

Porcupine Lake Only Refuge As Flames Swept South End

By PAUL DELEAN

A Northern Ontario summer implies many things, and not all are pleasant. The omnipresent spectre of forest fire, for example, is one of its disturbing aspects.

There are several forest fires burning today in Northern Ontario. They are likely no worse today than they were yesterday or will be tomorrow, but the fact that it's July 11 has a way of accentuating local emotions toward the destruction, menace and horror of forest fires.

It marks the anniversary, this year the 64th, of the great Porcupine Fire.

DEATH TOLL 73

That fire burned more than timber and wildlife. Over 70 Northern pioneers perished in the flames, which razed complete settlements in a rapid, extensive and horrendous path of destruction.

Over 5,000 residents of Cochrane, South Porcupine (South End) and points in between were left homeless after the blaze. The official death toll was 73, but because of the rapidity of the blaze and transient character of the residents, suspicions were that there may have been another 130 or so casualties.

The fire had been the result of above average spring and summer temperatures and a temperate winter characterized by a paltry snowfall. The bush had been dry early in the year, and minor fires had been erupting regularly.

HIGH TEMPERATURES

The dry spell was kindled to the point of eruption by a record temperature of 107 degrees Fahrenheit July 10. Small fires broke out simultaneously throughout the area. Brought together by a stiff wind, they soon melded into one gigantic northbound inferno, which the primitive fire prevention method of the time, the bucket brigade, was incapable of controlling.

The fire's attacking front soon extended for 20 miles, with flames climbing to heights of 150 feet. Abetted by a strong wind, it could travel six miles in 45 minutes.

By the morning of July 11, with the warning of the fiery onslaught already sounded, the residents of South Porcupine started to vacate their homes. Most were taken by boat to Golden City, now Porcupine a small community on the other side of Porcupine Lake.

BOAT SHORTAGE

A shortage of vessels, however, left a number of residents stranded on shore when the blaze hit the tiny settlement, still so new it was comprised almost entirely of log cabins.

The only escape was Por-

cupine Lake, and those remaining clung to anything that would float as they paddled out into its protective waters. The heat was intolerable, and the lake vigil required regular underwater dousings. Some wore moistened blankets over their heads. Though some drowned in the windswept waters, and almost all had their hair and eyebrows burned off by the searing heat, most would survive to tell the tale. This was not the fate of the majority of those who stayed on shore.

Newspaper accounts from Cobalt Daily Nugget indicate that two men, described as "foreign miners," were found in a trench where they had floundered in desperate attempts to combat the flames. They lived long enough to reach medical aid after suffering terrible injuries, but died soon after.

HUMAN FLESH

One Charles Pierce would find a small portion of human

flesh, a piece of a coat sweater, \$7.65 in money and a gold watch still running near a South Porcupine ice house after the blaze.

A "young fellow" came running to the McIntyre Mine, clothing afire and almost burned off.

He was horribly burned, and, says the story, was just able to gasp out "Oh, save me," when he fell dead.

Yet another man was reported to have been burned to a cinder, and the moment his body was touched it fell to pieces. The man was "found lying on his face in a position so as to suggest he was just raising himself when he died."

IN POOLS

In several instances, bodies of men were found later lying face downward in swampy places, or in small pools, and many of those were but charred

remains providing mute evidence of the intense heat of the fires, which were fanned by a gale which was said to have blown a mile a minute at times.

Possibly the most traffic tale in a litany of suffering is that of West Dome mine manager Bob Weiss, his family and several associates who sought refuge from the flames in the shaft of the mine.

The shaft, where they had sought safety was to be their deathbed. Under normal conditions, they would have been spared. However, the ferocity of the 1911 blaze and its considerable wind factor had not been foreseen. The raging fire sucked the oxygen from the shaft, and the 24 mine refugees died of suffocation.

There were horrors as well in the settlements of Pottsville, Goldlands and Aura Lake, which were wiped right off the map.