

Ten Years Ago in Timmins

FROM DATA IN THE PORCUPINE ADVANCE FILES

Practically the whole space in The Advance of August 2nd, 1916, is given over a report of the 1916 forest fire that swept the North Land. Indeed apart from three short items, the Honour Roll of Soldiers, enlisting from the Porcupine, and a couple of letters from soldiers overseas, the whole space in the paper, apart from the advertising columns, is devoted to references to the disastrous fire. It was recognized as the most important and tragic event in the history of the North, with the exception of the 1911 fire. "Death and Devastation Take Toll in Life and Property," says the heading right across the full six columns of The Advance. Another heading says: "From Matheson to Cochrane on the T. & N. O. Main Line and Branches East and West, Death and Devastation Have Laid Their Hands Heavily Upon New Ontario." "Outrivals Porcupine Fire," another heading says.

The Advance had a complete story of the fire, as given by an eyewitness of the holocaust. "For six long weeks," say The Advance, "Northern Ontario had sweltered in the grip of a continued drought, and the intense heat had dried out the forest and muskeg until the experienced Northerner shook his head in ominous warning of the certain outcome of this protracted spell of heat. The bush and muskeg had been sapped dry of all moisture and the whole north country was left ready and hungry for the touch of fire. Fire started in a great many different localities on Saturday last, July 29th, and as a result the best part of Cochrane is in ruins; the thriving town of Matheson is laid flat, save for the flagpole on the station garden plot, from which waves the Union Jack unharmed, the ensign of an undaunted race which will build anew the country so lately made desolate; Nushka, Ramoe, Kelso, and the other settlements in the radius of the fire have been wiped out so clean that when The Advance representative visited the several scenes there was not a stick the size of a man's arm left to mark their former sites. Ribands of tangled iron and shapeless kitchen stoves served only to mark them as the recent habitat of human beings. As the news filtered through to the Gold Camp, and the inhabitants of Timmins had partially recovered from their own miraculous escape of the same terrible fate, relief work was got under way and on Sunday a special train was run out as far as Porquis Junction."

Continuing its story of the relief work, The Advance says that from Porquis, Dr. Hainey and W. M. Widfield went in to Iroquois Falls and left supplies with Mr. Mahoney. They returned to the Junction and proceeded south on a hand car and were on the scene twelve hours or more before any other medical help arrived. Dr. Hainey put in a hard night's work in the vicinity of Monteith, Matheson and Nushka, where he rendered aid, with almost superhuman staying power, to the avalanche of sufferers who came in at these points. He had high praise for the untiring assistance given by "Widdy." On Monday morning another train was made up and business men and others worked hard rounding up clothing, bedding and food for the stricken sections. Two freight cars were filled with necessities of all kinds. A party accompanied the train, including Mayor Wilson, Rev. J. M. Allen, Dr. McInnis, Rev. J. D. Patterson, Lieut. Kennedy, T. F. King, Pte. Kelly, W. G. Smith, J. Dalton, V. Woodbury, C. Pierce, S. McLeod, J. T. Easton, K. F. Delong, E. J. Meyers and C. Wooderft (Advance representative). The relief train also carried Godfrey Proulx, of Timmins, who had received word that his brother, his brother's wife and three children had lost their lives on a farm near Cochrane. There were heartrending scenes at Porquis when the train arrived. Women and children who had borne the terrible strain bravely enough broke down after realizing that they were safe. So many had lost loved ones in the fire. Rev. Mr. Allen took one young girl off the train who had lost 22 relations and was alone in the world. He brought

her to Timmins where a good home was found for her. A Mrs. Smith, an elderly lady, collapsed on reaching the platform, and her little girl, a tot of eight years, stood crying and hugging a small fox terrier, the only thing she had saved. Countless stories were told of tragic incidents of the fire. A little girl of twelve was rescued from a well near Matheson, where she and five others had taken refuge. They were all badly burned. The little girl showed the greatest bravery as Dr. Lowery worked on the terrible burns on her legs. Gilbert Lee, of the T. & N. O. railway staff, went unshamed as he told of this brave lassie.

By the way, the T. & N. O. railwaymen were heroes at the time of the fire. Train crews were on duty without thought of sleep from Saturday noon to Monday night without rest or relief. They worked gallantly and without stint. One crew at Matheson took on passengers and ran the train through the smoke to safety down the line, and then returned to pick up others. They did this in face of coal cars burning on the track at Matheson and the tracks warping beneath their train. The lunches of the men of the crews went to women and children and some of the railwaymen were for over a day without food themselves.

Search parties of soldiers of the 228th and other parties under the supervision of Mr. Matt. Boivin, of Timmins, left Timmins in Monday night to search for survivors and the bodies of those losing their lives. Mr. Boivin's knowledge of the bush and of the country were of the greatest help, and he gave very generous and useful service.

Approximately three hundred deaths occurred in the fire-swept area. There were twenty-eight deaths in the Cochrane vicinity. Ten bodies were recovered from the ruins at Iroquois Falls, and thirteen at Onagan close by. At the "Y" the only thing left standing was the flagpole. Every house from Iroquois Falls to Porquis Junction was destroyed. The "Little Father" Gagne, of Nushka (now called Val Gagne, in his honour), was among those giving his life in effort to save others.

Among those mentioned by The Advance as giving aid to the sufferers and assisting in the work of relief (apart from those already mentioned) were:—J. A. Theriault, Gordon Leavoy, J. R. Gordon, Geo. Preston, W. J. Strothers (Porquis Junction), J. P. McLaughlin, D. Ostrasser, C. D. Kaeding, Gordon Gauthier and Geo. Bannerman, of Porcupine, E. G. Dickson and J. N. Joy, of South Porcupine, C. G. Williams, A. R. Gloge and others. Many of those mentioned were on the Fire Relief Committee formed in this Camp.

Miss Atcheson, a trained nurse, came in for great praise from the doctors and others for her wonderful work. She was a heroine and an angel of mercy, and was tireless in her efforts for the suffering.

Postmaster Watt and Dr. Reed, of Kelso, both lost their lives in the fire. When the doctor's body was found he had a sponge saturated with chloroform held to his nose, and it was supposed that he fought the fire until all hope was gone and then used the chloroform rather than needlessly endure the slow and painful death from smoke and fire.

Timmins did not escape altogether from this fire that caused so much loss of life and property in the district. On Saturday morning, July 29th, fire started on the new Government road west of Timmins, and soon

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secured a firm hold in the stumps and dried-out muskeg. There was a strong wind blowing and the fire looked so threatening that a call was given for the Timmins firemen. The fire brigade assembled at the hall, but, as the fire was outside the town limits they were not ordered to the fire. The firemen laid out hose and otherwise prepared to battle the fire, but it was afternoon before the word was given. The fire had great headway then and before evening twenty houses were burned to the ground. There was much excitement in town and for a time it looked as if Timmins might be wiped out. Householders carried away their goods, hoping for safety at a distance. Others buried valuables. In the fighting of the fire, three of the brigade, assistant chief E. H. Hill, Alf Luxton and Sam McLeod were overcome and had to retire for a time. Miss Delong took them in her motor car to the Imperial Bank where they were cared for by Mrs. Poirier and Mrs. Delong. Major Wilson, A. R. Gloge, Jules Timmins, Capt. Allen, Wm. Stoddard and others were prominent in the work of fire-fighting and directing the work. Chief of Police Albert Courtemanche also was of very noteworthy service. The Advance recalls the fact that the Chief and others had to use revolvers to impress some of the foreigners with the necessity of aiding in preventing a general conflagration. These foreigners, after saving their own effects, simply stood around in the way, and in some cases actually laughed at the troubles of the good citizens of the town. The Chief and other citizens, however, were eventually able to impress the seriousness of the situation. A car load of dynamite on the track at the south end of the station yard caused some anxiety but the T. & N. O. rushed in an engine and hauled the explosive out of the danger zone. Some dynamite used in road building did explode in town during the fire, but did no special damage. Towards evening the wind changed and the fire died gradually down. Again, the proverbial

luck of Timmins, backed by hard work and effort, saved the town from serious loss. The people learned the lesson of the fire since 1916 no fire near the town has been allowed to get under way without a battle from the brigade here. Also, the town went right on to buy fire-fighting equipment and generally to guard against the chances of any further serious menace to the existence of the town through the danger of fire. Thus at the cost of thought and effort and money has the "Timmins Luck" in the matter of fires been bought. It is appropriate here to mention that the leader in securing proper fire protection for Timmins was Dr. J. A. McInnis, through whose persistence, patience and public-spiritedness the town is largely indebted for the fine fire protection system enjoyed.

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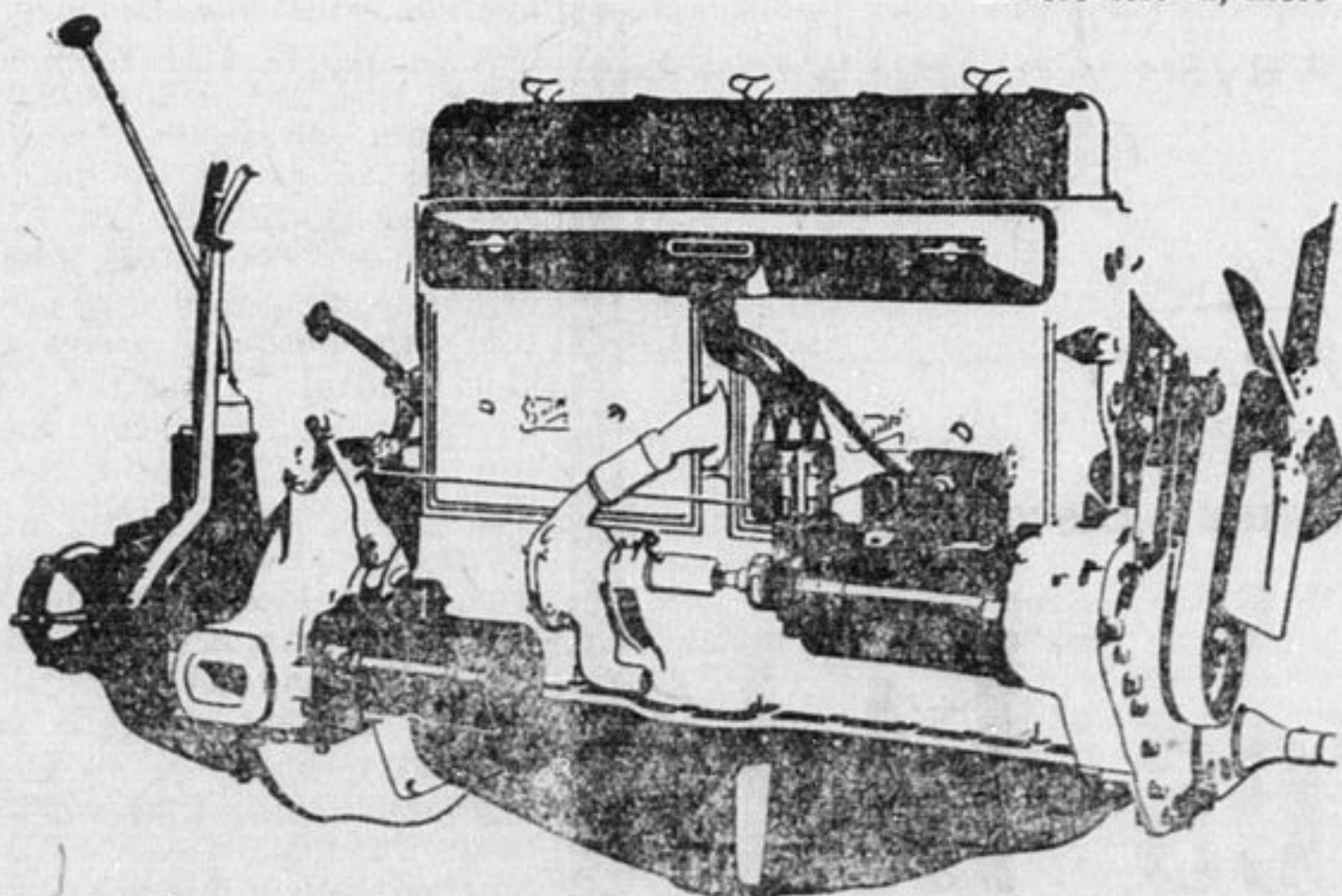
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