



THE BANDON LIGHT

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A PUBLICATION OF THE BANDON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Story of the 1936 Bandon Fire Told by an Eye Witness

By David E. Ward

Western World, October 1, 1936

Saturday, September 26, 1936, is one day citizens of Bandon will long remember, a day the like of which none of us will ever want to see again. From early morning until night our citizens were kept on edge as a bad fire was reported in the Bear Creek district and with the wind sweeping from the east toward the city it did call for worry. Volunteers were going out all day to help the farmers east and south of town and many of the places were saved and many were destroyed. While everyone realized that there was danger of the town being burned, no one took the matter seriously until after six o'clock in the evening and then it was thought that the wind would probably go down and everything would be all right.

The first real sign of threat occurred when chief of the fire department C. S. Woomer stopped the show at the theater at nine o'clock and called for the help of every able-bodied man to fight fire which at that time was about a mile southeast of the city. Mr. Woomer stated that a stand would be made at 11th Street going east and west and also along the highway south. About four hundred or more men answered the call and from five to six sections of hose were laid at certain important points along Eleventh Street starting near the home of Mr. and Mrs. Laub.

Each hose had from five to seven men with it. They did all they could to stem the fire but with no avail. It



An X marks the spot at the top of the stairs where the Coast Guard station used to be in this photo taken by Grace Felsheim. The Breuer Building is in the distance.

just could not be stopped. At times it looked as if the men had it conquered, then a fierce gust of wind would start the flames rolling in the air to heights of a hundred feet or more. This finally called for the abandonment of the stand at 11th Street and orders when out to get every family out of their homes and down to the water front where they could be taken across the river onto the sand dunes for protection.

It was the belief of everyone that the flames could be stopped before any damage would be done in the business section but this was not the case.

The business section was first hit by the fire in the buildings near the Standard Oil storage tanks. The flames worked along the street west, taking the Bandon Café, Amzy's Service Station and then the Harrison garage, Dreamland Hall and then across to the Thrift Hardware and within an hour the whole business section was a mass of flames spreading fast toward the end of the business section near the Coast Guard station.

At the corner of the Capps Motor garage, the fire department made one last stand but the smoke and flames became so hot they had to move again to the next hydrant at the Coast Guard station where it was finally abandoned and everyone ran for safety.

The fire hit the residential part of the city at about 10:30 pm and within an hour this part of the city was a mass of flames. At 12:30 that night the Bandon business district was no more except for the following build-

THE BANDON LIGHT

A publication of the
**Bandon Historical Society
Museum**

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The Board meets the fourth Tuesday of each month,
4:00 pm at the Museum. All members and guests
are welcome to attend.

Newsletter Layout Jim Proehl

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a 501(c)(3) organization

If you are interested in Bandon's history and
would like to help preserve our past for future gen-
erations, call us—we need you.

The Museum is OPEN Monday through Satur-
day 10-4 and 7 days a week June through Septem-
ber.

Volunteers are waiting to help you and answer
your questions about Bandon's history.

Enjoy Bandon's rich, wonderful history!

Located at: 270 Fillmore Avenue, Bandon, OR

**On the corner of
Fillmore Ave. and Highway 101**

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FROM THE DESK OF THE DIRECTOR

Gayle Hankwitz
Executive Director

So far so good! Our doors
are still open; we're just not ready
to have indoor programs. We are
doing this special Bandon Fire
newsletter in place of holding our traditional Bandon
Fire anniversary program. Jim P. does an excellent
job laying out our newsletters with the help of others
who contribute ideas and stories.

We are fortunate to have a great working relation-
ship with the Bandon Playhouse, a group with an
even bigger challenge during a quarantine when
gathering an audience is a problem. They were hoping
to open their fall season with a production of *Bandon
Burns!*, a readers theater production several of their
members developed and many of us enjoyed.

Instead, the Bandon Playhouse is creating a video
adaptation of *Bandon Burns!*, featuring seven narra-
tives from fire survivors. Filming begins soon and
will incorporate photos and music featured in the
original Gaels Readers Theater production, as well as
additional images provided by the Museum. Readers
include several of the original cast, including Corrie
Gant, Mike Dempsey, and Amy Moss-Strong, as well
as other local actors. BPH hopes to have the video
completed by early November and will make it avail-
able to the Museum and on YouTube.

The Bandon Playhouse approached us about pro-
ducing some other history related YouTube projects.
We looked together at some video projects other mu-
seums our size have posted online and agreed we
could do something similar, hopefully with a little
more dramatic flair and better production values. I
know whatever they come up with will be very enter-
taining.

We are fortunate to have received a grant from the
Keiser Family Foundation that is a perfect fit for this
collaboration with the Bandon Playhouse.

Next up will be a special edition Veterans Day
newsletter with great stories about local veterans.

As always, thanks for the support we get from our
members and the community.

New Members:

**Barbara Kennedy
Leisha Holmes**



Photo Find: Grace Felsheim's Pictures of the 1936 Bandon Fire

Just when we think we've found every important piece of material related to the 1936 Bandon Fire, something new comes to light. Museum board member and Bandon Mayor Mary Schamehorn shares this story:

"Recently, one of my siblings found several boxes of mostly family pictures, and it was suggested that I might want to look through them before we determined what to throw away and what to keep. I was pretty sure I had already looked through all the family photos, so I begrudgingly spent some time dutifully going through the boxes. Boy was I wrong.

"You can imagine the thrill when I found an envelope of 21, 2"x3" photos, taken within days of the Bandon Fire of September 1936 by my grandmother, Grace Felsheim. And, best of all, she noted on the back of each photo what had been there before the Fire.

"There was even one of my 20-year-old mother standing next to the ruins of the family home, labeled 'Martine (short for Martha Virginia) next to her 'home.' All that remained was a large stone fireplace and the chimney. Mother had left the previous weekend for her sophomore year of college, riding back to

Eugene with her neighbor Raymond McNair. An accomplished pianist, she had left her prized sheet music collection in a box on the glassed-in porch at their 11th Street home, planning to return the following week to take them to the University with her. So, while she did save her clothes and other things she had taken to college, her prized sheet music collection was gone. But then

considering that my grandparents were spending the weekend of the Fire in Florence on a short vacation, and it took three days to get back to Bandon because of the burned-out bridges, sheet music is only a very small part of what both sides of my family lost in the Fire. They virtually saved nothing except what was in the *Western World* office, which, while damaged, remained intact.

"To say that these photos are priceless is an understatement. They are some of the best I have ever seen of what remained after the Fire. I have always wondered if locals, or even people who used to live here, had pictures of the Fire that we had never seen. But I certainly did not expect to find them among my family's possessions," wrote Mary.

We are using several of Grace Felsheim's photos in this edition of The Bandon Light.



Grace Felsheim wrote on the back of this photo "Baby Bandon looking toward Coquille Highway." It shows the tent city behind the Bob-Otto Court, the Coast Lumber Yard building and the Stephan building that housed the Seaside Bakery. On the right is the concrete building that housed the Western World (currently the Masonic Lodge building).

“ . . .cabins were destroyed along with the Silver Spray Gardens . . . ”

“Story of the 1936 Fire” continued from Page 1.

ings which survived the blaze: The old city jail, M. Breuer’s building, Seaside Bakery, Union Oil service station, Bob-Otto Court, Standard Oil storage tanks.



A burned-out car with the Seaside Bakery in the background. A Grace Felsheim photograph from the Mary Schamehorn collection.

On the beach all of the cabins were destroyed along with the Silver Spray Gardens, the largest dance floor in the state. Down on the lowland near the jetty where many people went for safety only two homes were saved.

Many of the cars which were taken down to the jetty were destroyed as the owners were unable to save them after they became bogged down in the sand. Many cars were left on the main business street on the lots east of the Seaside Bakery and they were saved while others left near the coast guard station were burned.

Most of the people who could, drove to Coquille, while others moved across the river in boats provided by the Coast Guard and members of the crew from the light-house tender *Rose* which was in port, and by other individuals. All refugees taken

across the river were given hot coffee and sandwiches on the steamers *Rose* and *Alvarado* and in the morning, they were transported back to the main part of town. By that time a first aid station had been opened in the Bob-Otto court with doctors and nurses from Coquille and Myrtle Point. By noon on Sunday help was coming from all parts of the state. The American Legion post of Coquille was here with milk, bread, etc. The Red Cross and Salvation Army were also on hand ready to give aid. They city of Portland sent down their first aid car with a full relief staff of officers, nurses and helpers and they stood by until everything as in good working order.

The federal government ordered all available CCC equipment here to build a tented city back of the Bob-Otto court which takes care of 1200 people. A main kitchen was erected in which all cooking was done and large mess halls where everyone was fed.

The state police was here under Captain Bowne of Salem with forty-two men. They worked in shifts in guarding property and keeping all people out of the burnt area of the business district. The fire department pumped out basements so that safes dropped to the bottom could be snaked out and opened.

The National Red Cross contributed \$25,000 with a promise of at least \$75,000 more. A majority of the people are at Bandon as yet but a lot of them are being cared for by the Red Cross and other agencies at community halls in Coquille, Marshfield and North Bend.

At a meeting held at Marshfield Tuesday morning in which Major-General George C. Simonds of the 9th Corps, regular Army, was present and which was attended by a delegation from Bandon, a definite plan was given that all organizations in the county will cooperate to the fullest extent to



The Xs label the spots where people spent “that terrible night” according to the note Grace Felsheim made on the back of this photograph.

“ . . . opened for business Tuesday morning with homemade bread.”

“Story of the 1936 Fire” continued from Page 4.

see that Bandon gets started right on rebuilding.

The citizens of Bandon are particularly grateful to Dr. R.H. Mast of Myrtle Point who arrived at the scene of the fire early Sunday morning and organized hospital and first aid facilities. Many of the patients were removed to the hospitals at Myrtle Point and Coquille for safe care.



Grace Felsheim labeled this photo “the library that burned for days” and put an X over the Bank of Bandon vault.

West Coast Telephone Co. established communications between Bandon and the outside world early Sunday afternoon. Telegraph and telephone wires have been clogged with queries on the welfare of residents. During the first two days over a thousand messages were handled through the temporary exchange located at Bob-Otto Court.

The two young daughters of the Krump family aged three and four reported missing since Monday morning have been found safe at the home of friends.

The Seaside Bakery in the Stephan Building

opened for business Tuesday morning with homemade bread for everybody.

The post office of Bandon is established in the Coast Lumber Yard building and all outgoing and incoming mail is being dispatched on scheduled time.

Three births were reported to have taken place as flames swept across Bandon. The mothers were removed to the hospitals at Myrtle Point and Coquille.

The Moore mill resumed operation Wednesday morning. The plumes of smoke arising from the tall stacks of the mill were a heartening sight to the besieged city. A full crew was on hand.

Herman DeLong and family, who were reported to have been lost in flames were found safe. The DeLongs were fortunate in not having lost their home, which remains intact.

The Pacific Greyhound Lines pressed into service many of the busses to aid in the removal of homeless victims of the holocaust, as well as several maternity cases, which were hastened by the excitement and horror of the flaming city.

The National Guard has taken over the housing of many of the destitute victims. Army tents are pressed into service and mess kits are being brought in for use in the field kitchens.

Mrs. Elmer Gant, who with her family was one of the many destitute homeless huddled on the clammy shores of the Pacific, saw opportunity to save, with considerable hazard to herself, one of the Queen Anne cottages. “It was burning when we moved in,” Mrs. Gant said wearily. A large stray dog had attached himself to the Gant family, as well as rabbits, several cats, and a skunk, evidence of which wafted quite strongly on the smoke-filled air.



Grace Felsheim photographed the only unit of the Queen Ann Cottages to survive the fire.

David E. Ward, foreman in the mechanical department of the *Western World*, was an eyewitness and was one of the several hundred men who fought the flames while their own possessions were being destroyed.

***Western World* publisher, L. D. Felsheim and his family were spending the week-end with friends near Florence and therefore missed being an eye witness to “the biggest story of my career.” Ward wrote the account of the fire that appeared in the edition of the *Western World* published after the fire.**

The Tucker Family's Experience of the 1936 Bandon Fire

By Carol Tucker Acklin

My parents, Howard and Norma Tucker and their 16 month daughter, Barbara, lived on the NW corner of 11th and Franklin in 1936. Dad worked for Shell Oil Company, delivering gasoline and fuel oil to customers around the area and Mom was a busy stay-at-home mom.

A large fire burning near the city kept the air hazy with smoke day after day. My parents decided that Mom would take my sister to North Bend, and stay with her parents until the air cleared. They also decided they would buy fire insurance for the goods in their rental home. Through the smoky air from all the fires burning in the county, they drove highway 42 to her parent's house and Dad returned to Bandon. As the fire and smoke became more threatening, he loaned the car to neighbors who needed to transport their ailing grandmother to a safer place.

When the call came for all able-bodied men to fight fire, my dad was part of the fire crew fighting fire to the south and east of town, but when a warehouse filled with flammable containers began to explode, sending flaming debris high into the air, the fire captain pulled the men back and told them to go home and save what they could. As my dad, driving his fuel oil truck, raced west on Eleventh Street, he passed the 3-story elementary schoolhouse (on the site of the current Ocean Crest) just as the heated air



Howard Tucker working for Shell in Junction City in 1937

filled with firebrands ignited it. It exploded into flames and was fully engulfed in minutes. Reaching the house, he ran inside and grabbed a quilt which mother treasured, and dashed back to the truck. He was completely surrounded by fire. He jumped into the truck, surprised to find a large dog sitting in the passenger seat, aimed the truck as what used to be the road, and hit the accelerator. He broke through the wall of flames and worked his way one detour after another until he arrived at the waterfront on First Street. (After the dog jumped from the truck, my dad lost track of him)

People, like my dad, who reached the waterfront to avoid the fire, now found themselves trapped facing the river. Capt. Jensen of the lighthouse tender *Rose* began taking people aboard, and soon he ordered the ship



Bandon's elementary school before the 1936 fire.

moved into the river as the fire threatened buildings on the waterfront. Dad told of watching a rescue of a man in a burning building by two seamen from the *Rose*. He called it "one hell of a rescue".** (See page 7) As the tender *Rose* pulled away, Dad said the wall of flames was near 70 feet high as it reached the buildings on the waterfront. He spent the night aboard the ship, waiting his turn to send a short-wave message out to mother, who was sitting on her parent's porch 40 miles to the north watching the glow of fire in the night sky. My parents lost everything except the quilt and the car. Dad's truck burned where he left it on First Street.

Mother and Barbara stayed in North Bend while Dad made arrangements with Shell Oil to be transferred to Junction City. They lived there until the summer of 1943, when Shell Oil determined there was enough business to open another plant in Bandon. They moved in with my grandfather in the little section of east Bandon that had survived the fire. Since the house was only 3 rooms at the time of the fire, Mother insisted on some remodeling before she would move in, especially indoor plumbing! That was our home for the next 40 years and was under regular remodeling as the family grew.

Memorial Donations

A memorial donation has been made in memory of:

Glenda Gant Hawkins

A memorial donation has been made by:

George Gant

History Minute Sampler: "The Arkansas Travelers" and "The Wrong Goat"

Here's a little history from the museum in Bandon.

My father, John W. Smith, was a naturally talented musician. He teamed up with a fiddler named Al Baird and started playing for dances.

In 1933, he moved the family to Bandon. He formed a band, "The Arkansas Travelers," and played the Azalea Gardens, east of Bandon. By now, I was playing quite a few tunes "by ear" on the piano.

A good-looking young man came to the stage with a guitar and asked if he could play and sing with us.

Henry and I courted through the year 1935 and part of 1936. He bought me a bantam hen, twelve little chickens and a bouquet of snowballs.

I was eighteen and he was 20.

We decided to elope to Coquille. When we walked out of the hotel after the marriage vows, the atmosphere was heavy with smoke and cinders.

Someone yelled, "Bandon is burning!"

We were married 60 ½ years. It all started the night Bandon burned, September 26, 1936.

And that's a little history from Bandon's Museum.



Here's a little bit of history from the museum in Bandon.

As his ship filled with fire refugees, Coast Guard Captain Jensen walked through the burning city.

A little boy was sitting on the sidewalk holding a goat. "What are you doing here?" I asked. "I was down at the ship and the officers said, 'No goats allowed' and I won't go without my goat." I told him to beat it right down to the ship and tell the officers that the captain said to take your goat aboard.

Further on I saw a woman sitting in a truck. She said she had lost her little boy. I asked if by chance he had a pet goat, and assured her that he and his goat were safely aboard the ship.

The next day the Red Cross

trucks rolled in and started unloading tents.

I walked through the tent city and came upon the little boy with the goat. He seemed so unhappy, I asked what his troubles were. He replied, "It's not my goat. I made a mistake and picked the wrong one."

Another tragedy of Bandon's 1936 fire and a little history from Bandon's museum.

Bandon "History Minutes" are sponsored by First Interstate Bank. They run on KBDN (96.5) and other Bicoastal Media radio stations.

****"One Hell of a Rescue"**

Captain Jensen's account of the rescue Howard Tucker witnessed.

"I had the crew standing by the lines ready to cast off on a moment's notice. Burning debris was falling in the river, some near the ship. It was about time for us to leave. Flames were reported coming up between the planking on the far end of the dock. I still thought I should hang on a little longer as there might be one poor soul come running down the street. I had just ordered the fire hose taken aboard when we heard an awful scream from a man in the second story window of the hotel across the street from the ship. Before I could say a word, Leading Seaman Davis grabbed a ladder hanging in the fore rigging, out of the galley came the cook, Johannsen. Both men jumped on the dock. The crew sprayed them with water. When they got to the hotel, it was discovered that the ladder was about four feet short of reaching the window. Johannsen grabbed it by the lower rung and hauled it up to the window while Davis climbed on his back, then up the ladder. The man was drunk and insisted on coming out head first, but Davis would have none of that, so bopped him one lightly on his jib boom; then he saw the light and came feet first. Johannsen lowered the ladder and the two men gently to the ground. The victim was carried to the ship, all three being sprayed all the way."

Read the entire fire story as written by Capt. Jensen in Bandon Burns! Survivor Accounts of the Bandon Fire of 1936, available at the Bandon Museum.

BANDON BURNS!

Survivor Accounts of the
Bandon Fire of 1936



Compiled and edited by
Jim Proehl and Carol Acklin
from the files of the
Bandon Historical Society

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