

Oil Tank Fire Races Down Creek – Bethesda Storage Facilities Damaged, Homes Endangered

A mile-long ribbon of oil blazed along a Bethesda creek last night while fire and explosions damaged several huge oil storage tanks in the 5000 block of River rd. The burning oil, gushing from the tanks and trucks of the Metropolitan Petroleum and Colonial Fuel Oil companies, poured into the Little Falls Branch creek and endangered scores of homes before fire companies from the whole area brought the blaze under control.

Flames from the oil-coated creek roared 30 feet high, sending huge fingers of flames over homes in Green Acres and other communities. Firemen stationed along the stream battled for hours to stamp out brush fires that crept up both banks.

Five firemen were injured, none seriously.

Damage at \$350,000

Company officials estimated damage to the oil companies at approximately \$350,000. Also severely damaged by the blaze was the Bethesda Cinder Block Manufacturing Co., adjacent to Metropolitan. One official of Metropolitan said none of its storage tanks would be put out of service and that the company's principal loss was eight fuel trucks.

The 4-hour fire brought out more than 200 firemen from companies in the District, Montgomery and Prince Georges County and Virginia. Watching them fight the fire, according to Col. Joseph S. McAuliffe, Superintendent of Montgomery County Police, were some 10,000 spectators who lined the course of the blaze from River rd. to below Massachusetts Ave.

The fire apparently broke out at the Colonial tanks and sent blazing oil pouring down an incline toward the Metropolitan installation. Oil from both firms poured into the creek and carried beyond Massachusetts Ave., about a mile away.

As the blazing oil raced along the stream, it destroyed a footbridge leading to Western Junior High School, and blackened the Massachusetts Ave bridge. McCauliffe said that a large crack was later found in the bridge and that it would be barred to traffic pending further examination.

Smoke from the blazing storage area was reported above 3500 feet by pilots approaching National Airport. One pilot 35 miles from Washington reported seeing explosions, and radar operators at the airport said the smoke was showing on their screens. The smoke passed into the landing approach northwest at Georgetown but did not affect operations at the airport.

Martin F. McCarthy, president of Metropolitan said the fire was detected by his watchman, whom he identified as Thaddeus Melton. He said Melton saw flames roaring from the top of a truck parked near the Colonial office. The area around the truck, McCarthy said, then suddenly became engulfed in flames.

The fire was fought by more than 200 firemen working in black oily soot. In the tank area flames reached 150 feet high and oil tanks and oil trucks exploded in intervals.

While most of the firemen concentrated on the tanks of the Metropolitan and Colonial firms, several companies were deployed to wet down four 500,000 gallon gasoline tanks at the Washington Petroleum Co., adjacent to Colonial.

Sloping Land Helps. The terrain which carried the blazing oil away from the gasoline tanks, aided firemen in saving the gasoline tanks.

In the early stages of fighting the blaze, firemen were handicapped by a shortage of chemical foam, which is used against petroleum fires. Hyattsville firemen reported they had almost controlled their section of the blaze when they exhausted their foam supply and the oil flared again. Foam was rushed from National Airport and nearby Air Force installations. A major part in fighting the fire was played by a foam unit supplied by Andrews Air Force base.

Throughout the blaze, firemen in asbestos suits risked their lives to seal off lines that were spilling oil from the huge storage tanks. One of them, Paul F Schmidt, 21, of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad, went into a pump shed to cap off a 3-inch line carrying oil from a 350,000-gallon tank.

Along the oil-coated stream, firemen spread thick blankets of foam and fought with axes and shovels to extinguish brush fires that threatened to spread to the woods. The blazing stream

remained a threat until the flow of oil at the two firms was cut off.

The effects of the fire were almost immediately felt beyond the oil storage area when flames burned out a wire carrying telephone service to 50 residents in the area. To protect firemen against fallen wires, the Potomac Electric Co. cut off power to the blaze area. Homes in the area were affected, but power was restored shortly after the current was rerouted along other lines.

The fire injured firemen were:

Clarence Seike Jr of the Chevy Chase Fire Department; Kenneth Brown of the Hyattsville Fire Department; Jack Richardson and Lewis Kennin both of the Kensington Fire Department, and William Taylor, of the Silver Spring Fire Department. Seike was admitted to Suburban Hospital for burns of the eyes and knees. Taylor was admitted for burns, and Richardson was admitted for smoke inhalation. The others were treated and released for minor injuries.

Flames from the oil company fire last night licked within 100 yards of an historic 250-year old stone house, known as Milton or Old Loughborough at 5212 Allandale rd, Green Acres, MD. The original wing of the house was built around 1700 by Dutch settlers as an Indian trading post. The main section of the house and another wing were built in 1847. The house was occupied by Nathan Loughborough and his descendants for 100 years. It is now owned by Mordecai Ezekial, a New Deal economist, who rents it to Dr Richard L. Masland. The

furnishings were taken from the house and the family evacuated when the flames threatened it.

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