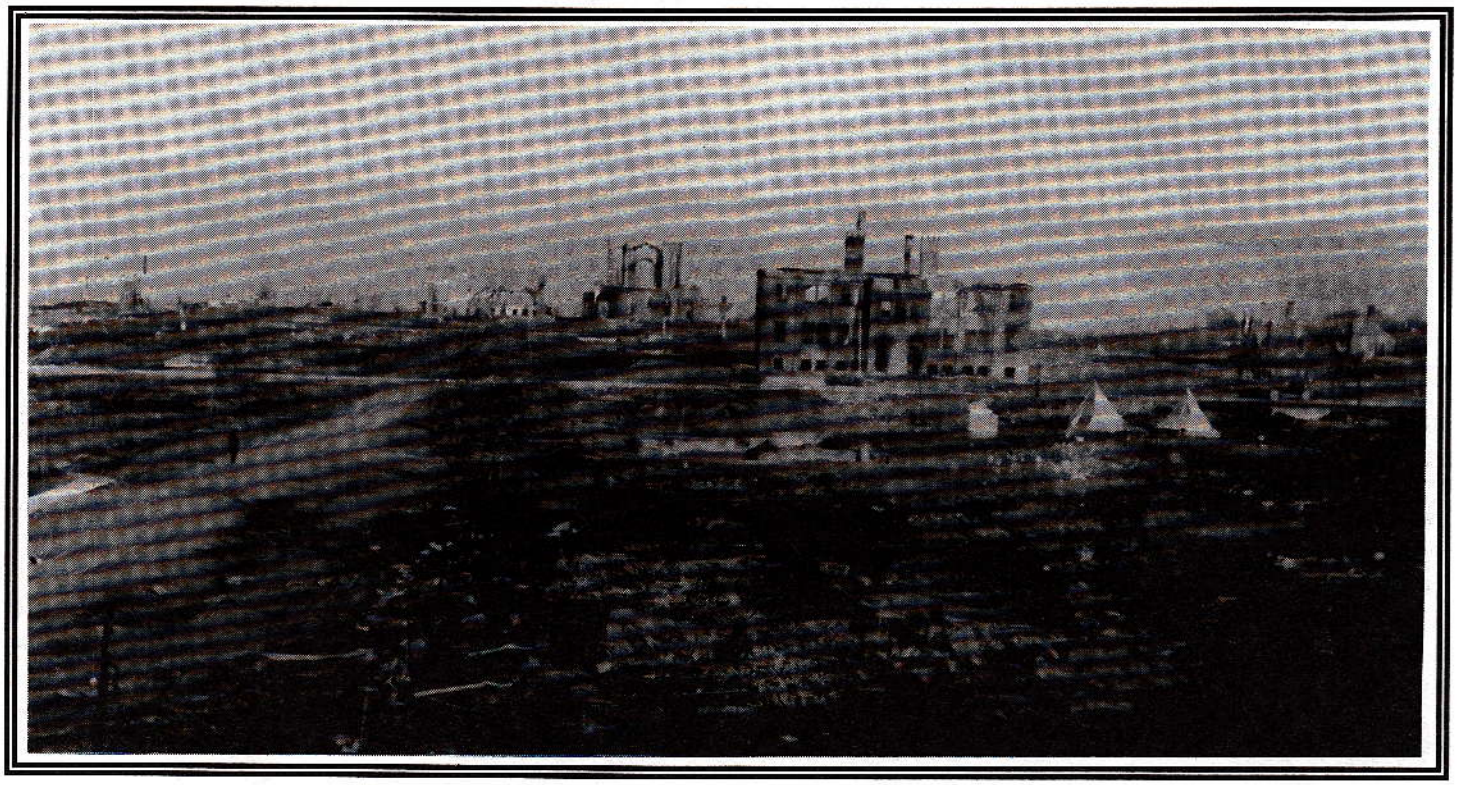
*The Heritage Dispatch* Vol. 1 No. 3

Friends of the Haileybury Heritage Museum Newsletter - September 1997

COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

# THE GREAT FIRE OF 1922



*Haileybury ruins following the Great Fire of 1922. Public School in foreground. Catholic Church in background.*

This edition of *The Heritage Dispatch* has been timely printed to coincide with the 75th Anniversary of "The Great Fire of October 4th, 1922." On that horrifying day, in which 18 townships burned, both in the District of Temiskaming and in the Province of Quebec, the lives of 1,744 families were permanently changed. Forty-three people perished in the inferno, eleven losing their lives in Haileybury. For the survivors of this terrible conflagration, the horror of that day will always remain permantely etched in the memory. So horrendous was the devastation following The Great Fire of 1922 that it later became recognized as one of Canada's ten worst disasters.

The 75th Anniversary Committee in conjunction with The Haileybury Heritage Museum, has for the last year, been organizing celebrations in commemoration of The Great Fire. This four-day event, slated for the weekend of October 2-5, 1997, plans to bring together survivors from not only the Temiskaming District but across Canada and the United States. The event will no doubt rekindle old acquaintances but will also spawn new friendships for many of the hundreds of expected attendies.

It is with great honour that the bulk of this publication be filled with many stories and recollections by survivors. Although The Great Fire of 1922 did obliterate 90% of the Town of Haileybury, it's path of destruction affected all those living in our immediate area. For this reason, *The Heritage Dispatch* will reflect memories of The Great Fire as seen through the eyes of many who lived in this area of South Temiskaming. ■

Brian Dobbs
Editor, *The Heritage Dispatch*

# HAILEYBURY'S GREAT FIRE

Written by Shannon Drainville, Grade 6 Haileybury Public School student,
Speech prepared for H.P.S. Public Speaking Contest February 1997.

On October 4th, 1922, something terrible happened in Haileybury. People lost their homes and almost everything was destroyed. Many people died and some were injured. What was this terrible event? This was the destruction wrought by Haileybury's Great Fire.

Farmers were permitted to burn brush but the fall was very hot and dry. Fanned by a strong west wind, these small fires became one big fire which would eventually cover three hundred thousand acres extending north of Charlton and spreading across south of North Cobalt.

Haileybury had looked at a sun, blocked by heavy smoke for many days, but never thought of approaching doom. At noon on the fourth, a fire bell called all able-bodied men to the railway station.

The men tried their hardest to stop the fire from spreading. The fire had by-passed the houses on the West Road. These were to burn in another bush fire. If the wind hadn't been so strong, the men would have been successful in their efforts but it became an impossible task. Disaster struck at 4 p.m. A train was coming along and cut off the hydrant lines that were laid across the tracks. Naturally, the water pumps were shut down. The roof of the train station was burning embers which were going through the air and towards the lake. As a result, the roofs of the Anglican and Presbyterian churches, the Vendome hotel, and the roof of the warehouse were set on fire.

*Haileybury Fireman Gervais Sutherland.*
*A hero of the Great Fire of 1922.*

Now it was up to the telephone girls to stay on the lines to warn the residents to leave for safety. A dozen or so made it to Cobalt in their cars. Most of the people made their way to the lakeshore at the south end of town. Sparks were flying over their heads as they watched the town being destroyed.

The fire was south of North Cobalt by 8 p.m. It burned into Lorrain Valley. Many people were burned when they looked for shelter at the dock warehouse. Unfortunately, it was the fourth building to burn. Forty-three people died, eleven from Haileybury. Two people were sheltered in the Roman Catholic Cathedral but the intense heat made it collapse.

Finally, the fire was out. It burned itself out in the Lorrain Valley. The Great Fire had burned seven hundred homes and seventy-five businesses. All that was left was seventy houses and the high school. Three houses miraculously escaped the fire on Albert Street. People were devastated by the loss.

Relief trains carrying food and clothing reached the area within forty-eight hours. Lumber was given to people to build temporary shelters. The City of Toronto donated eighty-seven street cars to the survivors to be used as their homes until they could rebuild. Not long after, water was available. Some businessmen set up their shops in temporary shelters. From the ashes, a town was beginning to emerge.

On a windy, warm day, the town had gone from prosperity to ruin within twenty-four hours. The Great Fire had taken its toll but it hadn't won the battle. The fighting spirit of Haileybury's early settlers was not to be extinguished.

When I look at this beautiful little town, it's hard to believe that this terrible incident happened. But from the ashes, beautiful parks, trees, and homes have appeared.

The Heritage Museum holds the memories and history of the Great Fire, one of the ten worst disasters in Canadian history. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Great Fire of 1922. Be thankful that the brave and courageous survivors of the fire chose to rebuild and give us back our town. ■

was over. Before daybreak a snowfall blanketed the charred remains of the inferno.

The morning of October 5 revealed the true devastation of the Great Fire. Haileybury lay in an unrecognizable wasteland. Seven hundred and twenty-five families were now homeless with little or no possessions. Eleven people in Haileybury lost their lives including firefighter Gervais Sutherland who gave up his seat in an automobile for the safety of two small children. The townspeople would bury him as a hero of the fire.

One of the largest relief campaigns in Ontario soon began as trainloads of blankets, tents, medicine supplies, food, and clothing arrived from the T. Eaton Co., Simpson's, and the Canadian Red Cross. The City of Toronto financially assisted with a $25,000 donation as did both the provincial and federal governments with their contribution of $100,000. On October 17, only two weeks following the fire, the Toronto Transit Commission sent 87 used streetcars for temporary housing. Sixty went to Haileybury, ten to North Cobalt, and the remainder were brought to the communities of Charlton, Thornloe, and Heaslip. A quarter of a million board feet of lumber would soon arrive to help build 16 by 20-foot homes.

A report in December 1922 by the Provincial Fire Marshall E. P. Heaton summarized the terrible disaster. The Great Fire of 1922 burned 648 square miles, reached into eighteen townships, and affected the lives of 1,744 families. Six million dollars of property were lost in the fifteen-hour blaze. Haileybury residents alone incurred over half the total loss. Every public building in Haileybury burned except the high school. Miraculously only 43 people died in all the confusion, terror, and severity of the fire.

A major rebuilding effort came in the summer of 1923. The sounds of banging hammers echoed throughout town as new homes were erected and municipal and government buildings were replaced. Nevertheless, Haileybury had lost something far more than its bricks and mortar. The ambiance of culture and sophistication, its very heartbeat that made it unique from many other Northern Ontario communities, had vanished. Townspeople moved, businesses opened elsewhere, and in many ways, Haileybury had lost its lustre. History now tells us that the Great Fire of 1922 became the major turning point in the town's life.

Every October 4 holds special meaning for those living in the Little Clay Belt. It is a day to pause, reflect, and pay homage to those who perished and endured through one of Canada's worst disasters, the Great Fire of 1922. ■

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**Thursday, October 2nd, 1997**

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| Noon - 8:00 pm. | Early Registration at the Haileybury Heritage Museum |

**Friday, October 3rd, 1997**

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| 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. | Registration at the Haileybury Heritage Museum |
| 9:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. | Bus Tour of the Western Fire Route |
| 6:30 p.m. | Fire Bell Commemoration at the Haileybury Fire Hall |
| 7:00 p.m. | Fire Survivors Parade |
| 7:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m. | Reception at Cobalt-Haileybury Curling Club |

**Saturday, October 4th, 1997**

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| 9:00 a.m. - noon | [illegible] useum | 5:00 p.m. - 6:30 p.m. | Formal Dinner |
| 9:00 a.m. - noon | Bus Tour of the [illegible] ire Route | 6:30 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. | Survivors: Presentations and Photographs |
| 9:00 a.m. - noon | Bus Tour of Haileybury-Bucke Township | | |
| Afternoon | Free Time or local tours on your own | 7:30 p.m. | Entertainment |
| 4:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. | Cocktails at the Haileybury Curling Club | | |

**Sunday, October 5th, 1997**

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| Morning | Church of your choice | 2:00p.m. - 4:00p.m. | "Fire in the North" by Leslie McFarlane at Classic Theatre |
| 9:00 a.m. - 1:15 p.m. | Champagne Brunch at Curling Club | | |