

OTTER LAKE FIRE PROVED CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION 8/13/96

I remember it like it was yesterday. A call from my wife informed me of a forest fire at Otter Lake.

Viv Norton had called to report a fire on his property at Brewer Lake. I was in Raquette Lake helping fellow Ranger Morgan Roderick work on his headquarters. My call to Viv went something like this:

“It’s a big fire Allen and you better bring all the men you can.”

It was my first fire season as Ranger, my first fire, and I was nervous as a long-tailed cat in a roomful of rockers on my way to Old Forge. The drive gave me time to analyze the situation.

The burning index and build-up index were on the low side, so the likelihood of a very large or hot fire was remote. Viv Norton was one of my fire wardens and I tended to believe that the fire being located on his property might have added to the urgency in his assessment.

After a quick stop for fire tools I headed to Otter Lake. I decided to hold off calling in any more help until I reached the fire and saw for myself the circumstances. Viv had indicated to me that he was moving on the fire with whatever help he could scare up.

A foot trail was the only access to the lake in those days. Joe Kowalik had started to pioneer a road to the lake, but it was not travel –ready as yet.

A number of vehicles were parked at the trailhead and four or five men were awaiting my arrival. I pulled up and started handing out fire tools. Guess who got “old soldiered” into carrying the heaviest piece of equipment!

I slapped the old Pacific Marine pump on my back and headed off up the ridge toward my first fire, full of anticipation.

Gasping for air, I finally make it up to the summit and met several fire fighters returning to the trailhead. When I say several, I mean just that. I was soon to learn that my suspicions about there being enough fire fighters were confirmed.

Viv had conscripted all of the crew at the veneer mill in McKeever, the State and Town highway crews and anyone else within reach.

I was told the fire was out, so I dropped my load and continued on to see the effects of the conflagration. I began to get concerned about the cost of suppression when I reached the scene. You guessed it. The fire was a ground fire about 15 square feet.

My fears were not alleviated when I arrived back at the trailhead. The crew had charged up several cases of beer, bread, ham, and cheese and were well on their way to toasting the triumph over adversity.

Later that evening I had a most difficult time with the *Observer Dispatch* trying to make my description of the fire live up to the expectations of the reporter on the other end of the line. A typical mountain out of a molehill.

To make a long story short, I learned much about forest fires, people, newspaper reporters and life in general that day. All's well that ends well and it eventually did that day. The experience provided me with a wealth of new friends and acquaintances.

There were many more fires and fire seasons to come and each was a story in itself.