

\$62,000 fire leaves family homeless

An Acton family had to jump from a second floor balcony to safety early Friday morning, as fire swept their home, completely gutting it.

Mr. and Mrs. Cory Van Merkestein, of 114 Mill St., Acton, both sustained back injuries, and son Shawn received cuts and bruises during the blaze. His parents were rushed by ambulance to Georgetown and District Hospital, where Mr. Van Merkestein could be forced to stay for up to four weeks, Shawn told the Free Press.

Deputy fire chief Bob Hyde said the fire is believed to have started in the chesterfield in the living room. Mrs. Van Merkestein, he said, heard a crackling sound and when she went to the head of the stairs to investigate, flames and smoke were racing up the stairs, blocking their only exit from the second floor. She awoke the rest of the family and called the fire department at 3 a.m. A passing Halton Regional

Police officer, Constable John Lyver saw flames and smoke billowing out of the front window, and coaxed the family members to jump to the ground. He then placed them in his cruiser.

Police are grateful to an unknown woman who came by later with blankets for the three, to ward off the cold. She did not identify herself, and police would like to know who she is, explained constable Barry Holland, and give her due credit.

Mr. Hyde said the house went up in flames quickly, due to the amount of combustible furniture in the room. The blaze could be seen for several blocks against the night sky. Fire prevention officer Larry Brassard said if smoke detectors had been installed in the house, the family may have had more chance of escaping unharmed. The detectors would also have warned them in time and perhaps avoided as much damage.

Mr. Hyde said damage is set at \$62,000 for the house and contents. The Ontario Fire Marshal's office was called in and both came to the conclusion the cause is unknown, although, Mr. Hyde said, careless smoking was considered. Halton Regional Police are also investigating.

Mill St. was cordoned off to traffic as flames reached out as far as the sidewalk. Mr. Brassard said. Spectators, aroused by the fire truck and ambulance sirens, stayed well away from Acton Volunteer firefighters. Firefighters stayed on the scene until 7 a.m., when many men had to change clothes and go to work.

"They are three very very lucky people," Mr. Brassard said. "They are lucky they got out of there (the house) alive." Mr. Hyde agreed and said he did not know how they got out in time. "It could have been a real tragedy," he said. It is the second fire in the same house in the past six months, Mr. Brassard said.

It was also the second fire in less than 48 hours on Mill St., as firefighters from both Acton and Georgetown battled a blaze in Elissa Shoe Store Wednesday evening.

Shawn Van Merkestein told the Free Press he was living with his girl friend's family on Young St., but had no idea where the family would live once his parents were released from hospital. He surmised they would "move back up north".

The family restaurant, Chicken and Pizza Spot, has been kept open by Shawn and others since the fire.

Mrs. Van Merkestein, upon her release from the hospital on the weekend, went to stay with her sister in Port Carling to rest. Meanwhile, friends of the family are arranging to replace Mr. Van Merkestein's reading glasses which were lost in the fire, so he can read while lying in the hospital bed.



DESOLATE VIEW OF THE stairway and part of the upstairs hall at the Van Merkestein home a few hours after fire caused \$62,000 in damages last Friday morning. Icicles formed everywhere once the ashes cooled down.



SHAWN VAN MERKESTEIN stands morosely in front of his burned-out home Friday, after the chaos of a few hours before had died down. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Cory Van Merkestein were admitted to Georgetown hospital with back injuries after jumping from a second floor balcony, (top of photo) to safety. The fire broke out in the living room about 3 a.m.



HOME AT 114 MILL ST. was completely gutted by fire early Friday morning. Owners Mr. and Mrs. Cory Van Merkestein and son Shawn had to jump to safety from the second storey balcony, as flames engulfed the stairway to the front door. The exact cause of the blaze is unknown. Damage is estimated at \$62,000.

The Acton Free Press

One Hundred and Third Year.—No. 33.

ACTON, ONTARIO, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1978.

Twenty-Four Pages.—Fifteen Cents.

Emergency fund 40 firefighters

The Acton Lions Emergency Fund has been established in the Bank of Montreal to aid the families of Cory Van Merkestein and Gojko Cavic, who were victims of major fires last week.

The fund was established during a Lions club meeting Monday evening, and already has a donation of \$500 from that club to start it off. Anyone wishing to make cash contributions may do so merely by seeing a teller in that bank and depositing the money in the Acton Lions Emergency Fund bank account. Any other donations, such as furniture, or clothing, may be given to Vic Bristow. He can be reached at 853-2237.

The fund will be used as it is needed.

\$3,000 goal set for Acton heart fund

February is Heart Month across Canada and Acton is no exception.

Heart Fund drive organizer Vic Bristow said a goal of \$3,000 is set for this year, an increase of some \$300 over last year. He said he is confident he will reach this goal as the town has expanded. Because of the extra homes in town, Mr. Bristow pointed out, there are 100 canvassers as compared to only 85 last year.

These people have been out canvassing homes, businesses and industries

since February 1. They will have completed the drive by the end of the month.

Heart disease was the number one killer in Canada in 1974, claiming 82,859 lives. Cancer was in second place with 34,065 deaths.

Acton is just a small part of the national fund raising drive aimed at raising nine million dollars this year. Ontario is expected to raise five million dollars of this total. The drive is aimed to raise money to fight heart and blood vessel disease, and will be used for research only.

Almost 40 firefighters from Acton and Georgetown battled flames for six hours Wednesday as fire ripped through Elissa Shoes on Mill St., Acton. Damage is set at \$100,000, according to the Halton Hills fire department and the Ontario Fire Marshal's office.

Firemen were called to the scene at 5:15 p.m. and faced what veteran Bern Van Fleet described as "the most stubborn fire" he had ever seen. Because of the structure of the rear of the building, with a room built within a room, the fire could not be located. At first it was contained between the ceilings, said fire prevention officer Larry Brassard.

The firefighters had to cut through the ceiling and the roof in several places to locate the flames, and were hampered by thick black smoke. The poor ventilation of the building made it hard for the men to breathe, in spite of their Scott Air Packs. Part of the roof at the back of

the building was in danger of collapsing, and although no firefighters were hurt, it further impeded firefighting duties. The snow on tin and tar roof also made it difficult to cut through.

Mr. Brassard said to top everything off, everything outside was getting icy, including the ladders used by the men to climb onto the roof. Police had cordoned off the street to traffic and kept spectators out of the way of the firefighters.

The store has a buzzer system connected with the

door, so that the owners' wife, Mrs. Gojko Cavic, can stay upstairs in their apartment over the store, while there are no customers. Once someone comes in the door, Mr. Brassard told the Free Press, the buzzer sounds, and Mrs. Cavic goes downstairs.

Such was the case on Wednesday. Mrs. Cavic was upstairs with her two children, and had gone downstairs to wait on someone. When she got down, both she and the customer noticed smoke, Mr. Brassard said. Both immediately ran upstairs and got the children

and the customer phoned the fire department from a nearby store.

Mr. Brassard pointed out if the customer had not come in, the three people in the apartment could have been trapped upstairs, or died of smoke inhalation. The identity of the man is unknown. Mr. Brassard said the suspected cause is electrical wiring, and the fire could have been smouldering for two or three hours before it was detected. First reports of the family being completely burned out were inaccurate. Mr. Brassard said the fire was contained to the back storage area. However, he stated the apartment and the store did receive extensive smoke damage, but nothing that cannot be cleaned up. Merchants have supplied clothing for the family until their own is cleaned up. Stock in the back room was destroyed, and deputy fire

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Return offer unopened

An offer to buy the old pumping station in Acton will be returned unopened to Gordon B. Dawe, realtor, who made the offer on behalf of a Mississauga client.

It will be returned because the town has a policy that all town-owned land must be sold

by public tender. Halton Hills finance-administration committee agreed the offer must be returned, but Councillor Peter Marks said the would-be-purchaser should be told he was welcome to submit a tender when the land is advertised.

Committee asks independent regional government study

A committee of politicians formed to study regional government in Halton has recommended an independent study of regional government in Halton be made by a three person task force.

The region's Bill 151 Committee passed that recommendation after spending the entire morning reviewing and finalizing its own report on the review of regional government in Halton.

It is the second time such a recommendation has been made by the Bill 151 Committee. The first one was rejected by council several months ago.

Provincial Treasurer and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs Darcy McKeough rejected a request for such a study by the Actonians for Action Committee late last year.

Questioned by reporters following the meeting, Councillor Walter Mulkeiwich said the action by the committee indicated there is more study required than the committee is capable of.

Mulkeiwich conceded that the action didn't carry a great deal of credibility. He noted the recommendation was discussed and voted upon without a quorum, and reminded reporters that council had rejected the same resolution several months ago. Mulkeiwich said the effort of the committee has been a futile exercise. "Blanket statements have been made and biases have been hurled from both sides."

He said the lack of financial and technical data to back up recommendations left the committee without any degree of credibility.

The study should have been an investigation of local government and its relationship to the province and the whole matter of finances, he said.

The province has refused to give local government the tools to do the job and the committee "is flailing around, looking for recommendations."

Halton Hills Councillor Russ Miller said regional government is hard to justify

when taxes double and he blamed fallings of regional government on local and regional politicians.

He claimed Halton Hills had not reduced staff relative to the reduction in res-

Seek safety check of Acton town hall

The Ministry of Labor will be asked to inspect the Acton town hall to determine if it is safe for public use, if council agrees to Halton Hills finance-administration recommendation.

Councillor Peter Marks said he had read all consultant Alan Zeegen's reports and still did not know if the building is safe.

"Who closed down Georgetown arena", asked Councillor Russ Miller.

Recreation Director Glen Gray explained it was the Ministry of Labor, after the

possibilities, and claimed that had a bearing on increased costs.

"We are to blame. There is no sense blaming staff," he said.

Milton Councillor Jim

Watson said the Plunkett report was laughed at when it was presented, but "we would have been wise to follow it."

The Plunkett report, prepared by Thomas Plunkett (Continued on Page 3)

recreation department asked for an inspection.

Marks suggested the Zeegen reports be forwarded to the Ministry along with a request for an inspection. He said he felt it was necessary to find out if the building is safe for public use.

The recommendation will go to council next week.

In his reports, Mr. Zeegen said further inspection of the town hall was made during the construction of the fire hall addition. He said the roof structure was in poor condition with a great deal of

wood rot due to rain water leakage.

He reported the main roof beams at high level were not bearing on the wood post supports. There is a gap of about one half an inch between the bottoms of the posts and the tops of the posts and also a horizontal movement of about one inch. Calculations indicate the main beams to the roof area are overstressed.

The first and second floors are in good order. The exterior masonry walls are extensively cracked, his report said.



THICK BLACK smoke hampered fire fighting attempts Wednesday afternoon as fire ravaged through Elissa Shoes on Mill St. Some 40

firefighters from both Acton and Georgetown battled the flames for six hours. \$100,000 damage resulted.