

The Wawa Fire

-by Donald Pugh

The summer of 1921 was the hottest and driest in Algoma's history. During the month of July, Michipicoten residents constantly saw smoke and read reports of a massive bush fire burning to the North along the C.P.R.

R.S. McCormick, general superintendent of the Algoma Central Railway, reported publicly on July 6th. that, "if we do not get some rain mighty quickly, we are going to have the entire country between the A.C.R. and the C.P.R. wiped out by bush fires". Only the week before, the Lake Superior Paper Company's large lumber camp at Millwood had been burnt to the ground leaving only smouldering ashes. Three days later a new fire was reported at the junction of the C.N.R. and the A.C.R. and Hearst, and was spreading southward. Fires at Bellevue and Searchmont on the A.C.R. had been checked. However, by July 24th. Michipicoten was surrounded by fires to the North, south, east and west. It appeared so dry that the very ground was on fire. A large fire was being fought to the North of Wawa and was believed to be under control. A shift of the wind to the east, and its increase to a half gale, turned the sullen fire into a furious furnace which sped over the ground as fast as a man could run. Six men from the Mission attempted to protect the largely deserted ghost town of Wawa. To the North, the fire was burning furiously towards the doomed Helen Mine. Nothing could be done to save the enterprise. To the south, the Roman Catholic Church burst into flames. Soon the town was surrounded by a ring of fire. The smoke was suffocating, forcing the fire

fighters back towards the lake. Numerous buildings caught fire at the rear of the town. One resident succeeded in saving the jail, 'though it caught fire several times. A break in the smoke about five in the evening revealed the Helen Mine burning amidst a fiery inferno over the complete Helen range. By six, a change in wind protected the remaining six or seven buildings in Wawa. But of the Helen Mine and Steep Hill Falls Power Plant, not a building remained. The Magpie Mine, on the morning of July 25th. stood in danger. A train was brought in to take the women and children away from the settlement. In Wawa, fire had again broken out, burning two more buildings, while the main fire swept on towards Michipicoten Falls and Anjigomi.

By August 4th. the fire danger was over. The falling of rain had saved the Magpie Mine. Mission residents bitterly regretted the burning of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the arrival of the steamer "Caribou", with a dozen canoes and thirty prospectors, timber cruisers, and tourists, suggested that some revival might still be possible for the region.

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BUG
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