

The Fires of 1908

by Gene Onchulenko

The year 1908 was a busy one for the fire brigades of Port Arthur and Fort William. One notable fire occurred on Feb. 25, when the Conmee block and a restaurant on Arthur St. were destroyed and a number of surrounding buildings were damaged.

A number of people were rescued from the restaurant with some difficulty. The businesses affected were H.A. Noble, merchant tailor, Jones' butcher shop and Mrs. Traynor's millenary shop. The Daily News and Pacific Hotel were saved after a desperate struggle.

On July 8, Chief James Armstrong took over the Port Arthur Fire Fighting Service. He made a number of changes at the Court St. fire station including re-arranging the equipment so when an alarm was received the men and horses could be readied easier and in less time. The phone was moved from the cellar to near the sounding gong in the lower part of the tower. The door releases were arranged so a single lever could open all the doors at once and release the horses instantly.

Chief Armstrong made 14 recommendations which were presented to city council. Some of these included the purchase of a new chemical engine and a saddle to exercise the horses. Other suggestions were: public telephones on street corners for fire alarms; hiring two additional men so that two men would be on duty at all times to permit each man one day off per week; uniforms for the permanent men, and that the city engineer take care of the fire hydrants so the firemen could stay in the fire station to respond to calls.



1908 was a disastrous year for fires at the Lakehead. Visible here are the remains of the Conmee block and surrounding building on what is now Red River Road.

At 2 p.m. July 20, the John King Company suffered a great fire loss. An entire new block was destroyed and four houses on George St., immediately behind King's, were totally gutted. The fire apparently started in King's furniture warehouse and spread with amazing swiftness.

When the fire brigade arrived the warehouse was a mass of flames. Five streams of water failed to check the progress of the flames and the Port Arthur brigade was asked to help. They came as quickly as possible but when they arrived they were asked to fight another fire which had just broken out at Oakley's warehouse and Whittefield's house on Leith St.

For a time it looked like the fire would spread to the Rutledge and Jackson block and to the new Murray block under construction across the street. The Rutledge and Jackson block was saved by the automatic sprinklers; but Kirkup and Wilkie's new block was badly damaged and the roof of Strachan's store was damaged.

The dangerous state of the wires on Victoria Ave. caused a shut-off of all electric power during the fire. The blaze was very spectacular and business all over the city was suspended.

Despite the low water pressure the local and C.P.R. brigades along with volunteers worked very hard and co-operated very well together.

At 7:30 a.m. December 2, Fort William lost one of its oldest landmarks. The old Roman Catholic mission house which stood just back of what was known as the "big stone house" was destroyed by fire. The building, on the south bank of the Kam River, was about 50 years old and was one of the first structures built on the mission.