



History- The Big Fire of 1922

Mr. Hilaire Damphousse from Notre-Dame-du-Nord has given us a document in which he retells the story of the “Big Fire”. He was a witness. At that time, he was 16 years old. With his permission, we have rewritten, almost verbatim, respecting all of his expressions which reflect the emotions that he sensed during this tragic event.

Sadly, Mr. Damphousse passed away since he handed us this document, leaving behind this precious inheritance. All of his life, he collected and conserved various newspaper articles in which there was talk of his parish and his county. He has written a lot as well. History lovers such as ourselves have relished in the precious information that we have been able to gather from these documents.

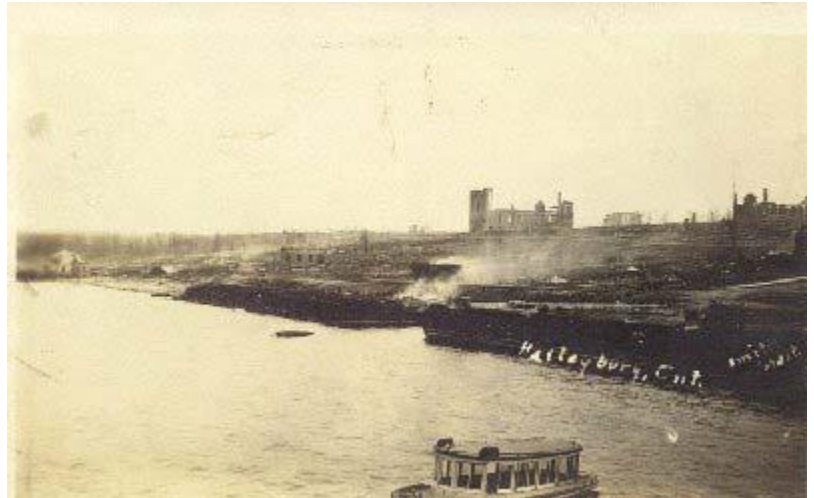
Thank you, Hilaire.



In the fall of 1922, the population of Témiscamingue was trying to revive itself from the terrible hardships caused by the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918. No one was able to predict that another hard blow would soon take place.

The rural areas were all dried out after a few months without rain. There was no water anywhere. A few fires were put out here and there. Even though some believed that there was no eminent danger, others were fearful that a small fire could quickly feed an outbreak of fires. And then it happened. At daybreak on the tragic day of Wednesday October 4th 1922, the wind began to rise softly as though it were caressing. But by noon time, it began to blow harder and harder. Around two o'clock in the afternoon, violent winds awoke the sleeping fires. Huge smoke clouds rose and thickened. The wind was blowing in the South-West direction. In Haileybury, the fire started at the train station. With the winds steadily increasing in speed, any type of debris caught fire and flew up to the rooftops. Homes and buildings all caught fire at the same time and the town was sliced in two. Around 5 p.m., the winds changed to North West with such speed that people had

difficulty standing up. All of a sudden, a terrible explosion shook the town - an oil tank had just exploded. Everything went up in flames like a match box. People were panicking. The Sisters from Assumption, Monsignor Élie Anicet Latulipe and many citizens took refuge in the wavy waters of Lake Témiscamingue. And the water in the month of October is cold. People hid under any cover, but many had none. With eyes reddened by the smoke, pierced by the cold, in tears, they watched as all of their belongings burnt down. In less than 6 hours, almost everything was in ruins. But when the wind turned North West, the northern part of the town and New Liskeard, which had already had a lot of hardships, were spared. But the southern part of Haileybury and North Cobalt burnt. Sad results: in North Cobalt, 11 dead and in Haileybury, 32 dead. 1,565 homes were burnt down - 6,566 people were without homes and lost everything. The fire had destroyed 18 townships, which amounted to a total of 648 square miles. Desolation was at its maximum around 3:30-4 p.m. because of the smoke. It was as dark as the middle of the night. But the fire didn't stop there. It continued its destructive path towards Belle-Vallée, Notre-Dame-du-Nord and Nédelec. At that time, our village was called North Témiscaming. As in Haileybury, the winds blew with speeds up to 80 miles per hour. The Big Fire appeared at the property of Mr. Élie Marcoux (known today as Mrs. Denis'



property) and in the Cossette Range Road along the provincial line (Little Nédelec). In the Cossette Range Road, only Mr. Treffe Laforge's property was spared and all of the families from the range road took refuge there. In Judge, Ontario, the fire burnt almost everything in its path but here, as though like magic, a few buildings were spared in the range road and close to Lake Témiscamingue; the Kelly family, Léon Beaudry, Legendre and the docks where boats landed. But everything else burnt: the entire lower town, the right side of rue Principale all the way up to Ontario St. on both sides of the National Bank, Mr. Alphonse Dupuis' store and the pharmacy of Mr. Armand Beauséjour on the north side. Here, as in Haileybury, the town was sliced in two. The school burnt down, which also served as a chapel since the destruction of our church by fire on January 1st 1919. The real church and the presbytery, which were under construction, were spared. The parish priest, Joseph Gauvin, first in charge of the parish after the Fathers of the Oblates', did everything in his power to console the parishioners and boost morale. Those whose homes were spared, tried to help the more devastated ones as much as possible. Here, we deplore a loss of life: Mr. Émile Nadeau. He perished while wanting to check on his properties in Little Nédelec. He was the brother-in-law to Mrs. Philippe Delay, Henri Furey and Rémi Martel. Here as elsewhere, the desolation was immense — cries, screams, laments, it was sad to see and to hear!

Around 6 p.m. as in Haileybury, the wind changed to North West which saved the north sector of the village, but burnt down the East side all the way to Desjardins Street.

In the meantime, since the winds were so strong, the fire jumped the river and continued to ravage on the Notre-Dame-Des-Quinze side. The burning debris multiplied, the fire was everywhere. It began by destroying the buildings owned by Mr. Oliva Rivard but the house was spared. The fire continued its way to Range Road 4 and everything on its path burnt. There was a lot of forest at that time and since everything was so dry and the force of the winds was measured up to 70 to 80 miles per hour, the fire advanced at an incredible speed.

Mr. Zénon Lacasse was harvesting when the Big Fire appeared from afar. Mr. Rodrigue Gagné decided to try to save the machinery from the fire. He harnessed the mare to the engine, brought it to the field and returned quickly to save his harvester. He worked arduously. He was alone, all the others were gone. All of a sudden, a gust of strong winds appeared, transporting with it burning debris and everything went up in flames, the barn, the harvester, the mare. Mr. Gagné was spared and suffered only burns.

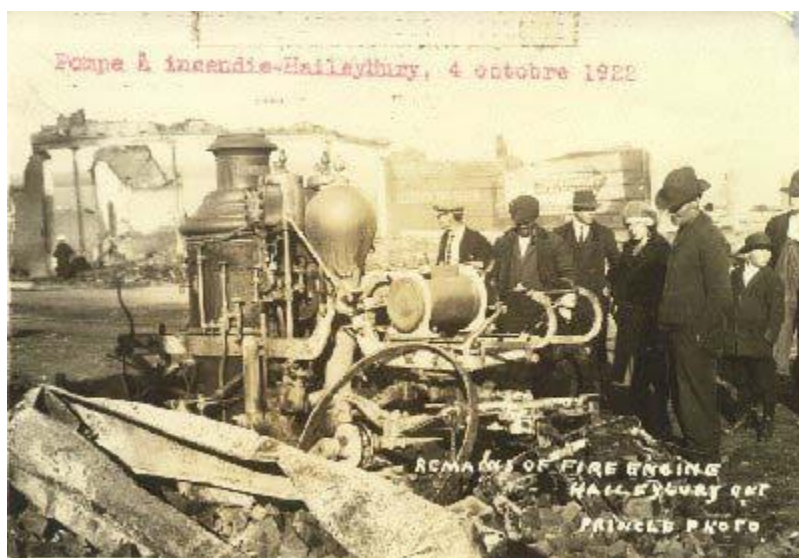


Seeing the big fire coming, Mr. Elie Laliberté harnessed his horses to the wagon near the house to save his family, his elderly mother and young children. He packed in pillows and blankets. All of a sudden, with a sinister howl, the wind turned to the North West! The fire transported itself at an incredible speed and everything resembled the end of the world. The elderly mother and the children had barely enough time to get down from the wagon. The horses panicked and threw themselves crazily into the burning barn and everything burnt. The house, thought to be spared, also burnt. The Laliberté, Lacasse, Pleau, Lannoue families and others, panicked and took refuge in the gully behind Dorilla Bouchard's home. The laments were mixed with screams from children and cries from hungry babies, not having been fed for many hours. Believe me when I say that those who lived through this cataclysm have survived some terrifying hours. I shiver just thinking back on those events.

In our area, on Range Roads 4 and 5, the wind was North West. The fire was raging in the forest on Range Road 4. Four homes, as through magic, were spared: the homes of Dorilla Bouchard, Ernest De La Chevrotière, Christophe Laliberté and that of Mr. Maillard, which was unoccupied. The fire started up again at the home of Joseph Lacasse, Ernest Damphousse, Édouard and Oscar Champoux. The old school as well as the new one, even though they caught fire many times, were saved. In that year of 1922, the teacher was Madame Rivard. She took refuge in Mr. Oscar Champoux's fields. At the Joseph Lacasse homestead, everything was burnt, they were left with nothing!

Mr. Adélarde Perron who lived 3 miles north of the village used to buy wool to card and resell. In a flash, his cart filled with wool, went up in flames and there was nothing left but cinders. The Big Fire continued to ravage up the property of Paul Parent where it destroyed everything. The Big Fire lit up dried up pine tree stumps on Joseph Perrault's lot (Grand Jos), better known today as the Relais and caught fire in the straw behind the Côme Perreault barn. They lost all of their belongings: home, harvest and animals.

The Big Fire was burning in Nédelec at the same time as in Témiscaming North. It made its way to the Plamondon-Béland Road, known today as King Road. The first to receive this sad visitor were Joseph Bédard and Fernand Touzin on Range Road 2 and 3. It continued to ravage on the big range road at the Sinaï and Téléphore Lafrenière homestead. Alphonse's camp did not burn down. At the Leblanc's (Victor's father), at Adalma Germain, Donat Ayotte, Napoléon Roy, Adélarde, Josaphat and Donat Garneau, everything burnt,



fanned by the South West winds. The town was thought to be spared but all of a sudden, like elsewhere, the wind veered North West. Only the church was spared. The founding parish priest in Nédelec from 1914 to 1930, Father Louis Z Moreau, who was very devout, did his best to comfort and help parishioners. The Big Fire in Nédelec left 52 families homeless. They still had not forgotten the 1916 fire which caused huge losses. That night, around eleven o'clock, the wind became very cold and people gathered around a controlled campfire to warm up – they greatly appreciated the sandwiches made of lard and warm blankets that were offered to them.