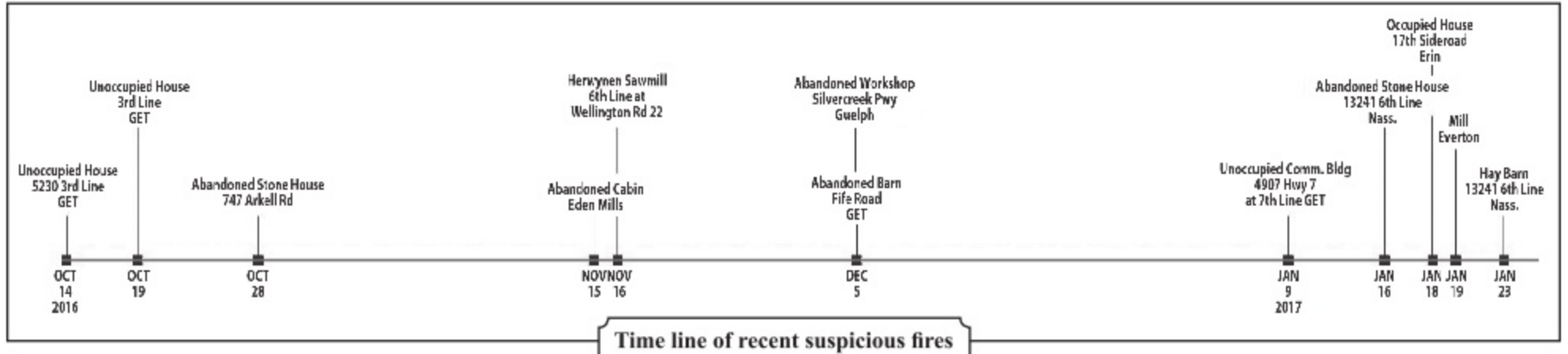


Suspicious fires in three counties have residents on edge



Time line of recent suspicious fires

By: Vivien Fleisher

For months now, firefighters in Wellington, Halton Hills and Milton have been called out to battle blazes on a number of abandoned buildings in and around Rockwood, Acton and farther afield. There had been a number of questions as to how those fires started before the end of 2016, but suspicion increased dramatically in 2017 with the total destruction of the Hortop Mill in Everton on January 19. Owned by the GRCA, the stately wooden flour mill had just recently graced one of the winning stamps issued by Guelph-Eramosa's Heritage Committee last fall. Like the other fires, this one started in the wee hours, giving it plenty of time to become fully engulfed by the time firefighters arrived on scene. The loss of this heritage building wasn't just heartbreaking; it was downright scary, as people were reminded of the strong possibility of an arsonist in their midst.

Proving arson is a very difficult task however. Bob Bortolato, of the Wellington OPP, says that while investigators are doing their bit, it's the public that can provide them with the kind of information they need to crack such a case. It's a lot like a neighborhood watch, where you

might notice something out of place, someone you don't recognize, or a vehicle. No information is too trivial in matters like these, and maintaining good relationships with neighbors is important for property owners worried about their own buildings. Of course, if the building is abandoned, securing it is difficult. However, he points out that technology has improved greatly, while at the same time the costs have come down. Regular property checks are also critical.

Mike Skoularicos, with the Halton Regional Police, spoke about three fires in north Milton in the past few weeks. Two involved hay, which under the right conditions can combust. However, area farmers said conditions weren't quite right for that and so the investigation continues. Of those three fires, two were at the same property: first, the stone farmhouse, and a week later, the hay barn, which took two days to extinguish. The current owners have farmed the property for a decade but not resided on site, and son Marko was visibly

distraught at the loss the second morning when firefighters had to return for a third time.

Two weeks earlier, due north of that property, an empty commercial property on Highway 7 burned to the ground, an anomaly where investigators are concerned, since it wasn't abandoned, but also highly suspicious.

Guelph Eramosa Fire Chief Jim Petrik said, "If we don't find a cause, we're left with calling it suspicious."

In fact, since there is zero possibility of the usual human activities being a cause—faulty wiring, careless smoking, cooking, heating etc.—and since there haven't been any lightning events during any of the recent fires, there are few items left on the list that could initiate such an event. Investigators can look for evidence of an accelerant, or a pattern to the



Scene at the recent Commercial building fire on Hwy 7. - Les Schmidt photo

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list that could initiate such an event. Investigators can look for evidence of an accelerant, or a pattern to the

burn, but unlike the tidy endings in TV dramas, real life isn't so neat. The worry with arson is the possibility of an escalation of events, and Petrik advised, "Be vigilant."

If you have any information, call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS) or submit a tip on-line at www.csgw.tips. You could be eligible for a reward from Crime Stoppers of up to \$2,000. And you can remain anonymous.

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