

CONFLAGRATION

The Lanark Village Fire of 1959

In less than three hours on Monday June 15, 1959, one in every ten residents of Lanark was left homeless and devoid of all possessions when a hurricane of fire swept along George Street consuming the heart of the village. By some miracle no one was killed and there were only two minor injuries, but total property loss was estimated in excess of \$1,500,000 and the community never fully recovered.

Although the first day of summer was just six days away, that morning dawned cold and windy. At 8:00 a.m., when Alex Peacock¹ went to work at the Campbell Sash & Door Co. mill, at the corner of George and Owen Streets², the thermometer stood at just 45 F (7.0 C) while the northwest wind, blowing at 30 miles per hour (48 Kph), made it feel much colder.

Peacock put a lumber order through the planer before shutting the machinery down at about 10:00 a.m. He spent the next hour or more stacking wood, and then went home for an early lunch. When he returned at about 12:15 he found the interior of the mill in flames that, moments later, burst with a roar through the shingle roof.

By the time the local volunteer fire department, just 28 men strong, reached the scene, the mill was fully engulfed, and the florist shop next door was ablaze. The air temperature had risen to 57F (14C) since morning, but so had the wind, now gusting to 55 mph (90 kph). Firefighters were entirely outmatched. One witness told the *Ottawa Citizen* that the blaze “*wasn't going 10 minutes until everything seemed on fire.*”³

The inferno quickly began to reach down George Street. Driven by the howling wind, sparks and burning debris flew southward ahead of the flames, landing on tinder-dry rooftops, and setting them alight. As the firestorm grew, creating its own updraft, sucking in oxygen, burning ever hotter, some buildings simply superheated and combusted in a single deafening roar.

A subsequent report on the conflagration, prepared by the Canadian National Research Council's Division of Building Research, described the streetscape that so readily burst into flame.

*With a few exceptions, the buildings in the village date back to 1900 or thereabouts. Three of the older buildings on George Street were of log construction, the Town Hall and some neighbouring buildings were of solid masonry [but] the remainder were of wood-frame construction with wood sidings, imitation brick shingles, or brick veneer. All the buildings on George Street were built close to the sidewalk; a number of them had wooden porches at the entrances.*⁴

¹ Francis Alexander Peacock (1925-2011).

² Where the Bell Canada building now stands.

³ *Ottawa Citizen*, June 15, 2009.

⁴ Canadian National Research Council, Division of Building Research, *Report on a Conflagration at Lanark, Ontario, 16 June 1959*, by M. Galbreath and C. G. Burnett.

Halfway down the block between Owen and Clarence Streets the flames leapt across George Street. With both sides of the street now fully involved the volunteer company's two portable pumps, installed at the Clyde River bridge, stood no chance. "Firemen worked continuously trying to hold the fire but, with the high winds and gusts up to 55 mph, they were forced to give ground".⁵ Step by step they were forced back toward the river. Telephone operators on duty at the local exchange "held their post just long enough to call in aid from neighboring towns"⁶ but, as the fire advanced, the exchange was consumed, isolating the village except for Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) car radios.



The New York Times captioned this photo by Lanark pharmacist Jack Strang 'Fleeing from the Fire'. In fact, Grant Creighton (16), was running to tell Volunteer Fireman Art Code⁷ that Code's own home was on fire.

Recognizing that the mostly frame buildings along George Street could not be saved, people dragged furniture and belongings from their homes, and merchants carried stock from their stores, heaping it all in the middle of the street. Residents of Wright's Hotel tossed their belongings from second-and third-storey windows, adding to the pile. For most, the effort was in vain. As the intensity of the fire increased, sparks and the blast-furnace heat of the blaze set everything alight.

The fire soon crossed Clarence Street, burning the Town Hall. Everyone but the able-bodied were evacuated from the village core. Students from the elementary school were sent to safety at the top of the Young's Hill (Clarence and Argyle Streets).

⁵ Perth *Courier*, June 18, 1959.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Arthur Douglas Code (1930-2010), later Lanark Fire Chief for 22 years and Reeve of Drummond North Elmsley Township.

When the Perth Fire Department arrived at about 1:00 p.m., less than an hour after outbreak of the fire, most of the buildings in the village's business section had either ignited or, down-wind to the advancing flames, were doomed. Over the next hour firefighters and equipment arrived from fire departments at Almonte, Arnprior Civil Defense College, Bathurst & Burgess Townships, Brockville, Carleton Place, Drummond & Elmsley Townships, Merrickville, Ottawa, and Smiths Falls. Five kilometers of hose lines were laid from pumpers parked around the Clyde River Bridge, but in the course of the fight more than 1,000 meters of that hose were burned. Hose sections succumbed to red-hot falling cinders and the road itself was so hot that even water filled hoses burst into flames.

The noise was deafening. *"All one could hear was the howling wind, exploding furnace oil tanks, and the crash of burning timbers"*.⁸ When the fire reached Mel Lee's Hardware Store it set off a loud and colorful barrage of exploding paint cans and rifle ammunition. The *Ottawa Journal* described Lanark that afternoon as *"a scene of almost indescribable terror"*. The *Ottawa Citizen* called it a *"holocaust"*.



Aftermath of the firestorm, June 1959 – Photo by James Leverance

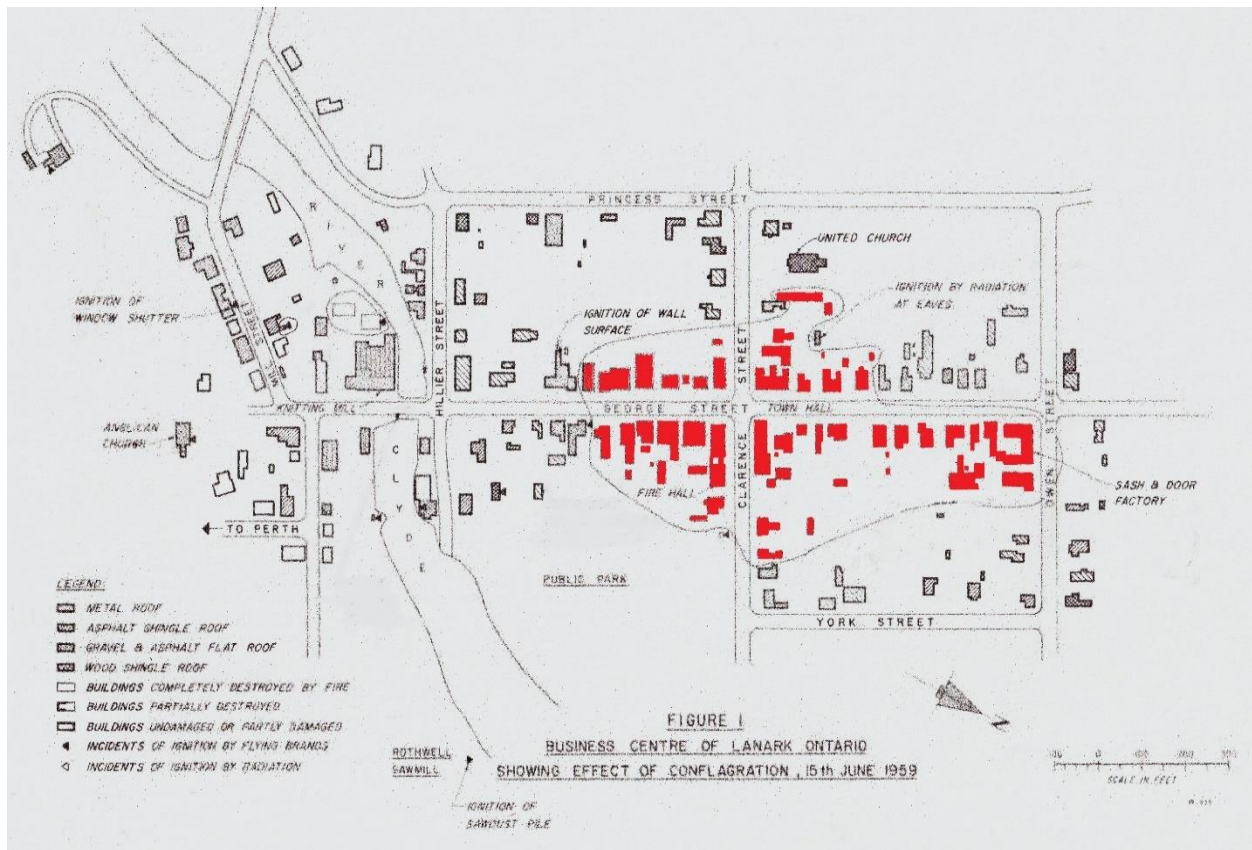
Flaming embers, driven by the high winds, flew far over the heads of firefighters. Sparks blew south, across the river, igniting a large number of smaller fires throughout the village. When embers landed on wood shingles, roofs began to burn, and residents struggled to extinguish them with bucket brigades from their wells. One house was completely burned four blocks from the center of the fire. The roof of the Anglican Church ignited, fire broke out in a lumber yard on the south bank of the river, and embers set a bush fire a mile away. Through the efforts of volunteers, these outbreaks were extinguished before even greater damage was done. Carried high into the sky on rising columns of superheated air, the howling west wind carried embers, ash, and charred roof shingles far beyond the village. Some fell on Perth, 15 kilometers away.

⁸ Perth *Courier*, June 18, 1959.

Several times it seemed the whole village would be lost, but in mid-afternoon the wind began to ease, and a light rain started to fall. After a fight that had lasted five hours, hundreds of exhausted firemen and volunteers finally fought the blaze to a standstill about halfway between Clarence and Hillier Streets.

Millions of gallons of water from 43 hoses eventually brought the fire under control at about 5:00 p.m., after the firemen had concentrated a monster wall of water below the Town Hall, on both sides of the street”⁹

Fire crews from the various municipalities were gradually released and by 7:00 p.m. only the Lanark and Perth brigades remained on duty.



The Lanark fire of June 15, 1959, burned along George Street, from the northwest to the southeast, right-to-left on this map prepared by the National Research Council, Division of Building Research. Buildings shown in red were those destroyed

The Village of Lanark was devastated. Most of its business district was a smoldering ruin. The Campbell Sash & Door mill, a hardware store, three grocery stores, two dry goods stores, a tinsmith, barber shop, hairdresser's shop, florist, snack bar, bakery, bank, shoe store, drugstore, hotel, and a dance hall were all reduced to ashes. In addition, the Town Hall, jail, fire hall, telephone exchange, the Royal Canadian Legion Hall, the Masonic Hall, the Baptist Church, and all the mature shade trees that once lined its main street were completely gone.

⁹ Ibid.

The fire completely destroyed everything within an area approximately 1,100 feet long and 600 feet wide and caused varying degrees of damage at other scattered locations, some at considerable distances from the center of destruction. In all, 33 houses, apartments, businesses, and public buildings were destroyed. About 100¹⁰ of the village's 950 residents, or 43 out of 280 families, were made homeless. The Dominion Fire Commission's report on Fire Losses in Canada estimated the total property loss at \$738,420. Other estimates, inclusive of building contents, store inventory, personal possessions, etc., ranged from \$1,000,000 to \$2,000,000 (1959 dollars). Remarkably, no lives were lost and only two people required brief hospital treatment; Lanark Fire Chief Del Storie¹¹, suffering from exhaustion, and Blanche (Mrs. James) Perry¹², who collapsed.



Disaster tourism, June 1859 – Photo courtesy of the Lanark Era.

On Tuesday June 16th, volunteers and the bone-weary men of the Lanark Fire Brigade worked all day dealing with hot spots. On Wednesday the 17th Bell Telephone restored service, Ontario Hydro brought in generators and lighting gear and the *Lanark Era* came out on schedule, even though only at half its usual number of pages. Three days later, however, the ruins were still smoking when swarms of disaster tourists arrived. On Saturday and Sunday, according to the *Perth Courier*, an estimated,

20,000 people invaded the village to see the devested area, with the Ontario Provincial Police and volunteer workers directing traffic. Hundreds of cars were lined on either side of the Balderson-Lanark Road over a mile from the outskirts of the village”¹³

¹⁰ According to a report of the National Research Council, Division of Building Research, 96 people were left homeless. According to the Canadian Disaster Database, 122 people lost their homes.

¹¹ Peter Adelbert 'Delbert' Storie (1905-1992).

¹² Blanche Bigras-Perry (1919-1966).

¹³ *Perth Courier*, June 18, 1959.

The Canadian Red Cross established operations in the Odd Fellows Hall, serving meals to the homeless and clean-up crews. Donations of food, clothing and other basic necessities flowed in an avalanche from surrounding communities for distribution to the dispossessed and jobless. One Ottawa businessman donated trailers that were parked in Clyde Memorial Park as temporary accommodation for burned-out residents. By the end of June, the Lanark Relief Fund had collected \$50,000 in cash to be matched by the Ontario Government.¹⁴

Neither the Fire Marshal's Office, nor investigators from the National Research Council could determine exactly what had started the fire. Ontario Fire Marshal J. Scott¹⁵ did confirm what everyone knew, that *"the fire started in the Campbell Sash & Door plant, where ... there was a large accumulation of wood shavings"* and further noted that *"three fires had occurred in the mill one week previously but had been put out"*.¹⁶ The NRC report also noted that, when first discovered, *"the fire seemed to have made considerable headway in a pile of wood shavings"*¹⁷ at the Sash & Door mill, but drew no conclusions as regards what had actually started the fire.

- Ron W. Shaw (2022)

¹⁴ Within six months 13 new homes had been built along George Street, but 45 former residents had moved away and many of the business never reopened.

¹⁵ William J. Scott, OBE, Q.C. (1900-1960), Ontario Fire Marshall 1935-1960.

¹⁶ Perth *Courier*, June 25, 1959.

¹⁷ Canadian National Research Council, Division of Building Research, *Report on a Conflagration at Lanark, Ontario, 16 June 1959*, by M. Galbreath and C. G. Burnett.