



A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT SOME HURONTARIO STREET FIRES

By H. David Vuckson

Much has been written about Collingwood's "Great Fire" of September 25, 1881. The headlines in the *Bulletin* of Sept. 28, 1881 said, "COLLINGWOOD IN FLAMES", "HALF THE BUSINESS OF THE TOWN DESTROYED", "THE MISCHIEF DONE IN THIRTY MINUTES". Different accounts since that time say different things about the fire. There is even a current legend that a stone wall in front of the terrace at 219 Hurontario St. north of Fourth St. is "believed to have survived the fire". The flames, in fact, did not advance beyond the north-east corner of Hurontario and Simcoe Streets.

To visualize the extent of the Great Fire you have to imagine about two thirds of the east side of Hurontario St. between Huron and Simcoe Streets in flames, as well

as a portion of the west side of that block, also the entire north side of Simcoe St. over to Ste. Marie St. and most of the west side of Ste. Marie St. down toward Huron St., as well as the stables and outbuildings in the back lane all burning furiously. Some historical accounts say or imply that this first block was of mostly wooden construction which fuelled the fire and that, subsequently, after the wreckage was cleared away, the stalwart merchants of Collingwood, instead of focusing on the size of the disaster, concentrated on the size of the opportunity and rebuilt the street with handsome brick buildings, many of which still stand today. In fact, there were already a number of brick commercial buildings mixed in among the wooden buildings on both sides of that first block of Hurontario St. in 1881, some of them substantial 3-storey buildings as well as two of them of 4-storeys with mansard roofs. This is confirmed by a study of photos in several Collingwood history books plus the 1875 "Bird's Eye View of Collingwood".

In fact, brick commercial buildings had existed in Collingwood from at least the year 1861, and the first such building is widely believed to be that of John

McMaster's Store at the corner of Huron and Ste. Marie Streets. In the late 1890's this building became known as the Queen's Hotel. While brick buildings are generally more resistant to fire, when you factor in all the hazards enumerated below, even some of those brick buildings didn't have much of a chance in September 1881.

A number of things contributed to the extent of this disaster--among them, wooden sidewalks, wooden verandahs in front of almost every building to shield the storefronts from the heat of the sun, multiple layers of paint and varnish, wooden signs, and the physical limitations of the volunteer Fire Brigade of the day. There were no fire hydrants for the simple reason that Collingwood did not yet have municipal waterworks—these were first installed in 1889. Also, there was a strong south-west wind that blew sparks and flaming debris over a wide area between Hurontario and Ste. Marie Streets (and beyond) on that fateful Sunday. A review of fires in Collingwood over the last 150 years or so almost invariably reveals a “strong wind” or a “stiff breeze” fanning the flames.

The Great Fire occurred late in the afternoon on a Sunday when stores were closed and most residents were at home observing a day of rest, preparing for both the evening meal and the evening church service. If it had been a weekday when more people were around, the fire might have been discovered sooner enabling a faster response. Many buildings were already ablaze before the fire engine arrived.

As the Great Fire burned the north side of Simcoe Street, it scorched the north wall of the Grand Central Hotel on the opposite side of the street (where the former Bank of Montreal stands), and then burned the frame houses on the west side of Ste. Marie St. down toward Huron St. The wind carried sparks and burning debris far and wide, setting the railway station platform and freight shed alight a number of times as well as a large pile of cordwood half a mile away at the Tobey Tannery on Simcoe St. beyond Niagara St. At times it was feared that much of the town was threatened.

The horse-drawn steam engine of the Fire Brigade drew its water from a ground level tank on Hurontario St. This

tank was connected to the waterfront and, therefore, had an unlimited supply of water from the bay (but not under pressure). Under normal circumstances the water in this tank was used by the Fire Brigade for the horse-drawn water wagon that was used to control the dust on the streets. A second steam fire engine was brought on the railway from Stayner to assist, arriving around 7 p.m. The Fire Brigade were in possession of 1200 feet of hose but only 500 feet of that total were in good enough condition to use. Nevertheless, with what equipment they had, the Brigade fought valiantly. Realizing that nothing could be done to save wooden buildings, they directed their efforts at stopping the northward progression of the fire through the brick buildings on the east side of the street. The two available streams of water were directed at the large store of Melville, Fair & Co. where the advance of the flames was finally stopped. When the wooden buildings on the west side caught fire there was nothing that could be done except to let them burn which they did between the Bank of Toronto at the north end of the brick Telfer Block and the new brick

block being built by Long Bros. (now Loblaw's parking lot north of the Federal Building).

As the fire progressed, merchants with stores in buildings not yet affected began to remove and pile up outside what they could of their stock and, sad to say, it was reported that much looting took place. My great-grandfather R. W. O'Brien, a grocer at the time, saved some of his stock and, to his credit, had \$1000.00 worth of Insurance. In our home we had a set of figurines of a boy and girl that had been rescued from his store with the date 1881 written on the underside of them.

Insurance notwithstanding, the fire must have been a hard blow for him. His older brother Fred O'Brien [Jr.] was one of the volunteer firemen and for the O'Brien brothers it was a case of *deja vu* to helplessly watch the grocery store go up in flames because they had witnessed the same thing happen to *their* father's store in Barrie in 1864. The Collingwood Museum has a photo of the volunteer Georgian Fire Brigade "who fought the fire, Sept. 25, 1881" posing proudly with their equipment. Fred O'Brien's regular job was that of a house painter, paper hanger, decorator, etc.

The cause of the fire is believed to be that someone dropped a match or a lighted cigar butt through a crack or hole in the wooden sidewalk. If it was a cigar, it was the deadliest cigar in Collingwood's history, creating far more ashes than it was intended to. Eyewitnesses watched the flames gallop along the wooden verandahs on the east side of the street and in their destructive path were six brick buildings, the grandest of them all being that of "Thomas Long & Brother" [as John J. Long was styled at the time], 4-storeys tall, built in the 1870's. Prior to the erection of the Town Hall in 1889-90, the Long's building was the tallest structure fronting onto Hurontario St. The *Bulletin* newspaper said that as it burned, the Long Bros. building collapsed like a house of cards. One can imagine the firestorm of flaming debris that would have been scattered on the wind from that collapse. So successful were the Long Brothers that, at the time of the fire, they were building a large new three-storefront brick block across the street that was almost ready for occupancy (according to the Huron Institute records) whereas a photo from seven years earlier shows the west side of the block to be mostly

wooden buildings at that time. This new brick block of Long Bros. was lost in a massive fire in February 1953.

On the east side, going north from Long's, a vintage photo shows there were two adjacent brick buildings, the first of 2-storeys, the second of 3-storeys, then the large Melville Fair & Co. building with dormer windows and a mansard roof similar to Long's, followed by a wooden building (replaced with a brick structure containing E. R. Carpenter's Drug Store with Lindsay's Music Hall on an upper floor by the time of the fire), then James Lindsay's "Masonic Building" of 3-storeys, then the wooden 2-storey North American Hotel which today is the site of the 3-storey Carmichael Block. At the corner of Hurontario and Huron Streets with frontage on both streets was the huge 3-storey brick Greaves Block built in 1874. Its Huron St. frontage extended all the way to the lane that runs between Huron and Simcoe Streets. This building was demolished in 1937. Fifty years ago its site was the used car lot for Lockhart Motors and now has a newer building on it occupying a similar footprint to the original and housing Noble Insurance. At the time of the fire all the buildings south of Long's to the corner of

Simcoe St. were wooden with one exception: there was an unoccupied stone house owned by Chas. Cameron which also was destroyed.

Lindsay's Masonic Building had a tall mast on the roof with a weather vane at the top. One has to wonder if the volunteers of the Fire Brigade looked at the direction it was pointing on the day of the fire because it could have predicted what they were up against and how badly their day would go.

One historian has said that the fire's path was halted at what is now 51 Hurontario St. at about the mid-way point in the block; however, further investigation indicates that the flames were stopped several buildings north of there at what is now 35 Hurontario St. The *Bulletin* newspaper says that if the fire had burned through three more brick Buildings [Melville, Fair & Co., E. R. Carpenter and Lindsay's Masonic Building] the wooden buildings north of Lindsay's would have conducted the flames to the Greaves Block and then the Globe Hotel and all of "Front" St. between Hurontario and Ste. Marie Streets would have been lost as well. At that time, First/Huron St. was also called Front Street

because it was the town's "front door", signifying the importance of the very busy harbour.

According to the Huron Institute Papers and Records, what is now 51 Hurontario St. had, before the Great Fire, a 3-storey building that was at one time the store of Wm. Telfer & Henry Wiggins on the ground floor, the second floor the location of the Y.M.C.A. rooms and the first office of the *Bulletin* newspaper. The third floor had the candy factory of J. H. Smith. That building was destroyed in the Great Fire and replaced with the 3-storey building that stands there today. Fifty years ago it was Herb Chapman's Rexall Drug Store. Today it houses Farrow Arcara Design.

On the west side of Hurontario St. the southward progression of the flames was halted at the Bank of Toronto in the north end of the Telfer brick block, now numbers 54 and 56. The bank was saved by heroic efforts but not before it was seriously damaged. The original with its heavy wooden doors can be seen on pg. 21 in *Butchers, Bakers & Building the Lakers*. The Telfer block had elaborate upper brick work above the windows

as well as a rooftop decorative fence. In the 1950's about two-thirds of the fence were still there and the brick work intact when the former bank was occupied by Smarts Flowers and Ross Doherty's barber shop (pg. 231 in *Reflections*). Since that time, the decorative fence has gone, the upper brick work is much deteriorated and the two sections above 54/56 and 58 Hurontario St. have been rebuilt, including the insertion of a stone that reads "Smarts Flowers 1890 A. D."

On the west side of Ste. Marie St. six frame houses burned down but the advance of the flames spared Dr. A.R. Stephen's house at 18 Ste. Marie St. just behind the Queen's Hotel building. This grand house, having survived demolition by fire in 1881, suffered "demolition by parking lot" in 1983.

The *Bulletin* newspaper stated "It is pretty certain that no more verandahs will be erected in Collingwood, that the fire limits will be extended, and that either a system of water works, or some special system of water supply for fire purposes will be put in operation". On the day following the Great Fire, the Mayor called a special

meeting of the Town Council at which Councillor Stephens suggested “that this would be a good time to push the water works question”. At that meeting there was also a call to establish a “good hook and ladder company” to replace one previously disbanded. The Reeve claimed that a hook and ladder company could have pulled down the verandahs, and then the fire could have been stopped at Long’s store. The fire brigade also wrote a letter to the Town Council outlining additional equipment needed as well as the necessity of a hook and ladder company. The Town Council meeting approved the purchase of 1000 feet of new fire hose “at once” and struck a committee to draft a bylaw “forbidding the building of any more verandahs” and requiring that storekeepers should use awnings instead.

Lindsay’s 3-storey Masonic Building on the site of what many years later was a 2-storey building housing the Collingwood Dairy & Creamery was only singed and it remained for over twenty more years into the early 20th Century until on January 17, 1905 it was totally destroyed by another fire (see pgs. 41-42, *Ordeal By Fire—A History of the Collingwood Fire Department* by

Douglas Skelding). The Lindsay building in its original form and with a distinctive masonry plaque in the facade can be seen on pg. 141 in *Butchers, Bakers...* when it had wooden buildings on either side. Page 107 in the same book shows how it looked in the 1890's surrounded by newer 3-storey brick buildings. The Lindsay building stood at what is now 25 and 27 Hurontario St. The two 3-storey buildings immediately to the south of it (pg. 107) were destroyed in a fire in November 1961 and were subsequently replaced by the single-storey buildings now at 33 and 35 Hurontario.

This block of Collingwood's Main Street from First/Huron to Second/Simcoe had the largest number of 3-storey brick buildings in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Of approximately a dozen such 3-storey buildings in the block (this does not include the now-gone Globe Hotel on the north side of Huron St.) only two remain, both of them on the east side. The others were cleared away by fire or demolition. On the west side of the street of the first block the 3-storey buildings were all north of the Federal Building, an area now a parking lot. The size of these late 19th Century buildings speaks to the optimism

and confidence of those who had them built. The ornate facades of these new buildings were a tribute to the brick layers' art and those that remain make Collingwood's downtown the special place it still is more than a century later.

As new brick buildings began to appear, the east side of the block was not rebuilt all at once. Empty lots remained here and there between newly constructed free-standing buildings. A case in point is the 2-storey building at 69 Hurontario St. to which I have a family connection. The empty lot on which it was built can be glimpsed in the lower photo on pg. 105 of *Butchers, Bakers...* This 22ft. wide piece of land between two newer buildings near where he was burned out in 1881, was purchased in May 1901 by my great-grandfather Robert Weber O'Brien.

Soon after this he erected the building that stands there today and it housed R. W. O'Brien & Co.'s Fur Store selling furs and gentlemen's furnishings. A photo of the interior shows bearskins on the floor and a multitude of mounted heads of deer, etc. on the walls, as well as many stuffed birds. Great-grandfather was a hunter and

spent time hunting in “the north country” (Muskoka) every fall.

When he first came to Collingwood about 1874 he had worked as a “pork inspector” (C. E. Stephens had a pork packing house) but soon went into business for himself on Hurontario St. as a grocer for many years. A victim of the Great Fire, in the 1890’s he took over a store at the corner of Hurontario and Third Sts., selling groceries, flour & feed, crockery and glassware. But with three daughters approaching marriageable age, his focus switched to things more profitable than perishable radishes, lettuce and tea leaves. (His eldest daughter became my grandmother Hewson, the second daughter became the mother of Dr. Bob Storey, and the third daughter who never married, outlived all the rest of the family).

With the advent of the town waterworks in 1889, the firemen had more effective means of fighting fires in the newly rebuilt business section. Water mains and hydrants notwithstanding, the newer brick buildings were still vulnerable to fire. Stores continued to be heated with stoves, many people smoked and carelessly

discarded or left unattended cigar and cigarette butts, kerosene lamps were still in use, etc. Doug Skeldings' book on the history of the town Fire Dept. recounts a fire in O'Brien's fur store in July 1910 that destroyed the interior, the exact cause apparently never determined, making this the second time his business was burned out on Hurontario St. The fire was "discovered" at 4:00 a.m. (It is interesting to note that many of the industrial and commercial fires in the early 20th Century started or were discovered in the early hours between midnight and 5 a.m.) My great-grandfather had recently passed his 61st birthday and it would appear that he retired from active business at this time. While he still owned the building, the business was restyled as O'Brien & Hewson, the principals being R. W.'s younger son, Robert Reginald O'Brien and my grandfather Robert James Hewson, R. W.'s son-in-law. My uncle, Howard Hewson, the next generation in the family to own the building and the business once told me that in the basement there was evidence of a fire from sometime in the past—a fire now known to have occurred in 1910. The current owner, Holly Stephenson (Poise on Main) has confirmed the

presence of blackened bricks in the basement and elsewhere on the building.

Even with today's state-of-the-art firefighting equipment, the brick buildings from the 19th Century have proved to be still vulnerable to fire even in more recent times. In the 1980's the Stephens Block and the adjacent Arlington Hotel—both of them 3-storeys—were destroyed in separate fires. And in 2000 the Temple Building suffered the same fate with one difference—it was rebuilt by the Trustees to look similar to its original appearance.

Many buildings have come and gone since Collingwood's earliest days when every building on the main street was constructed of wood. Then there was a trend to brick construction in the two decades before the Great Fire, followed by a massive building boom with bricks after the fire. In that first block of Hurontario St. some of those brick buildings have been lost, particularly all the ones north of the Federal Building right down to First St. Those that do remain (particularly on the east side) from that bygone era form a lasting tribute to those long-ago

merchants, architects and brick layers and give downtown Collingwood its unique character.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C .where he works as a piano tuner while maintaining a keen interest in the history of his hometown.

On October 2, 2017 David will be the guest speaker at the Collingwood District Historical Society Meeting, giving a special presentation on the Great Fire of 1881.