



# THE BANDON LIGHT

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A PUBLICATION OF THE BANDON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Host of Human Interest Tales, But Only Highlights Possible

This dramatic story ran in the *Oregon Daily Journal*, Portland, October 1, 1936.

By Sterling F. Green

Bandon, Sept. 30. ---Out of the desolation that was Bandon are a thousand human interest stories, if only there lived a reporter with 50 hands and 50 eyes to note them all and write them down before the hugeness of the catastrophe dims memory of the sharp-cut sidelights.

In the forest of fireplaces and gaunt chimneys in South Bandon is the roasted body of a deer, driven out of the forest by searing flames. The doe sought shelter in the realm inhabited by man, but man and beast alike, if they hesitated, died.

Near it is the charred carcass of a cat, or a rabbit. Not far away is a circle of swollen, burst eggs on the ground—the remnants of a pheasant's nest.

Fine stone steps that once led to palatial homes of Bandon's resort colony now lead only to ashes.

A dog remains, barking furiously as a visitor approaches. He is protecting a home that is no longer there.

A rudely painted sign on a post: "Found—Ten Head Cow." Another sign tacked to a street barrier, "Don't Drink City Water." A third, "For Sale," but there is nothing left except a twisted, blackened bedstead.

In the yard of the Bob-Otto Tourist court, where relief and Red Cross work centers, are never fewer than 150 people. They want news of loved ones, they want food, they want a finger bandaged, they are bringing a sick child; they need an overcoat, or blankets, or a toothbrush—the Red Cross can supply all.

The turmoil of conversation rises and falls. The only telephone in Bandon is out-of-doors, in the same auto court. The switchboard girls—a misnomer, for there is no switchboard, only a telephone with a hand crank—take your number, tell you your call cannot possibly go through within three-quarters of an hour. The girls are patient, diligent and gentle-voiced, though they cannot have had six hours sleep in the last 72. If you

have the time to sleep, your nerves will not let you.

Rich and poor are alike now. They sit down on opposite sides of the lid of a garbage can and eat the applesauce, potato salad, stew, coffee, bread and milk that has been handed them over an improvised counter in the auto camp office.

Now and then the babel in the courtyard is stilled when a terrific blast echoes from the flats below. They are dynamiting buildings to avert the danger of crashing walls.

Photographers crowd as close as they dare to the building, hop-



*The recently built Bob-Otto Auto Court, located between First and Second streets on the west side of Elmira Avenue, escaped the 1936 fire and became the headquarters for relief efforts.*

**Continued on Page 3.**

# THE BANDON LIGHT

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

Executive Director.....Gayle Hankwitz  
Native American Consultant... Reg Pullen

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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!

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

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## FROM THE DESK OF THE DIRECTOR

Gayle Hankwitz  
Executive Director

**“There is nothing permanent  
except change,” Heraclitus**

History has a way of repeating itself.

We all have a story of loved ones and friends who  
have been affected by fire.

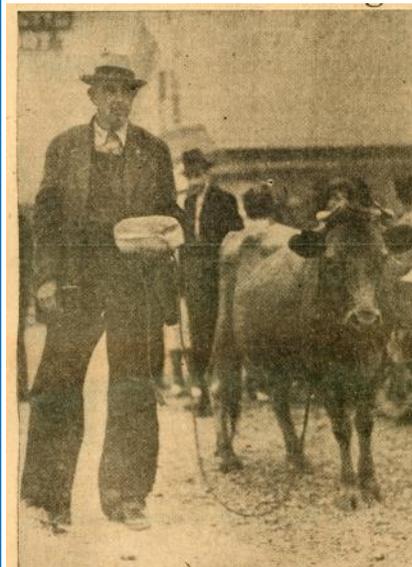
September 7 was the two-year anniversary of the  
horrific forest fires in Oregon in 2020.

Otis, Oregon, was hit very hard—that is where my  
late son's wife and my granddaughter live. They were  
lucky. They only had to evacuate for 24 hours. Her  
extended family was not as fortunate: her sisters'  
homes were threatened and her sisters' children lost  
their homes. They all lived on the Highway 18 corri-  
dor east of Lincoln City. My daughter-in-law's house  
became a safe sanctuary for her sister and husband, a  
nephew and his wife, 3 adult dogs and 10 new pup-  
pies. All of this with no water and no power. This

went on for three  
weeks. No one was  
allowed to go back  
and even check on  
their property for 14  
days.

I was safe here in  
Bandon but was very  
concerned about the  
fate of my family in  
Otis. Thankfully  
everyone was safe  
and those who lost  
their homes are now  
just recently in their  
new homes.

We are remem-  
bering the 86<sup>th</sup> anni-  
versary of the Ban-  
don Fire with a spe-  
cial newsletter edi-  
tion sponsored by Five Js Cranberry Farms. We are  
still not comfortable gathering an audience inside for  
a program but want to recognize the fire survivors  
who have the fire from so long ago etched forever in  
their minds. And in doing so, we want to also honor  
the survivors of the 2020 fires. It was 84 years be-  
tween the two big fires here on the coast. Let's hope  
it's at least another 84 years before the next big one.



***WC Dorland, a fresh loaf of  
bread in his hand, with his cow  
in the wake of the 1936 fire.***

# Host of Human Interest Tales

Continued from Page 1.

ing to catch a wall as it totters, sways and falls. A newsreel man starts his camera grinding; he raises his hand; a powder monkey crouches behind a concrete wall, shoves a handle suddenly with both hands . . .

**BOOM!**

The ground shakes, a blast of air whistles past, a cloud of rocks, cement and debris goes up in the air. But the sturdy skeleton of the Bank of Bandon does not fall. It has resisted dynamiting for two days.



One block away an army truck has hooked a chain and cable to the tottering façade of a two-story structure. The truck roars, its wheels spin, the walls totter and crash.

There are two cases of chickenpox on the east side. Every hour some new child develops a temperature. That is the gravest danger—that colds will develop into pneumonia.

There is shelter for everyone. But the fear of fire is too great. Tuesday night—two days after the disaster—40 families eluded the shore patrol and slept on the beach. They know they are risking pneumonia. They have been told that there is no more danger. But they have been through a hell of flames. They want only security beside the cool water.

Join Us For

## A Veteran's Celebration

Saturday, November 12

Special Military Collections Inside

Military Vehicles in the Parking Lot

Free Admission



# Detective Tells of Fire Damage

This story from *The Oregonian*, Portland, September 29, 1936, helps put Bandon into the context of the larger fire situation. The fact that the witness was a detective seems to have given the story more weight.

Graphic account of the damage done by forest fires along the Pacific coast from far down in California to Tillamook was given yesterday by George Turner, detective at Portland police headquarters, who motored through the burning area on his way from Oakland, Calif., to Portland.

“We struck smoke about halfway up the peninsula,” Turner said, “and we didn’t get out of it until quite a ways beyond Taft. Laytonville in California was half burned out, and the last couple of miles in the redwood forests just across the Oregon border were burning.



*Del Burkhart, photographer for The Oregonian, took this photo on the Oregon Coast Highway.*

“We arrived in Bandon Sunday morning—it was terrible. There was hardly a thing left.

The fire burned out everything in the town-- buildings, homes, beach houses and everything. We watched a couple of houses along the beach start.

“They were all in a row and first one would catch fire and then the embers would land on the next and it would catch, and so on until the whole row was nothing but leveled and smoking ruins.



“The smoke was so thick that we had to use the lights on the car most of the way up the coast, and in a couple of places we drove between the fire burning on either side of the highway. It is just one continual fire all the way up—it looked like the end of the world, or something.”

Turner said he stayed overnight in smoke-ridden Taft and came on to Portland yesterday morning. Relief agencies in the stricken area were functioning ably, but the people “looked forlorn,” the detective reported.

# BANDON DESTROYED; 6 LOSE LIVES

*Ruins and Refugees of Once Beautiful Bandon-by-the-Sea*



Mrs. C. Hilcy and children sitting on what little remains of their belongings, snatched hurriedly from their house as flames swept through the town of Bandon, virtually demolishing it. (Photos by D. C. Burkhardt, staff photographer, The Oregonian.)

**Marshfield and Coquille Menaced;  
Wind Fans Vicious Flames Onward**

## As Reported By ...

The fire in Bandon September 26, 1936, was a nationwide news story. In Oregon, the story consumed almost entire editions of newspapers. The *Coos Bay Times* ran five Special Editions on September 27.

While the fire in Bandon was the heart of the story, it wasn't the whole story.

An extraordinarily late September heat wave coupled with a drought in the West—this was the era of the dust bowls—created a recipe for disaster, especially in the forests of coastal Oregon.

The whole Oregon coast was on fire in late September 1936.

In these pages, we are sharing how the fire was reported beyond Bandon.

### THE FIRE SITUATION AT A GLANCE

Six known dead, several missing, many injured in ruins of Bandon, which was wiped out. Fifteen hundred homeless.

More than 1000 men fighting uncontrolled blaze which has swept over more than 6000 acres north of the Rogue river.

Depoe Bay and Yachats burning and may be destroyed before morning.

Gold Beach cut off by flames.

Coquille, Marshfield, North Bend, Langlois and Powers all menaced by separate fires.

Fifteen hundred men fighting fire between Coquille and Bandon.

One hundred fires reported in northern California.

Half a dozen fires in Clark county, Washington, including a 400-acre blaze near Tum Tum mountain.

Five hundred-acre fire seven miles north of Underwood, Wash.

Humidity sets record lows. No relief in sight for 48 hours.

Estacada sends call for 200 firefighters to fight 160-acre blaze.

Governor Martin orders everyone except fire fighters from all forests west of the Cascades.

Red Cross and other relief agencies mobilized.

National guard units and Boy Scout troops in menaced areas standing by to render assistance.



FIRESIDE TALK. A KEX crew broadcasts a close-up description from Bandon while the fire still rages. Left to right—Bob Thomson, Phil Irwin and Clark (Red) Sanders.

**The Portland Oregonian, reporting how a Portland radio station broadcast from the fire.**



*From the Portland Oregonian, above, September 28, below, October 1.*

# BANDON DESTROYED; 7 LOSE LIVES

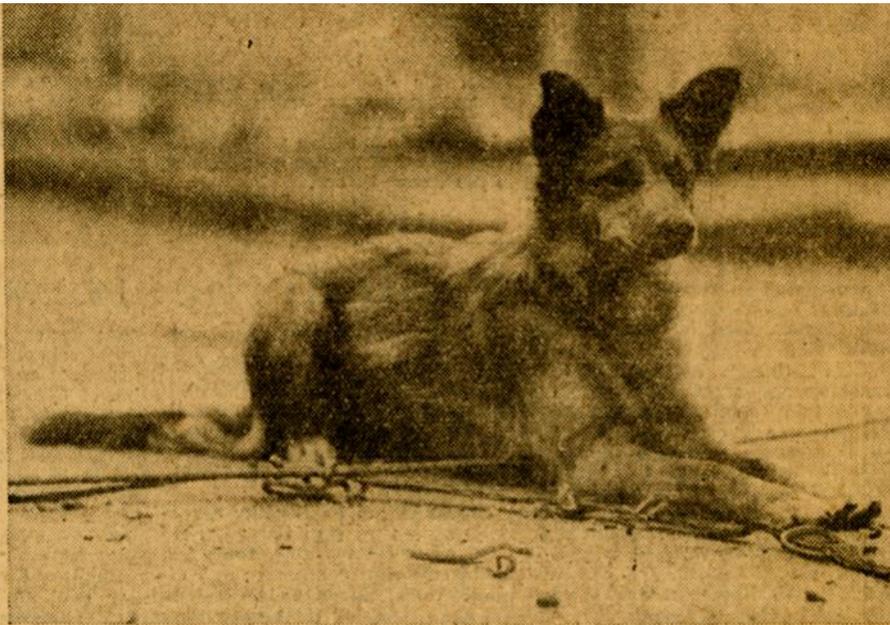
*Myrtle Point, Depoe Bay  
Appear Doomed to Blaze*

## Medford Sends Bedding, Tents To Fire Sector

MEDFORD, Sept. 28 (AP)—  
Twelve hundred complete sets of  
bedding and equipment and all  
available tentage rolled out of the  
Medford CCC headquarters in na-  
tional guard trucks early this morn-  
ing, destined for the suffering and  
homeless in the Bandon fire area.

The CCC equipment, consisting of  
cots, blankets, cooking outfits, in-  
dividual mess gear and military tents,  
was being rushed to the coast com-  
munities and headquarters here was  
prepared to issue other equipment  
as called for.

With the fire raging on a dozen  
fronts in western Oregon, the fa-  
cilities of this 21-camp district, with  
more than 3000 men, have been di-  
verted from routine channels and  
the full strength of the area concen-  
trated on the important work of fire  
fighting and relief.



WHERE IS HE? That appears to be the question in the mind of this loyal dog as he waits patiently amid the charred ruins of blaze-blackened Bandon for the return of his master. Perhaps, however, his owner is one of the group believed to have perished in the flame and the loyal canine's vigil will be in vain. Since the blaze the dog has spurned all offers of food, simply staring into space for a glance of the familiar figure for which he waits.

*Above:  
Portland Oregonian*

*Below Left:  
Coos Bay Times*

## Times Office Now Heart of Nation's Top News Story

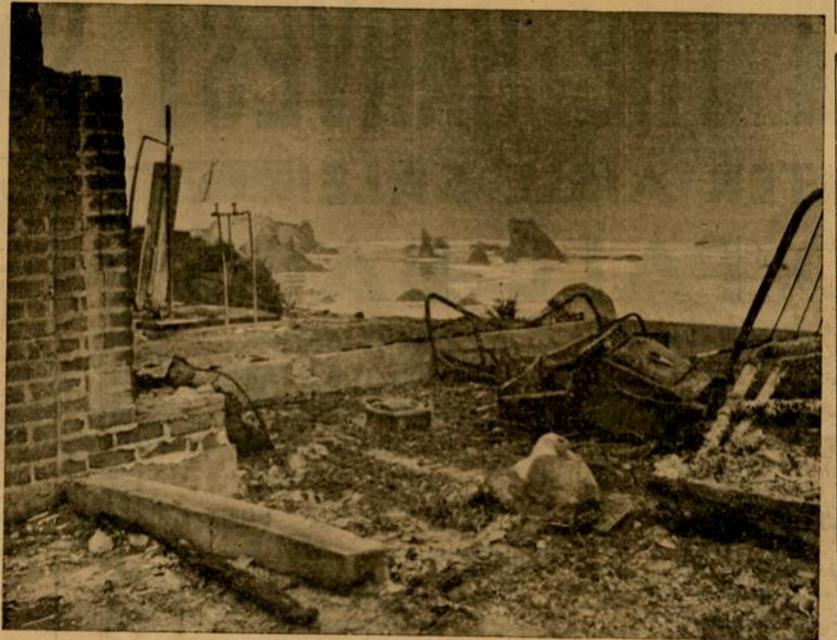
The Coos Bay Times was news headquarters for the biggest story in the United States today. Thousands of words were telephoned and wired from this office to all press agencies and to Portland and by them were relayed throughout the United States and overseas.

The fire, raging throughout the county, started at a time when Sunday newspapers had gone to press.

News staffs at the press agencies in Portland and at the Portland newspapers were hastily summoned back to work while extra papers were hurriedly produced to tell the fast-developing story of the Bandon holocaust.

At 2:30 p.m., 4000 words had been filed by the Coos Bay Times.

*Bandon Fire Jumps Across Breakers to Rocks*



Even the salty breakers were defied by the demon fire which hit Bandon early Sunday. Heat and embers from the land fire jump... the wide span to the offshore rocks and set ablaze the grass covering on them. This view shows a group of the fire-scarred rocks and the ruins of the Bandon bathhouse. It is a truthful statement that almost everything burned but the ocean, as in some cases the ground is said to have burned, and in the business district the pavement and sewers burned.

*Oregon Daily Journal, Portland, September 30. The bathhouse the caption refers to was the Wecoma Baths, on Coquille Point.*

# A Legend Is Born on the Night of the Fire

A "legend" of the 1936 Fire concerns the number of and location of babies born the night of the fire.



Thomas "Sparky" Adams at a museum fire anniversary program in 2018.

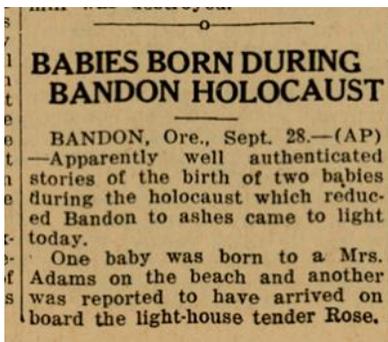
For a fact, Alice Adams gave birth to a boy named Thomas at 4:40 PM Saturday, September 26, delivered by Dr. Ellsworth F. Lucas in the home of Reverend and Mrs. Loree in a house near the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Chicago Avenue. (The Adams family lived on a farm about 10 miles south of Bandon.)

But newspapers were reporting on many Bandon Fire babies born many different places before the flames were out.

In her account "My Bandon Fire Baby" in the museum publication *Bandon Burns!* Alice Adams suggests why reports may have been confused. "I wonder if

there was ever another baby who, before he was 14 hours old, had been in nine different places: the house where he was born, an automobile, a hotel, a bus, another auto, a lumber ship, a Coast Guard Cutter, an ambulance, and a hospital. He was promptly called 'Sparky, The Bandon Fire Baby' by the townspeople and newspapers."

Thomas "Sparky" Adams lives in Damascus, Oregon.



Roseburg News-Review, September 28, 1936.

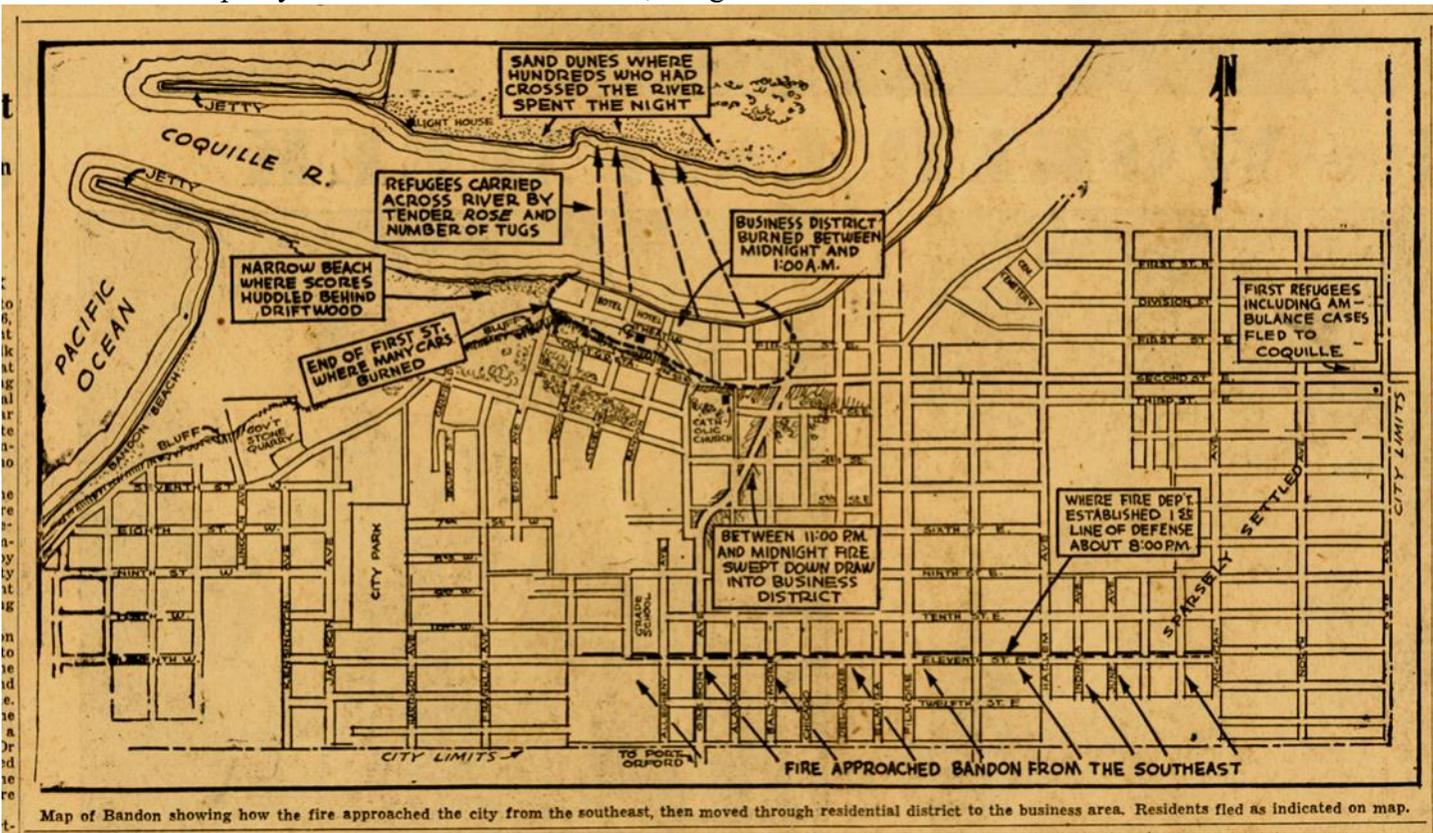
## The Origin

Wild rumors of incendiarism, some of them weird enough to be funny, are in full-blown circulation in Bandon and elsewhere in the Coos bay area. Some imaginative soul vowed, and many believed him, that a big airplane had been circling around, dropping fire bombs into the woods.

But until it is proved otherwise, many will hold to the theory of slashing fires, as the origin of the catastrophe. They may have been the slashing fires of farmers or of loggers, or both; and they burned along sullenly for days, attracting little attention. And then, when all the factors were right—the humidity, the wind and the temperature, in the importance named—everything was logically set for exactly what happened.

The slashing fires merged, so to speak, somewhere along Bear creek. Bear creek is east of Bandon. An east wind blew stronger, and then, as it grew, the fire made its own wind, for the wind was too slow of itself. That was when, as eye-witnesses said, fire seemed to explode out of nothing on the east edge of town. It didn't take long after that.

One thing, other than a new and better Bandon, will undoubtedly come out of the ashes; and that is a determined effort to uproot or otherwise stamp out the shrub known as Irish gorse or hedge. This oily bush has only too long grown wild and thick in and around Bandon. The origin of the whole tragedy was undoubtedly in a forest fire, but the fire that swept into and through the city of Bandon was pretty much a fire of Irish gorse.



"The Origin" and the map of the fire are from the Sunday Oregonian, Portland, October 4, 1936

# History Minute: '36 Fire Just One Adventure for Hero Librarian

*Here's a little history from a cemetery in Bandon.*

Amelia Henry trained to be a nurse, but found her true calling caring for Bandon's library when it was established in 1913.

Miss Henry wrote weekly columns for the *Western World*, painting word pictures of a lively and innovative library culture.

Her greatest challenge followed the 1936 Bandon fire: her book-filled building smoldered for days after most other spots were cold.

A photo in the Bandon museum's collection shows Miss Henry standing next to a sign that reads "Bandon Free Public Library" outside a tent in the tent city that housed the fire refugees.



She ushered the library into its new home in the post-fire city hall, a space that now houses Bandon's Museum.

Miss Henry passed away in 1952.

She shares a plot with Antle Henry, her Civil War veteran father, in Bandon's Grand Army of the Republic cemetery, a fitting place for a warrior for literacy, a battler for books.

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

**Bandon History Minutes, broadcast on KBDN, 96.5-FM and other Bicoastal Media radio stations, are sponsored by the Coquille Tribal Community Fund.**



*The lumber in the foreground suggests rebuilding has begun. Grace Felsheim labeled the library as the source of the smoke still coming from the ruins along Alabama Avenue.*

## Photo Find: Not The Fire but The War Explains Waterfront Image

At first glance, this photo from the Goddard Family collection looks like another picture of the immediate aftermath of the 1936 fire. But the fact that it was grouped with some pictures taken during World War 2 warranted a closer look. The key to this image lies in an article in the *Bandon Western World*, October 8, 1942.

"The big community scrap-pile on the vacant lots at the corner of First and Alabama is growing steadily with more and more people giving active cooperation in the all-out drive for old iron.

"Generosity on the part of truck owners and drivers has made the collection of scrap iron possible according to Ed Capps, chairman of the local salvage committee.

"Capps tells his story in these few words: 'Bring it in yourself if you can! If you can't, call 551 and we'll come and get it!'"

Community scrap metal drives were a patriotic duty during World War 2. The fact that charred docks were still present on the waterfront 6 years after the '36 Fire was a growing concern for community leaders.



## JOIN THE BANDON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

YES! Please accept my membership in the Bandon Historical Society

Already a member? Please consider a donation to help support your museum.

(please check one)

\$20 Individual  NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

\$30 Family  ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

\$250 Life  CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ E-MAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

I'm a Member  and would like to make a tax deductible donation in the amount of \$ \_\_\_\_\_

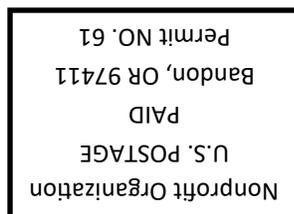
Please make check payable to BHS and mail to:

**Bandon Historical Society, PO Box 737, Bandon OR 97411**

For more information on benefits of memberships go to

<http://www.bandonhistoricalmuseum.org/membership.html>

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**Bandon Historical Society**

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