

Thunder Bay's Biggest Bang?

By Art Gunnell

The ancient rock that makes up the Pre-Cambrian Shield is hard! Building a railway line or constructing a highway through that rock requires explosives—and lots of it. The CPR line around Northern Lake Superior used dynamite by the ton. And it was tricky stuff to use. Testament to that fact is the number of graves that lined their right-of-way during construction. It has been said that the CPR was the longest cemetery in the world.

As well as usage; manufacturing, transport, and storage were all highly hazardous operations. In 1885 there was such a "powder magazine" near the mouth of the Current River. On a Wednesday afternoon, September 23, that year, the area was shaken by a blast that people first thought was an earthquake. An ear-shattering roar accompanied the explosion.

The local newspaper, the Sentinel, reported that glass flew out of windows all over town. Smoke poured roll upon roll high in the air.

Soon it was apparent that the powder magazine had exploded. It was estimated that at the time it contained almost 23,000 pounds of nitroglycerine and other explosives, plus caps and fuses. The contents belonged to contractors Conmee & McLennan, and the Burk Brothers.

A hole, 10 feet deep and 60 feet in diameter resulted. Trees and brush were hurled clear of the area for a number of acres around the hole.

The Meikle store called the Bazaar, located at the corner of Cumberland St. and Park St. had its windows shattered. Nearby, the Brunswick Hotel was damaged. Windows in the Queen's Restaurant, St. Andrew's Church, and St. Joseph's Convent were broken. A horse, owned by Brown's Butcher shop dropped dead. A young girl who happened to be looking out a window lost her eyesight as a result of the blast.

Amazingly, there were no known deaths or other serious injuries. The local CPR Superintendent blamed the explosion on hunters in the area who may have started a bush fire.



One of the most dangerous jobs going; "powdermen" used dynamite to clear a path for the railway.