

" Storm of Flame "

The year 1853 was long remembered in Renfrew county as the " Black Year " . On May 16 , a terrible fire swept nearly the entire country from the Deep River to the Bonnechere River .

The spring of 1853 had been exceptionally dry . But this fire originated from the burning or clearing of new land in different parts of the county . A high wind developed and created a storm of flame that ruthlessly wiped out homesteads and settlements before being stopped at the Bonnechere River , near Renfrew . Approximately 350 homesteads were left in ruins , in a territory of 450 square miles ; yet , by a miracle only two lives were lost .

The destruction was so great that it prompted Rev. Goerge Bucker , a Congregational minister in Pembroke, to make a mercy tour of the fire swath in an effort to hasten Legislative and Municipal aid . Rev. Bucker then wrote a moving article for a newspaper , describing conditions in the stricken area . He described the tottering chimneys standing in the clearances , the heaps of broken kettles , twisted stoves and charred equipment , the skeletons of horses and cattle .

Rev. G. Bucker found the homeless people in hurriedly erected cabins with unchinked walls , but these cabins were palaces compared to the wretched camps of the poorer classes , who were poorly fed , poorly clad , and swamped by the pitiless rains that followed the drought . Others crawled on all fours into root houses scooped out of the sides of ravines , literally living in holes and caves of the earth .

For lack of fences around the fields , the surviving cows , often attacked by bands of wild dogs , had to be driven to the unburned bush where they remained unmilked for days .

Many children , lacking milk and butter , lived for the rest of the summer on dry bread and half-grown potatoes . Meanwhile the men , toiling early and late , endeavoured to gather the crops , already half-devoured by roving animals , into hastily erected , half-covered barns , or stacks in the fields .

It is to the everlasting credit of the rugged settlers that they eventually emerged from the disaster of 1853 , and made their districts as prosperous as any in the Ottawa Valley . Thus the human spirit triumphs over adversity and defeat . Across the years we salute the memory of that brave breed who builded better than they knew .