



THE BIG FIRE OF 1953

H. David Vuckson

On Sunday, February 1, 1953 a massive fire altered the appearance of downtown Collingwood. Happening as it did in the dead of winter, the fire presented a formidable challenge to firefighters. Frank Teskey, a reporter and photographer with the *Toronto Daily Star* for 40 years, in his dispatch the next day, said that the temperature in Collingwood was 6 below zero Fahrenheit which translates to minus 21 Celsius. Add to that a strong wind blowing and you can imagine the wind chill factor.

A massive brick “block” of commercial buildings had been erected on the west side of Hurontario St. in 1881 by the Long brothers and Charles Cameron and was nearing completion at the time of The Great Fire of September 25, 1881. This contiguous block originally consisted of a large 3-storey section immediately north of the site of the Federal Building, followed by two 2-storey sections and then another 3-storey section. North of this was the empty space that was known as Cameron Park until Loblaws built their new store there in the 1950’s.

At the time of the *1887 Jubilee History And Business Directory Of The Town of Collingwood*, the Longs occupied three storefronts in this vast building. Some other tenants in that era included Duncan Bros. Plumbers and Steam Fitters and A. Chellew’s Undertaking Parlour. In November 1881 my great-grandfather

O'Brien's older brother Fred also had a spot in this building for his business as a decorator:

F. O'Brien. House Painter, Paper Hanging, Graining, Glazing, Kalsomining [whitewashing], etc. Shop & Residence Hurontario St. Opposite Melville, Fair & Co. (about where Foleys/Occomore were in 1953).

When the Long/Cameron Block, spared by the 1881 disaster, fell victim to fire on that fateful February Sunday 72 years later, it was the home of Hogan's Dairy, Andrew's Taxi, Walker Stores, Max Faith Furniture, Foley's Furniture and Occomore's Repair Shop. The 1881 2-storey and 3-storey sections beyond Occomore's at the north end had already disappeared from the landscape at some earlier date. Alice Belcher told me in the 1960's that the northern end of the block "down by Occomore's" was pulled down during the Depression. The appearance of this massive building had changed somewhat since its erection in 1881, notably the arrangement of masonry and metal rooftop decorations and the shape of some of the window openings.

Part of the 3-storey section north of the Federal Building containing Max Faith's store was destroyed right to the ground as well as the 2-storey section north of there, containing the businesses of Foleys, and Occomores and the two apartments on the second floor above Foleys, the homes of Mr./Mrs. Orville McArthur and Mr./Mrs. Fred Thompson. The balance of the block containing (going south-to-north) Hogan's Dairy, Andrew's Taxi and Walkers remained standing but Walkers was gutted.

The origin of the fire was suspected to be an oil space heater in a rear storeroom at Foley's. The flames then spread rapidly to the adjacent stores on either side. It all began at 6:30 that Sunday morning when Mrs. Orval McArthur in one of the two apartments above Foleys was wakened by the smell of smoke. She roused her husband who quickly dressed, roused his newlywed neighbours Mr./Mrs. Fred Thompson and then ran to the pay phone at the north-east corner of Hurontario and Simcoe Streets outside Sandell's Meat Market. At 6:45 he gave the Bell operator the number "100" for the Ste. Marie St. Fire Hall, reported the fire and then ran back. Both couples escaped with just the clothes they were wearing.

The first wave of firemen arrived shortly but there would be many more arriving as the potential scope of this disaster became evident. Eventually, at least one hundred men were fighting this fire.

Mayor Graydon Kohl, after consultation with Fire Chief Jack McAllister, telephoned multiple neighbouring towns to request assistance. Three airplanes circled overhead to take photos of the scene and to observe the spread of the fire. Calls went out to Owen Sound, Midland, Barrie, Camp Borden, Wasaga Beach, Elmvale, Stayner, Creemore, Meaford, Thornbury and Clarksburg. The firefighters from Barrie are said to have covered the 29 miles in 26 minutes on icy Highway 26 (there was probably little traffic on a Sunday morning). Because Hurontario St. was King's Highways #24 and #26 in those days, local and through traffic had to be re-routed to other streets with extra police being called in from other communities to assist.

The fire hydrant in front of Walkers was frozen so fire hoses were attached to the hydrant farther north outside Bull's Garage (later Lockhart Motors). Councillor Jack Royal, Chairman of the Fire Committee of Town Council brought equipment from his Collingwood Steel Products including welding and acetylene torches to try to thaw hydrants that were frozen. When this didn't work, he built a bonfire around them using rags and gasoline. It took four gallons of gas to thaw one hydrant. Pipes on the Midland fire truck were frozen and had to be thawed as well. When the fire truck from Elmvale arrived, all hydrants were in use so they stretched their hoses all the way to the Shipyard to draw water from Drydock No. 2. It is ironic that while there is an unlimited supply of water in Georgian Bay, the firefighters could not use its full potential right away because of frozen hydrants. The running of fire hoses to the Shipyard echoes the Great Fire of 1881 when the two steam-powered fire engines drew water from a tank in the ground connected by gravity to the harbour at the north end of Hurontario St.

The Federal Building with 21 windows in its north wall immediately south of the site of the fire was separated from the Long Block by just a 4-foot wide alley and was the home of the Post Office, Canada Customs, Steamship Inspection Office, and others. Postmaster Fred Bellamy had to call his staff in and a frantic effort

was made to bag all mail and important documents in case the building had to be evacuated. Two trucks were standing by in the back lane to take all the valuables away.

So intense was the heat from this fire that 14 plate glass storefront windows across the street were cracked, including those of the L.C.B.O. (Liquor Store) where the venetian blinds were kept closed so that passersby would not be horrified to see their neighbours inside purchasing booze, thus protecting the morals of the citizens of Collingwood. The awning of Allen's Children's Wear on the east side also caught fire but was put out by spectators.

Those of you who remember the distinctive Red Ball Parking Meters will recall that they were removed from their posts in the winter months to avoid being buried when the Department of Highways ploughed the snow to the curbs and left it there until spring. Merchants had to dig tunnels through these enormous snow banks so that people could access the sidewalk from their cars without resorting to mountain climbing (I once helped my cousin Jim Hewson shovel one of these tunnels in front of my uncle's store). With the meters away in storage for the winter, the U-shaped steel crossbar at the top of the posts provided a handy cradle to support fire nozzles.

Owen Sound sent their aerial ladder truck, a piece of equipment that Collingwood did not possess at the time (Collingwood would not have an aerial ladder truck until November 1959, the first of its kind in Simcoe County). The Owen Sound truck was used to pour tons of water through windows on the upper floors of Walkers store to drench the building and this was effective in stopping the southward advance of the flames. Walkers store remained standing but was gutted. A similar tactic was used in 1881 when the Collingwood and Stayner steam-powered fire engines flooded the 4-storey building of Melville, Fair & Co. to stop the northward advance of the flames during the Great Fire (that building lost its mansard roof and was gutted but remained standing and would survive until it burned down in November 1961). The other two businesses in the Walker building, the taxi stand and Hogan's Dairy (in later years Gibson's Fish & Chips) suffered heavy smoke damage. The fire was brought under control by 4:00 p.m.

The Salvation Army were on the scene by 9:30 with sandwiches and urns of hot coffee for the cold, ice-caked firefighters. A number of businesses on the main street, including the Arena canteen, opened up to provide the firefighters with coffee, donuts, sandwiches, soup, mitts and gloves. Members of the Royal Canadian Legion Branch 63 stood watch through the following bitterly cold night while exhausted firefighters slept. During the fire four doctors and several nurses stood by to help if needed.

As the fire raged in the tinder dry building, the front brick walls of Max Faith, Foley's and Occomore's crashed out onto the sidewalk and street. Fortunately there were no serious injuries to firemen although one of them from Wasaga Beach was taken to the General & Marine Hospital suffering from smoke inhalation and for treatment with oxygen. Fire Chief McAllister was knocked unconscious at one point but revived. Two hoses kept pouring water into the ruins throughout Sunday evening and into Monday afternoon. On Tuesday, smoke and steam were still rising from the wreckage covered in heavy ice.

Mayor Graydon Kohl said the response was the greatest display of good neighbourliness he had ever seen. Four days later in the *Enterprise-Bulletin* he thanked all those who helped:

On behalf of the citizens of the Town of Collingwood, Mayor Graydon Kohl wishes to express the deep feelings of gratitude felt toward all those who in any way assisted in combatting the fire which destroyed one of the town's finest business blocks on Sunday. To Owen Sound, Midland, Barrie, Elmvale and Wasaga Beach a special thanks goes for the use of their fire-fighting equipment and the splendid co-operation of the firemen from those centres as well as those from Stayner, Creemore, Meaford, Thornbury and Clarksburg. If it were not for the fact that this assistance had been forthcoming, there is little doubt that the fire would have extended over a much larger area and the fire loss possibly doubled and maybe trebled.

The Salvation Army did a wonderful job. Their men and women were on the main street at nine-thirty in the morning with hot drinks and food ready for the fire fighters. They worked tirelessly. Thanks goes, too, to the several businesses which

were open to supply hot drinks, soup, sandwiches, etc. to those engaged in fighting the fire. To the many citizens who assisted in this work at the Community Arena thanks are extended. The Canadian Legion was of great help with their voluntary assistance in night-watching, thus relieving men who had been in the midst of it for many hours throughout the day.

And to the hundreds of citizens who turned in to help the Fire Department when and where they could, for all and any assistance the officials and citizens of the town say "Thank you".

When the cleanup began, there was a vast amount of debris consisting of bricks, masonry, charred wooden beams and the steel I-beam that supported the altered façade of Max Faith's store to be carted away. The most likely place to take all this stuff was to the waterfront north of First St./west of Hurontario St. where it could be dumped on empty land owned by the Town. The huge site of the former Toner & Gregory sawmill north of First St. was sold to the Town in 1903 and provided a handy place for dumping fill to fill in the former log booming inlets and generally extend the shoreline northward. In another decade this land would become part of the Shipyard as it expanded westward beyond its original boundary at the north end of Pine St.

The 3rd floor was removed from the portion of the building containing the dairy, taxi stand and Walkers. The Walkers store was repaired and carried on for many more years. Max Faith, in business in Collingwood since 1907, constructed a new one-storey building on their burned-out site right against Walkers. Art Foley relocated to another location farther south on the east side of Hurontario St. between Ontario and Fourth St. East. Morton Occomore's father Frank (1864-1948), an electrician by trade, had occupied a shop in the location of the fire since *at least* 1910 when he appears in the *Vernon's Directory* listed as

F. OCCOMORE & CO., electrical contractor, bicycles and sporting goods.

Likewise, he was listed in *Vernon's Directory* for 1923 as

F. OCCOMORE & CO., electric merchandising, contractors, bicycle dealers.

This was an interesting combination of callings: wiring houses, selling/repairing electric appliances, and selling bicycles and sporting goods (Mr. Occomore was in direct competition with J. O. Stoutenburg).

Morton Occomore, on the other hand, in his 40th year at the time of the fire, appears to have changed his occupation a number of times since losing his repair shop which he assumed after his father's death in 1948. Various Voters Lists give his occupation as Clerk (1940), Electrician (1949), Clerk (1957), Driver (1962), Dry Cleaning (1963), Salesman (1965 and 1968), and Shipper (1972 and 1974) by which time he was in his early 60's. He died in 1988 in his mid-70's.

Bit by bit in the late 20th Century/early 21st Century Max Faith's replacement building and the remains of the Long Block were gradually demolished and their locations now form the Hurontario St. side of Loblaw's parking lot, leaving the Federal Building as the first heritage building at the north end of the street.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.