

Hep Smith's Finest Hour

from an interview with Skip Bold

Hep Smith lives at South Beach, just across from Canoe Island. Out at Canoe Island there is a dock and landing area that is quite a way, maybe a quarter mile, from the main Lodge. Both Skip and Hep had been out to Canoe and knew the lay of the land. It was late September and Skip got a call from Hep just after dinner. Hep said he thought there was a fire on Canoe Island. "Really?" said Skip, "what do you think is burning?". Hep replied "I think its the Lodge". Hep said he had his outboard in the water so Skip asked that he drive to the fire station and grab all the gear needed and take it out to the island; he would join him there as soon as he could. Hep said "that should be easy since I also have a canoe in the water." So Hep did as Skip said and brought all the gear with him and left Skip the canoe. Somehow Hep carried the portable pump and all the gear to the Lodge and brilliantly put the pump in the swimming pool. The fire had, by this time, almost burned itself out. Most of the building had burned, but there was thick yellow smoke coming from the basement indicating that it was still hot but without oxygen. The danger in this situation is that the fire in this non-aerated space is emitting noxious explosive gasses that can explode when exposed to oxygen. Hep had arrived with his hose at exactly the right time. He broke a small window and inserted his hose. He then swirled it around, creating a sort of fog of water that creates steam that extinguishes the fire. This is when Skip arrived on the scene, just as Hep had the fire mostly out. There were still some hot spots that Skip was able to put out, giving Hep a chance to rest ... he was understandably tired!

As Skip was mopping up the remainder of the fire, he noticed a sort of hole in the ceiling. He put the hose up into the hole and filled it with water, however, it wasn't long before all that water just dumped down on top of him! Once he was sure there was no fire there, he went up to investigate. Right above the hole below, was a cast iron bathtub that had reflected the heat back down and created the hole below!

Eventually Pete Nelson and a few other firefighters showed up, but most simply couldn't get there.

The building was built by Diversified Services on Orcas Island run by Ernie Thompson. Once Skip put the fire call out, the dispatcher may have let Ernie know since he had built the Lodge and knew every inch of the building. Back on Canoe Island the fire was completely out when a couple of men arrived in full turnout gear ...it was the fire chief from Orcas and Ernie Thompson. They looked around and were impressed at how well the fire had been put out! It turned out they knew how the fire was started. Ernie's and the Fire Chief's wife had been tasked with delivering a new mattress to the Lodge. They had arrived at night and weren't sure where to put it but finally decided to place it in the basement. Because it was off-season, there was no power on and it was dark, so when they went into the basement, they couldn't see very well. They decided to lean the mattress up against the wall, but unfortunately placed it just in front of a baseboard heater. No matter, without power, the heater wasn't on. However, unbeknownst to them, the owner's brother also arrived on the island after they had left. He was with a girlfriend and immediately switched on the electricity that also turned on all the heat. They went off to bed and soon smelled smoke and they call the fire department, then fled.

The fire was out and the crews from Shaw and Orcas were mopping up when Skip saw this couple coming out of the forest - it was the brother and his girlfriend. "What are you doing here?" Skip asked. They told him their story and then the brother asked a favor. He said he had left his watch, with his name on it, on the bedside table and could Skip please fetch it for him. He didn't want anyone to know he had been there! The house was all full of smoke at that point but Skip broke a window and retrieved the watch.

In the end, it turned out that Canoe Island was not part of Shaw's jurisdiction and Skip took a little heat for going out there. The owner, Dr. Austin, was very thankful for Hep and Skip's quick thinking and effort and asked if there was anything they could do to help the Shaw Fire Dept.? Skip realized a small dedicated boat, powered by oars, would be helpful in reaching isolated waterfront properties like Canoe Island. Dr. Austin bought and donated the skiff, painted red, for the Fire Dept. It could be loaded with gear and either rowed or towed by someone's outboard.