

Remembering the 1910 Fires...

Bess Levensgood was born in Augusta, Montana on August 16, 1906. She and her husband Harold raised their family in Anaconda and lived there over 60 years. Bess wrote the following in November 1988, nearly 80 years after the event. At that time, she had begun studying its devastating impact on the region. Bess passed away in 2000.

I'll tell you my impression of the Wallace, Idaho fire. We lived at Plains, Montana 50 miles from the fire as the crow flies. The fire turned day into night. It was very dark, with no sun peeking-through. The full moon was a big red ball. Papa took a lantern to work in the barn and chicken house. No outside farm work was possible. There was no electricity on the farm. Oil kerosene lamps lit the interior of the house, just like night. Choking smoke filled the air outside. My mother kept the windows and doors shut.

This frightened me, a four-year-old girl, and my five-and-one-half-year-old brother, Howard. Bernard, my two-year-old brother, was too young to notice. I knew a fire in August is very dangerous. Howard and I were used to awakening in daylight, and then playing outdoors most of the day. When we awoke that first morning to dark, with breakfast smells mixed with acrid outside smoke, we were scared. I had been trained from babyhood to fear fire and be very careful with it. Now this. We felt surrounded with it and in panic.

Papa continued to work our farm as best he could. He came in many times a day to report on things out-doors. The chickens refused to get off their roosts. Dark meant night to them, so they slept. The lantern was too dim for them to see their feed, so they would not eat or drink. They didn't lay eggs either.

The cows thought it was night. They refused to be milked and go to pasture as they were supposed to do. They stayed in the dark barn, Papa told us. The one lantern there did not cast much light. The horses were distressed and hung around the barn door, refusing to go to pasture. None of our stock knew how to act. We kids stayed in and shuddered.

"Fire!" the dogs whined.

This all lasted for several days. Our parents made us play indoors for fear we would get lost. The neighborhood did not visit. When the crisis finally ended, daylight came back to us. Papa found a big piece of charred wood in one of his fields. Our neighbors also found fire-related items.

From Rich Levensgood, son of Bess and Harold Levensgood, third generation Montanans. In 2003, Rich retired from municipal and county government administration. He lives in Moscow and is now a University of Idaho student, researching and writing a memoir of his and his family's time in Colorado as well as a book about the political adventures of his grandfather in Anaconda, Montana, 1902-1905. None of this work could be undertaken without the help of the excellent staff in the UI Library, Professor Kim Barnes in the English Department, and Professor Tom Bitterwolf in the Chemistry Department.