



## UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

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### **The Large Life of Ida Small**

*by Terry White and Meg Costello*

On an early spring morning in 1924, Ida Adelaide Small, age twenty-five, headed to the top of Howland Hill in West Falmouth. She wasn't on a sightseeing mission, nor was she about to transmit semaphore messages from the highest point in Falmouth, as Joseph Dillingham had done over a century earlier. Ida was at Howland Hill to climb to the top of the ninety-foot tall fire tower, where she would spend the day on the look-



*Ida Small Sylvester, 1979.*

out for smoke indicating a forest fire that might spread and threaten the towns of the Cape. Ida would repeat this routine every day of the fire season, from March to October, for much of the next forty years.

While it was not common for a fire lookout to be a woman, it wasn't unheard of. There were three others on Cape Cod, and several across the United States, who followed the path that Ida chose. Hallie Morse Daggett had become the first female Forest Service fire lookout in 1913, edging out two male applicants for the position in California's Klamath National Forest. The man who interviewed Hallie and recommended her hiring wrote to his superior, "I hope your heart is strong enough to stand the shock" – that is, the shock of discovering that a woman was the best candidate for the job. This interviewer noted that Hallie was thoroughly familiar with the forest and "absolutely devoid of the timidity which is ordinarily associated with her sex as she is not afraid of anything that

walks, creeps, or flies.” In addition, she was “a perfect lady in every respect.”

By the time Ida became Falmouth’s fire lookout in 1924, she was well known around town. It’s unlikely that anybody was shocked by the notion that she would make an excellent fire watcher. Ida was born on Elm Road in 1899 to Leander and Bessie Small. Her father was the superintendent at the Fay estate, later the Whittemore estate, in Quissett. Something of a tomboy, Ida always loved the outdoors. Even as a child, she knew the woods so well, and was so reliable, that she was trusted to take food and drink to the men fighting forest fires.

After Ida graduated as salutatorian from Lawrence High School in 1918, she worked as the gamekeeper at the Whittemore estate. She oversaw two enclosed five-acre game parks which held tame deer and game

birds, and she kept an eye on the peacocks that freely roamed the estate. Next, she spent two years as a delivery truck driver for the Coonamessett Ranch store. She began a long history with the Falmouth Nursing Association, working as a secretary and sometimes as a nurse’s aide. Occasionally Ida assisted at dental and well-child



*Whittemore Estate, Quissett, Mass., c1910.*

clinics or helped with tonsil or adenoid operations. Ida’s office jobs and nursing assignments kept her busy when fire season was over, or when health issues forced her to take a break from the lookout position.

It was at the fire tower, however, that she found her true calling. The tower from which Ida observed the upper Cape was built in 1914 on Howland Park Hill to a height of 192 feet above sea level. On a clear day she could see from Provincetown to Nantucket. The original structure was replaced in 1946 with a tower brought over from Martha’s Vineyard.

The lookout job was not an easy one. Ida climbed the 90-foot tower

while carrying a day's supply of food and water, as well as a jug of kerosene for the stove that heated the 9 foot by 9 foot cabin. Luckily, climbing was not a problem for Ida, at least in her earlier years, when she would climb the outside of the steel tower just for fun and exercise.

Once atop the tower, Ida would spend the day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. watching for suspicious smoke. If she spotted any, she reported the exact location to fire department headquarters. At first she used a crank phone. In 1937, she was provided with a two-way radio that allowed her to communicate with firefighters on the ground.

The Enterprise noted, “The network of dirt roads winding through Falmouth forests [was] an open book to Miss Small for she [had] journeyed to every nook and corner of the forests . . . Often she direct[ed] firemen within a few feet of the actual scene of a fire, although it may be miles from her post on Howland's Hill.” Ida’s record was superb but not perfect. On one occasion she sent firefighters to a location in Sandwich, where they startled a group of partygoers gathered around a barbecue pit. It was a rare mistake. Ida’s ability to distinguish the dirty grey smoke of a train engine from the white smoke of a scrub oak fire, or the black smoke of burning pine trees, usually led her to make accurate warnings.

During the long hours when no dangerous smoke was visible, Ida found other ways to keep herself busy. Her little treetop cabin had twelve windows to wash, brass to polish, and walls to paint.

Ida’s service as a fire watcher spanned nearly forty years, with some



*Tower on Fire Tower Road, photographed in 2023 by Terry White.*

gaps. The first break came when she married Gordon Sylvester, a Woods Hole firefighter, in 1933, and gave birth to their son, Herbert Crowell Sylvester, in 1934. By 1939, the couple was no longer living together. Ida was working once more at the fire tower, and she obtained a court order for child support from Mr. Sylvester.

In 1943, Ida stepped away from the job again to serve as a captain in the Massachusetts Women's Defense Corps. MWDC members assisted the State Guard with motor transport, map plotting, canteen, casualty, ambulance, and clerical duties during World War II. After the war, she returned to the tower.

However, from 1950-1954 Ida battled various ailments including a chronic back condition and phlebitis in the left leg. These illnesses sometimes confined her to home or to the hospital. In July 1951 Ida had to resign from her nursing work at Camp Edwards due to health issues. She soldiered on, working as a housekeeper and caregiver for Mrs. A.M. Morse of Quissett during this time period. Ida also worked as a nursing assistant at the Camp Cowasset infirmary in 1952.

Despite her chronic illness, Ida's civic and social activities are too numerous to recount. They fill the pages of the *Enterprise*, where she was often mentioned in connection with every sort of entertainment and worthy cause. When her village of North Falmouth opened a library branch

in 1957, Ida became its first librarian. She worked as a "stringer" (reporter) for the *Enterprise*, providing news about her neighborhood. An editor would clip her articles, thread them on a string, and pay her by the column inch. She relayed social news and lively human interest stories, describing the first crocus of the spring, a wayward skunk, or the Horribles parade in Megansett.



*The North Falmouth Library was housed in the Junction building when Ida became its librarian. Fittingly, the building had previously served as Fire Hose House 9. Trucks exited through the wide front door, which has been remodeled.*

In 1955, the Enterprise noted that Ida was committed to “manning” the Falmouth fire tower that year. Her service continued until 1966, when Ida, now 67, was finally “forced to retire” from the fire watch position. In recognition of her dedication, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation gave her a statue of Smokey the Bear. After retirement, she remained active as a librarian, reporter, club member, and election poll worker.

On August 12, 1980, Ida’s passing was noted in a front-page obituary, which declared she had “lived all her life embodying neighborliness and a concept of community responsibility.” Whether high atop a fire tower, or mingling with friends on the ground, Ida was always a steadfast guardian of her town.



*Mid 20th century firefighting truck, surely a familiar sight to Ida.*

Sources:

[Female Fire Lookouts Have Been Saving the Wilderness for Over a Century](#)

Falmouth Enterprise, April 25, 1961.

Falmouth Enterprise April 9, 1965

Falmouth Enterprise, May 21, 1943

Falmouth Enterprise, April 15th, 1955.

Falmouth Enterprise, August 12th, 1980.