PROTECTING COLLINGWOOD FROM FIRE IN THE OLDEN DAYS

H. David Vuckson

There is a wealth of information on the early days of the Collingwood Fire Department in the book *Ordeal By Fire—A History Of The Collingwood Fire Department 1852-2005* by Douglas G. Skelding, from which I have permission from Jack McAllister to quote. In addition, some of this story is based on a talk I gave about The Great Fire of September 1881 at the Collingwood Historical Society on October 2, 2017.

The site of Collingwood (original name "Hen And Chickens Harbour", so called because of one larger and several smaller islands near the entrance to the harbour) in its original state before the area was settled, was described as a dismal cedar swamp. Vast, thick and undisturbed forests covered most of Simcoe County. By the middle of the 19th Century, this scene was about to change as someone figured out that a railway from Toronto north to some point on Georgian Bay would be a quicker, shorter way to reach "the west" (i. e. Chicago) rather than the much longer journey traveling by ship on Lake Ontario, bypassing Niagara Falls then continuing on Lake Erie, the Detroit River, Lake St. Clair, the St. Clair River, Lake Huron and on to Lake Michigan. Like today, time was money and the thought of cost-saving measures and fortunes to be made livened up the imaginations of many.

The building of the railway (it officially opened in Collingwood on January 1, 1855) naturally brought settlement with it. The massive trees had initially been regarded as a nuisance standing in the way of settlement and the clearing of land for agriculture and at first, they were chopped down and burned. But there was money to be made and gradually the lumbering business was established, the main impetus for this coming from the arrival of the railway in Allandale in October 1853. Representatives from the British Royal Navy soon discovered that the white pine trees of Simcoe County were ideal candidates to serve as masts and spars on their warships and the harvesting of these giant trees began in earnest. That great Simcoe County historian, Andrew F. Hunter, in *A History of Simcoe County*, tells us,

…when the Hon. Peter Robinson was appointed Surveyor General of Woods and Forests in Upper Canada in 1827, the instructions he received from the British Government directed him to make a survey of the woods and forests, to find where there was timber for masts and for other use in the Navy…The first timbermen to arrive in this county after the opening of the Northern Railway were those in search of masts which they loaded on the freight cars at full length. The largest mast, which was obtained in the Township of Innisfil, was 118 feet long, and required fourteen teams to draw it to the railway track.

Of course there had been lumbering in earlier years, but it was the arrival of the railway that gave birth to Collingwood that spurred the lumbering industry into a major force to be reckoned with. Hunter says the railway gave that industry "a tenfold increase".

We now leave the vastness and massiveness of the county forests and turn to the lumber that was made from them as the principal building material at the time as a direct result of that tenfold increase. With the preponderance of the wood supply that was used to build more sawmills, houses, hotels, saloons, stores, stables, barns, boats, etc. once the trees had been turned

into merchantable lumber by the many sawmills that sprang up, there was always the danger of fire. Wooden buildings were not the only hazard. There were wooden sidewalks, wooden ramps over the ditches, wooden signs, wooden verandahs fronting the stores, multiple layers of paint and varnish, livery stables with large amounts of straw and hay for the universal four-legged motive power of the day, and wood lath on interior walls for plastering. There were no building codes or fire codes or fire prevention officers, and considering that buildings were heated with fireplaces and wood stoves and lit by kerosene lamps and the open flames of candles, it is not surprising that many early villages, towns and cities had frequent destructive fires. Collingwood's Great Fire of September 25, 1881 is believed to have been started by a discarded cigar butt setting fire to accumulated rubbish under an elevated wooden sidewalk on the east side of Hurontario St., aided by the strong wind that always seemed to be blowing in Collingwood when there was a fire. Many of the buildings on Hurontario St. were built of wood, but there were a number of brick buildings mixed in as well. The fire did not discriminate as the flames consumed the wooden sidewalk, and the contiguous verandahs spread the fire to other buildings whether of wood or brick. The result of this action dramatically changed the look of downtown Collingwood.

One could be tempted to think that the Town of Collingwood, situated as it is on the shore of the vast body of water known as Georgian Bay, had some measure of fire protection from its very beginnings but what protection there was, was limited to a bucket brigade as often seen in old western movies. Other than water available from wells, creeks or ditches, the water supply from the harbour was limited to times of the year when the harbour was not frozen. By the time Collingwood became an incorporated town in 1858, a number of volunteer fire companies had formed. Doug Skelding tells us,

By 1858 there were no less than four different fire companies in the town. There was Georgian Fire Company #1, Collingwood Hook and Ladder, Union Hook and Ladder, and the Collingwood Bucket Brigade. These all vied with each other for recognition. The members of these companies were elected from applicants in the community. The applicant's personal history was investigated and if he proved to be a stalwart member of the community he was taken on as a volunteer, since at this time there was no such thing as a paid fire brigade.

It is fortunate that Collingwood, because of its small size, did not have competing volunteer fire engine companies as they existed in larger centres. In Victoria, B.C. (population around 15,000 in the 1880's) there were two rival fire companies, the Deluge Company and the Tiger Company partly based on British and American politics respectively. It was a great honour to get the "first water" onto a fire and involved intense rivalry. In one instance the hand-pumped fire engines of both companies arrived within a few minutes of each other to a fire and resulted in an argument as to who was going to fight the fire. This dueling testosterone escalated into a fist fight in the snow, the men oblivious as to why they were there, and meanwhile the fire burned itself out. Thankfully, Collingwood did not have occurrences like this. At the time of our Great Fire, a call for assistance went out to Stayner via the telegraph wires and a locomotive and flat car sped down to Stayner to bring their fire engine to Collingwood. The two teams worked side by side to drench the 4-storey (with a mansard roof) Melville, Fair & Co. building to stop the fire in its tracks northward toward Huron St. In situations other than right downtown, water could be drafted from a well or from a stream if one were nearby. In this particular case, the hand-operated fire engine was worked until its supply of water (bucket brigade) ran out and it could do no more. The second fire engine brought on the railway from Stayner joined Collingwood's Silsby engine in drafting water from the in-ground tank connected to the harbour. The firemen realized they could not

save wooden buildings and that their best chance was to stop the flames in one of the brick buildings. For 8 hours, these two fire engines directed streams of water into the Melville Fair & Co. building, thoroughly soaking it and ruining all the stock to save the structure. It was here, at what is now 35 Hurontario St., that the northward advance of the flames in 1881 was stopped, saving the remaining buildings at the north end of Hurontario St. and the buildings on Huron St. The top floor of Melville, Fair & Co. was burned off and the building flooded but it remained standing and, subsequently repaired as a 3-storey building, would survive for another 80 years until it was destroyed in a disastrous fire in November 1961 when the Chalet Normand Steak House in the building next door blew up.

In the early days, the railway had loaned the Georgian Fire Company a hand-pulled hand pump. These were also known as a "hand tub". They contained a tub or trough which had to be filled and kept filled by the frantic exertions of a bucket brigade. Long wooden handles on each side called "brakes" had to be pumped up and down at a furious rate to force water through a hose. Ten men per side were required to pump the handles. This loaner pump was eventually replaced with a larger one requiring twenty men per side to operate it. The Facebook version of this story (on the *Collingwood Historical Society* page, as well as on *If You Grew Up In Collingwood*, and my own Facebook page) has a photo of a restored hand tub. There are videos online that show modern competitions of rival crews using these restored machines. Google "Hand Pump Fire Engine Competition" and you will be amazed at how hard the men had to work to throw a stream of water. It was exhausting work and the men could pump like human pistons for only about three minutes before they became exhausted and had to be relieved by another crew. During the changeover, the rapidly moving handles could and did break fingers, hands and arms. One complete motion up and down of the brakes was called a "stroke" and these machines were operated at up to 120 strokes per minute. During The Great Fire, Mr. J. L. Cox, assisting

with the hand-pumped fire engine, overexerted himself and fainted, remaining unconscious for several minutes.

While the job of the Fire Company was to fight the fire and put it out, The Hook and Ladder Companies had a different job: to rescue people. Their horse-drawn wagons contained ladders of various lengths, axes and long poles to pull down burning structures. At the time of Collingwood's Great Fire, it turned out that the Hook and Ladder Company had been previously disbanded, an untimely, short-sighted act that contributed greatly to the destruction caused by the fire. It was stated in retrospect that if there had been a functioning Hook and Ladder Company, they could have pulled down the wooden verandahs on the front of the burning buildings on Hurontario St. since the verandahs conducted the flames from one building to another.

How was a fire announced in those days when the town was small? In the earliest days someone would yell "FIRE!", and then Mr. Lockerbie's large triangle was rattled loudly to call the volunteers from their day jobs or from their beds if the fire occurred at night. The earliest Fire Hall was in a 2-storey wooden building on the grounds of the Northern Railway Station (today this property is the location of the grounds of the Collingwood Museum in a replica building of the 1873 railway station). This wooden building (which still stands today having been moved to the west side of St. Paul St. and converted into a residence) also served as the first Town Hall, the Orange Lodge Hall, and the first High School and had a small tower containing a small bell that was not very effective. Eventually, the bells in the towers of the Maple St. Methodist Church (today's Trinity United) and All Saints Anglican Church were used as a fire alarm. After the establishment of the town's steam-powered Waterworks in 1889, the steam whistle at the Waterworks was also used to signal a fire.

The Town Council, in its earliest years, established the rates of pay for the volunteer firefighters. Doug Skelding states,

The title of Chief was not used in those days, instead the head man was called "Engineer". The Chief Engineer of the Fire Brigade was to receive the sum of $50.00 per year for his services and the Assistant Engineer $25.00…The brigade members were required to answer all fire calls and for this each firefighter would receive the princely sum of $8.00 payable quarterly and 40 cents for each hour he would be at a fire. For false alarms he would receive one half of an hour's pay of 20 cents.

The Council also looked forward to the day when they could purchase a steam-powered fire engine:

The Engineer of this future steam engine was apparently considered a valuable man since his pay was to be $225.00 per year and his Assistant Engineer would receive $75.00…When and if a steam fire engine would be purchased, the owner of any team of horses who was first at the fire hall and actually harnessed to the proposed engine would receive $3.00. The town did not have any horse teams of its own for this service since it was thought to be too expensive.

In August 1871, the Town of Collingwood, population 2829, took delivery of a Silsby Steam Fire Engine. The Silsby Manufacturing Company was located in Seneca Falls, New York. Seneca Falls was known for many years as the fire engine capital of the western hemisphere (the Facebook version of this story shows a beautifully restored Silsby Fire Engine). The Silsby was owned by the town for 66 years until 1937 when it was sold to Chester Stewart for $40.00 and hauled away to a scrap yard. The Silsby was quite heavy and required a team of horses which the Town did not own. The then-large sum of $3.00 was offered to whoever, on hearing the alarm, arrived with a team and hitched them to the Silsby. When an alarm was sounded using one of the church bells, the engineer, while waiting for a team of horses to show up, started a fire in the boiler. The Silsby was said to be able to produce

steam from cold water in three to five minutes using wood or coal for fuel. This speedy firing provided working steam pressure when arriving at a fire.

But what was the source of water? Collingwood did not have a Waterworks with water mains and fire hydrants until 1889. During The Great Fire in 1881, the Silsby drew water from a tank in the ground at the north end of Hurontario St. The tank was filled by gravity with water from the Hurontario St. slip which, in 1909, became Drydock No. 2 of the Collingwood Shipyard, and, later, in 1959, was decommissioned as a drydock and became known as the "launch basin". While there was an unlimited supply of water from the harbour, the water in the tank was not under pressure so the Silsby created the water pressure with the steam from its boiler.

My great grand-uncle Fred O'Brien, older brother of my great-grandfather R. W. O'Brien was one of the members of the Georgian Fire Brigade. His "day job" was as a painter/interior decorator while his wife operated a confectionery business (the firefighters all had day jobs and were expected to drop what they were doing when an alarm sounded and head for the fire hall).

Mayor Adam Dudgeon called a special meeting of the Town Council on Monday afternoon, the day after the fire. Among the things discussed was the fact that of the Fire Brigade's 1200 feet of hose, only 500 feet were good enough to use, the other 700 feet apparently being useless, and that 1000 feet of hose was a necessity. Fire hoses in that era were made of thick strips of rear quarter cowhide leather riveted together. Right after use or when being stored, the hoses had to be treated with a leather conditioner such as fish oil, warm beef tallow, or Neat's foot oil to keep them pliable, otherwise they would dry, crack or rot and fail at the most inopportune time. Councillor Charles Stephens suggested it was time to push for a waterworks. Reeve John Hogg stated that an efficient hook and ladder company was necessary (the previous one having been disbanded) and that if there *had*

been one with proper equipment, they could have pulled down multiple verandahs so that the fire would have stopped at Long Bros. 4-storey building instead of jumping from building to building. In the chaos, two gentlemen, Mr. Palmer and Mr. Livingston, on their own initiative, had seized a pole and demolished the verandah in front of Lindsay's building. If the flames had reached this verandah, right next door was the wooden North American Hotel and it is easy to guess what could have happened here if the flames reached the hotel. Fortunately the advance of the flames was stopped several doors south of this location.

It was moved, seconded and carried that the Fire and Water Committee be instructed to purchase 1000 feet of hose at once. It was also moved, seconded and carried that Council consider the great necessity for the formation of an efficient hook and ladder company.

The Mayor suggested a bylaw should be introduced forbidding the construction of any more verandahs and that storekeepers should use awnings instead. A 2-man committee was appointed to draft such a bylaw. There were suggestions of having an iron pipe laid down Hurontario St., tapped by hydrants at different places, and fed by a steam-powered forcing engine at the north end of the street, drawing water from the harbour.

The Fire Brigade met on that Monday evening and prepared an address to be presented to the Town Council at their next meeting. It contained a list of wants, including a large hose reel, 1000 feet of hose, various other hardware including one axe and six lanterns, and the formation of a hook and ladder company.

As we know, once the rubble from The Great Fire was cleared away, the stalwart merchants of Collingwood erected numerous brick buildings of 2- and 3-storeys along both sides of Hurontario Street between Second/Simcoe and First/Huron Streets. Verandahs, being the fire hazard they were, became a thing of the past, replaced with awnings. However, wooden

sidewalks and wooden ramps over the roadside ditches were still a feature of the streetscape and still a fire hazard until the advent of concrete.

The history of the development and efficiency of fire protection in Collingwood was very closely tied to the history of the development and efficiency of the Collingwood Waterworks. The issue of adequate water volume and pressure for firefighting would, at times, haunt the town for many years into the mid 1960's. The Collingwood Fire Department got its first gasoline-powered equipment in 1919 but the use of four-legged horsepower would continue for a few more years.

As an illustration of how loyal the well-trained fire department horses were, consider this anecdote from Jack McAllister who lived at and grew up in the Fire Hall's upstairs apartment when his father was the Fire Chief:

Collingwood Fire Department's last horse team were named "Pride and Prince". They were a particularly spirited team and would get very excited when the fire bell rang. They would run out of their stalls and stand under the harness that was suspended from the ceiling. A pull of a rope and the harness would drop to the horses, which, when cinched, would charge out of the fire hall and the brakes would have to be held on the fire wagon to slow them down in order to gain control and continue to the fire. The horses became old and with the advent of motor trucks, were sold to a farmer. One day the farmer was coming down the street with a wagon loaded with hay, going to the weigh scales adjacent to the fire hall on Ste. Marie St.

The firemen sitting out in front of the hall wondered if the team would be too old to remember the fire bell, and as the team reached the front of the fire hall the fire bell was sounded. Without a moment's hesitation the team came to life and charged on down the street at full speed. As they turned the corner the whole load of hay was dumped out on Ste. Marie St.

The chief merely looked at his men and, without another word, the front of the fire hall was immediately vacated, the apparatus doors slammed shut and everyone headed in a different direction.

David A. Manson (1884-1947), local piano dealer and music store owner who we met in my October 2017 story, was involved with the phasing out of horses and the advent of all-motorized fire fighting vehicles. From his obituary comes the following,

The deceased was a member of the Town Council for a number of years and it was under his chairmanship that the local fire department was mechanized and changed from horse drawn reels to modern fire trucks and firefighting equipment.

A photo from Jack McAllister's collection shows David Manson, identified as the Reeve along with Mayor Basil Patten standing beside a gas-powered fire truck in front of the Ste. Marie St. Fire Hall, while beside the truck is a hay-powered fire wagon during the years when horsepower with four legs and gasoline engines overlapped in the service of the fire department.

This story provides a glimpse into small town Collingwood when just about everyone either knew just about everyone else or, at least, knew *of* just about everyone else. From the earliest era of the bucket brigade and hand-pulled/hand operated and horse-pulled/steam operated apparatus to the advent of motorized equipment following the First World War, down to the modern fire hall and its extensive equipment of today, coupled with the town's modern waterworks, the firefighters of Collingwood have provided the town with fire protection for over 160 years.

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.