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The Ellsworth and Auburn, Maine, Fires of May, 1933: Official Report of Relief Operations of the American National Red Cross

American National Red Cross

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A. R. C. 998
October, 1933



The Ellsworth and Auburn, Maine, Fires of May, 1933

*Official Report of Relief Operations of the
American National Red Cross*

THE State of Maine in 1933 had two fire disasters within eight days of each other. In the city of Ellsworth, 102 families were made homeless by a fire which started during the night of May 7th. In Auburn, an even worse fire occurred on May 15th, when 457 families became its victims. The two fires affected more than 2,800 people and caused losses in excess of \$4,000,000. In both disasters, representatives of the national organization of the Red Cross were on hand before the embers had cooled, to organize relief. And it was the first time in history that the Red Cross accepted funds from outside states for the relief of disaster victims within the State of Maine. An appeal for funds brought in from all sources \$99,166.14 which was spent for the benefit



Fighting the flames at Auburn

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MAINE FILE

of the sufferers. This was a positive achievement for the Red Cross Chapters which were confronted with unusual conditions, especially in Maine which was at that time in the midst of a reorganization plan for many of its banks. This reorganization put business in a state of temporary suspense and naturally impeded the collection of relief money. Nevertheless, the people responded generously and thus helped to make possible a good piece of rehabilitation work. In the appeals for money, Governor Louis J. Brann issued proclamations naming the Red Cross as the official relief agency, and asking the citizens to contribute for relief.

ELLSWORTH

Fire, probably of incendiary origin, started during Sunday night, May 7th, and by daybreak on Monday had wiped out a large part of the residential and business sections of the city. Ellsworth does not maintain a Red Cross Chapter of its own but is an active Branch of the Hancock County Chapter. This Branch has a disaster committee which functioned promptly during the emergency.

The property loss at Ellsworth was estimated at \$2,000,000, with 102 families made homeless.

Ellsworth, well-known to summer visitors, is a gateway to some of the most beautiful and interesting coast country. The people are of the old New England type that lived carefully, built solidly and enjoyed substantial comforts. Their homes were large, often connected with large barns and sometimes connected with other buildings. One could in snowy weather do all of one's work in the house, barn, granary and wood-shed without having to pass out of doors. Although not all of the town homes had this type of construction, a great many of them did.

Some of the old mansions will never be rebuilt. They had a place in the beauty of the town and many were filled with furniture for which antique hunters would have given a fortune. All these and the beautiful elms, whose charred trunks have been pulled away for safety's sake, were losses which cannot be replaced.

Dry timber and roofs unprotected by fireproof material acted like kindling when the embers from the fire were spread upon them by a high wind.

When the Red Cross issued an appeal for financial help, the Chapters went into action immediately in Maine, and the other

New England States. A relief fund of \$31,492.21 was raised and dispensed on a basis of the needs of the individual sufferer. The trained Red Cross workers presented their findings to a local advisory committee which reviewed the data and fixed the awards.

AUBURN

A flash of fire in a can of rags at the rear of a garage, a fire alarm, and Auburn began a battle which lasted for hours. In the end, the fighters stopped the flames although not until the fire had destroyed the homes of 457 families. The Auburn fire occurred in the afternoon of May 15th, and caused property losses in excess of \$2,500,000 rendering nearly 1,600 people temporarily homeless. The burned district contained several small business houses, but for the most part it consisted of individual homes and tenements. Two school buildings also were lost.

The Assistant Director of Disaster Relief assigned to the Ellsworth fire happened to be in Bangor, and on hearing of the fire in Auburn met the Red Cross field representative on duty in Maine and together they hurried by automobile to Auburn.

A splendid piece of emergency work was done by the Lewiston-Auburn Chapter. A fleet of trucks carrying Red Cross flags



Children of the fire gather about the Relief Director at a distribution of toys by the Junior Red Cross

went on duty as soon as the fire began to spread and helped people move their belongings to safety. Some member of each household was asked to accompany the truck so that he would know exactly where his goods were placed. Another fleet of lighter cars brought sandwiches, coffee and cold water through the smoke-filled streets to the firemen, policemen and others who were working to save property and to keep the public out of places of danger. Uniformed Red Cross nurses went on duty in the fire zone. Although there were few injuries, their presence had much to do with the good order which prevailed.

The Mayor of Auburn met the Chairman of the Chapter, in a smoke-filled street while the fire was at its height. Then and there the Mayor issued a proclamation, naming the Red Cross as the official agency of relief. Governor Brann did likewise on the following day, and the Red Cross set up machinery for immediate rehabilitation work.

Auburn is a manufacturing city on the Androscoggin River and had a large section of wooden tenements three or four stories high. When fire, driven by a high wind, reached these buildings, there was no hope of saving them. The fire started in the early afternoon and came under control by evening. The people of the burned district, mostly of French descent, many speaking only French, are thrifty and industrious, with large families as a rule. They had neat and attractive homes, whether as renters or owners.

The amount of money spent for clothing was small because of the large amount of donated stocks which came from eastern cities and especially from the State of Maine. The American Legion put on a drive for clothing and obtained a large amount. Many Chapters also collected gifts of this kind.

At Auburn, as in Ellsworth, members of the Red Cross staff who had worked in disasters for many years and in many parts of the country said that they had never experienced more pleasant contacts than with the people of these two New England cities.

The Junior Red Cross has for years been developing a program of its own in disasters like these. One of its first efforts was in the great Midwest Tornado of 1925. From that time on the Juniors have been active in disaster work.

In the New England fires the Juniors did an outstanding piece of work. They devoted their efforts to provide playthings for the children, and the way they succeeded is remarkable. Auburn

was made the central point of distribution, and toys from all over New England and other eastern states came pouring in. The children of both devastated towns were supplied from this central toy depot.

Dolls, toys, puzzles, jigsaw pictures and the like were sent in by the Juniors chiefly of New England and New York City for the homeless children in Auburn and Ellsworth. These gifts were assorted according to the ages of the children and their names written on the cards.

The distribution was made a gala event at Auburn, with music, a peanut scramble, ice cream served at tables and a distribution of the toys. A perfect summer day favored the party.

FINAL FINANCIAL STATEMENT

THE ELLSWORTH FIRE

Contributions

Contributions from Chapters and individuals.....	\$31,492.21
Contributions from American National Red Cross.....	1,999.52
Total Contributions	\$33,491.73

Expenditures

Maintenance to disaster sufferers	\$1,897.40
Food	126.36
Clothing	1,123.24
Building and repair	12,338.47
Household goods	8,811.50
Medical aid	216.00
Family service	624.71
Field supervision, accounting and other field expenses.....	1,507.31
Tools, stock and equipment.....	4,934.81
* Grants to Chapters—follow-up work.....	765.99
Other	1,145.94
Total Expenditures	\$33,491.73

THE AUBURN FIRE

Contributions

Contributions from Chapters and individuals.....	\$67,673.93
Contributions from American National Red Cross.....	7,876.93
Total Contributions	\$75,550.86

Expenditures

Maintenance for disaster sufferers.....	\$3,771.71
Food	474.41
Clothing	6,121.45
Building and repairs	26,812.99
Household goods	19,240.72
Medical aid	546.95
Family service	5,481.76
Field supervision, accounting and other field expense.....	4,080.23
Tools, stock and equipment	6,744.39
* Grants to Chapter—follow-up work.....	1,516.94
Other	759.31
Total Expenditures	\$75,550.86

* Any additional contributions received after July 31, 1933, will be sent to the Chapter concerned for follow-up work.

**Your Annual Membership helps to support Disaster Relief and
other peace-time activities of the American Red Cross**