

PIKE LAKE CONSUMED BY FIRE

Kay Rogers

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“Burgess Almost One Blackened Waste” read the headline in the August 26, 1870, edition of the *Perth Courier*.

Eye witnesses tell me that the scenes in Burgess where the fire raged on those two days were of a most heart-rending character. As the fire approached a farm stead with the rapidity of a race horse at full speed the people were struck numb with terror. Men, women, and children cried in their agony of despair expecting every moment to be swallowed up by the flames...

***INSERT PHOTO OF FIRE 008

Source: Terence M. Currie, *The Ottawa Valley's Great Fire of 1870*, Creative Bound International, Canada, 2009, cover. ***

In one instance, the case of a Mrs. Byrnes who had a daughter — a young woman — lying at the point of death was greatly endangered by the fire and it was thought for the sake of safety to remove the dying girl which was affected only after considerable difficulty...

We return to the subject of the fire record again today, but happily not with the same sorrowful array of disaster that our pen was called upon to chronicle yesterday, at least not in our immediate vicinity. In Burgess, the fire continues to rage but the people have turned out en masse and are working night and day unwearily in fighting the fearful monster. ¹

The fire spread from Black Lake to both Pike and Otty Lakes. It burned the Stanleyville and Island, and Cedar Bridge schools, the Old Mill, known as Burgess Mill, and the homes of Owen Quinn and Thomas Tully. It also destroyed thousands of acres of valuable timber. ² Horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and dogs were all victims of the fire. On a contemporary note, Mary Donnelly remembers her dad showing her charred posts by Pike Lake, remnants of the Great Fire.

This was the Great Fire of 1870. As well as affecting North Burgess Township, it devastated much of Lanark and Carleton Counties, as well as the Gatineau. “The fire spread intermittently for a month. It finally reached the Rideau Lakes in the south, and Wakefield in the north. Three thousand farms were destroyed and thirteen people were killed by the fire.” ³ There are no records of anyone in North Burgess perishing in the fire.

Severe drought led to the Great Fire. In August 1870, the newspapers were reporting on the remarkable drought. No rain had fallen in the Ottawa Valley since April and, as a result, the countryside was a tinderbox. Fires were smoldering in many parts of the countryside. On August 17, “the wind was blowing a full hurricane of one hundred miles an hour, and the fire was

advancing at the speed of a trotting horse...Survivors report whole large trees thrown in the air, a ‘hailstorm of red-hot horizontal hail’ and the countryside going from dim and smoky to a full blaze in a matter of minutes.”⁴ Wooden houses, barns, and fences often constructed of highly flammable white cedar as well as piles of brush cleared for farming provided fuel for the fire.

*****INSERT MAP WITH CAPTION 009** Final Extent of the Fire, September 24, 1870.

Source: Currie, *The Ottawa Valley’s Great Fire*, p. 56.

[**Mag**, full page map please] ***

Heavy rains finally put the fire out in late September. People started the arduous task of rebuilding their homes and their livelihoods. Neighbours helped neighbours. Churches played a major role in relief efforts, and special fire relief funds were set up to accept private donations.

The fire led to a “rancorous” debate at Queen’s Park. There were those who considered giving relief unconstitutional, those who advocated loaning money to property owners at a rate two percent higher than the bank rate, those who feared that government assistance would “sew up the private purse of charity”⁵, and those who argued that the recipients would waste the money. Meanwhile, Quebec had already provided a cash grant to its fire victims.

In January 1871, Ontario succumbed to public pressure and agreed to a special grant of \$25,000 to the sufferers. “The enormity of the Ottawa Valley catastrophe produced a new situation where the reflex of keeping the public purse strings tightly drawn had the appearance of both injustice and insensitivity... Thus, the Great Fire of 1870 was significant in introducing government intervention for matters of public need.”⁶

The Great Fire of 1870 remained the largest natural disaster to strike the Ottawa Valley until the Ice Storm of 1998.

¹ *Perth Courier*, August 26, 1870, p. 2.

² St. Bridget’s Stanleyville and N. Burgess, *Pioneer Era and Memoirs*, Thomas Lithography Ltd., Kingston, Ontario, 1974, p. 42.

³ Terence M. Currie, *The Ottawa Valley’s Great Fire of 1870*, Creative Bound International Inc., 2009, p. 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

