crackling roar, sending sparks and embers flying end over end, amid a pall of smoke which enshrouded the town. It was Saturday afternoon, the day when Falmouth was experiencing its greatest danger.

Hose lines under high pressure were played into the woods, having soaked the buildings and grounds behind them. Fire swept and danced over the ridge, dipped into hollows, and spurted upward again. Whole trees ignited and exploded from the approaching heat. Firefighters could feel the searing heat bearing down upon them through the smoke. Then - the collision of flame and water as the hose streams came to bear, 125 feet out, smashing into the advancing front. Billows of mixed steam and smoke engulfed the crews. Soon the front was broken all

along the line west of the buildings. However, fire continued to march, now downhill, on each side of the salients. Promptly, firefighting units were re-deployed by Chief Wells on the lower ground along the railroad tracks, guarding the Grain Mill, The Enterprise building, Dyer Coal Yard, Wood Lumber Co., and the Texaco gasoline tank near Locust Street. It seemed to the spectators that the whole western sky was a mass of orange smoke and flame as the front moved downhill at dusk. It reached the estate wall at the Grain Mill road and the shattering hose streams at about eight o'clock. There the runaway fire was stopped, and Falmouth was saved.

There was, of course, an aftermath. A flareup near the Texaco tank at midnight. Pockets of flame and smouldering in the woods throughout Sunday and Monday. Cleanup and repair of equipment. Inspection and drying of surviving hoses. Replacement of engine parts. Reports. Newspaper accounts. Tributes to all firefighters and volunteers, including Junior Call Men from Lawrence High

School and Red Cross Disaster volunteers. Medical treatment for smoke inhalation, burns and injuries. Tales of a thousand incidents. Sleep, deep restoring sleep. Square meals again. And there lay 1,150 acres of blackened gaunt skeletons of the incinerated trees, almost the whole of Beebe Woods, standing or lying silently in the heavy rain which developed on Wednesday. The cause was never determined, but Falmouth's firefighting had come of age.<sup>75,76,72</sup>

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**Gordon F. Todd** is a former Engineering Officer in an Electrical Wire & Cable Company in Rhode Island; he has been a resident of Woods Hole since 1982. He is a modeler and recent Chairman of the Woods Hole Historical Collection. He spent two years researching, interviewing and writing the "Fire Fighting in Falmouth" article.

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