

Written for the students who lived in our neighborhood - but it may serve as an insurance check! 205 O Street, N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

Dear *Laura*:

Thank you for your fine letter. We are finding that Goose Rocks and the School had literally hundreds of friends who loved it almost as much as we did. We are only sorry that there isn't time to reply to each of you personally; but, since we imagine that you might like to hear more about the fire, we are sending this mimeographed letter.

Eliot, Shirley and June had closed up all the buildings and reached New York, when Desmond called us from Tufts College at midnight, Tuesday, Oct. 21, saying that he had just heard on the radio that the O'Hara School had been burnt to the ground. He drove up there that morning, and we, that afternoon. We found the woods still ablaze in many places, and the roads choked with smoke and blocked by the National Guard, except to a few with passes. Through the murk we made out that the only one of our three chimneys still standing was that of the Student House, except for twisted pipes, bedsteads and cement posts there wasn't even much rubble. The deep layers of ashes were still hot. Smoke poured from the trees of Timber Island.

Desmond, the Fred Smiths and the Annises were quartered in the only remaining house on the ocean side of our end of the beach, that of Dot Mignault. They had all been fed, watered and candle-lit by the Red Cross. Thanks to Dot's quickness in grabbing an extinguisher when a brand fell on her back porch, and perhaps to the very swiftness of the wind, her house escaped.

We spent the next three nights at the Kennebunkport Inn, and Thursday evening watched the whole town tense and mobilized, with word to stand by to evacuate. (Later we found that Kennbunk had been as closely threatened.) Desmond and a trained nurse worked till 3 A.M. bringing invalids out of the path of the fires, and carrying food and coffee to the fire-fighters; but the latter, and the Red Cross, town officials, and endless volunteers, got little sleep for three or four days.

Here is our pieced-together story of that Tuesday at Goose Rocks. At noon, on October 21st, Fred Smith was doing errands in Biddeford and the forest fires did not seem threatening. The nearest was 4 miles away at Oak Ridge. He drove home, and had lunch with Dot. Suddenly the wind whipped in from the northwest, and blew a 50-60 mile gale straight toward Goose Rocks. By 3:30, all our end of the beach was a "devastated region." Though Fred says he can't remember what things he did when they realized that the flames were roaring toward them; he and Dot and Mr. Nimmo (of the "other" store) managed to drive 5 cars (including our beach wagon) on to the Sand Point. Mr. Nimmo rushed through the smoke to help the women and children huddled in the tidal river at the point, with wet blankets over their heads. Fred doused the blazing grass around the 5 cars with two extinguishers, and saved them and himself, with only a few "scorches." Mrs. Seidel, Mrs. Henchey, Mrs. Young and others crouched in the water, as did the Annises and Dorothy Mignault. When Dot Smith reached into her pants pocket to see if her income tax return was still there, she dislodged a huge rat. So dense and swirling was the smoke that only occasional flames licked through it. Fred said that the Gallery caught on the sides and went in a big burst of fire. "Your house, though, took a long time to catch." *The smoke was too thick for him to see when the Doe House and Student House caught.*

Perhaps just because the wind drove with such hurricane force, freak survivals saved a few other houses at our end: "The Blue Lantern" and other Walker house, Miss Wingate's, the 2 Wiewel cottages, the Craig house opposite the Gallery (where a Mr. Moore kicked a burning hammock off the back porch), and the rental cottage of the Henchey's, two of the Doe houses, etc. Their farm (and old Major, in his stall) went, and the Emmons Farm. The Howards kept the hose on their cottages and on the Arnold log cabin and saved them. Mr. Ireland, Fire Chief of Goose Rocks, stuck to his job and didn't even see his fine home burn, or his two cars. Martha Bozman, our former student, lost both her houses. Flora Cleaves and the Burnhams barely escaped in their cars. It took her 4 hours to get away from the beach. (Houses at the other end of the beach burned too, as well as many in the back country and in Cape Porpoise, 108 in G.R.B. alone.) She had to watch great flames shooting from the grand 150-year-old barn of

the Homestead that she had bought only a few weeks before.

Fred and Dot, besides losing all their houses, had a greater worry. You may have read "Three children missing." One of these was 11-year-old Mimi, who wasn't located till 1 A.M. that night. When the 3 o'clock school bus from Kennebunkport was blocked by flames, a farm neighbor, Mrs. Chick, rescued the three children who lived at Goose Rocks, Mimi and two youngsters of Arch Smith, Barbara's little sisters. A Red Cross ambulance called for them after rumor located them. "It was heaps of fun at the farm," said Mimi.

Most of our trees are shrunken, branchless ebony. Our grass is a black powder over baked earth; they say the fire ate through the roots, and the lawns must be re-sown. The "Milo" pine still waves some needles, but all the roots were smouldering. The ash-beds of the buildings gave few clues to what had been: pictures, brushes, blankets or pewter, the 1948 stock of paper. The 250 O'Hara books, all autographed for next year, powdered down to a few mounds of 2X3 ghost volumes - flutters of sheer white rice paper.

Our salvage was three pairs of crusty andirons and Desmond's childhood Mexican "piggy bank." Also, 25 pictures from the Watercolor Gallery's Permanent Collection, borrowed by the Norton Gallery in Florida to be shown in January, and 30 of E's '46 and '47 watercolors sent to an Arts Club one-man show here. "Ebbing Tide" and "Above the Clouds", had been sent on approval to the Montclair Art Museum, which bought the former, October 17th. Except for a few other pictures out on exhibit, some early sketches in Washington, and a small package stored at the Kennebunk Bank, the "collection of the artist" has been sharply reduced, and with those lost are many of the book illustrations, and the pile of recent demonstration pictures. Also the unique copies of all films but the last Britannica ones, and "Tree Rhythms" with M. Winter, the new projector, etc. Shirley's "Out of the Way" Shop couldn't be more so!

Whose fault, the loss of irreplaceables? Our own, of course. And if any of you need convincing on the subject of fire-proof lockers or sufficient insurance, just refer to us!

But shall we ever again feel so free? Eliot plans - after the Florida Course ends in mid-March - to take a sabbatical - do a little writing and more painting and travel, for a whole year. Beyond that - no definite plans, except that we are holding our land at Goose Rocks which we still consider the rarest of beaches, both in beauty and accessibility. Our first re-building will be a cottage to live in.

At present, we feel so much luckier than many of our neighbors who lost all. We share a home with Shirley's father in Washington, and we have our health, and that part of our income which comes from books, painting, lectures and demonstrations.

We can't begin to thank you for all your sympathy and offers of help. Already we have been offered part of a big farm in North Carolina, the loan of a house and barn in Cape Porpoise, a big studio at a college (students thrown in), and latest -- the use, in any way we'd want, of the facilities of the Brick Store Museum in Kennebunk. Furthermore, some of the students have wanted to start a re-building fund, which, of course, we cannot and would not accept. Meanwhile, whenever you are in Maine, do swing out to see us, and to tell us about your progress in the world of art.

Best luck!

Your friends,

Eliot, Shirley, Desmond and June O'Hara

POST CARD



CORRESPONDENCE

ADDRESS

Painted by "E." from the "Studio"
as he "Sat among the ashes". Oct. 23, 47

Marker Island $\frac{3}{4}$ m. from shore,
still burning 2 days after the fire

