



THE COBALT LODGE

Newsletter of the Cobalt Historical Society



Volume 17

P.O. Box 309

Cobalt, On P0J 1C0

November 2008

The 1922 Fire – A Letter from Mrs. Will Clarke to her friend Mrs. Tom Hickey

December 3, 1922 Cobalt, Ontario

My Dear Mrs. Hickey:

Before the fire, in some way or another, I just did not get your letter answered, and since, everything seems to have been so unsettled and out of the ordinary, that I have done but very little in the line of writing, but now we are beginning to feel a little more balanced, so am going to try and write you a few lines, as I know you will often wonder what has become of us and how we came through the night of October 5th. Well Mrs. Hickey, consider yourself fortunate that you were away out of it all, as I believe that out at Giroux Lake they were, at one time of that night, in danger also. Quite a few families left their homes. Had it not been for the wind changing, that part of the country would have been wiped out also.

On looking back on that night, Mrs. Hickey, it seems to me nothing short of marvelous how few lost their lives. We left our home somewhere around a quarter to six o'clock in the evening with the intention of going to Mileage 104 to the home of Sadie (you remember me speaking of the Irish girl who married the French lad), not knowing that Argentite [*the hamlet of Argentite located north of Mileage 104 where the cement pillars carried the streetcar trestle over Highway 11 now Highway 11B*] was in flames. We had not gone but a few yards when we met a man who asked us if we were going to Cobalt. We said "Yes". He told us to turn back as he had tried to get through but could not pass Argentite. The fire was raging on each side of the road. Well, Mrs. Hickey it seemed to us as though we were trapped. Fires were burning on every side of us. A great number of people were flocking up to the College, [*Haileybury School of Mines*] thinking that because it was built of brick it would not burn, but if the wind had not suddenly changed when it did, nothing would have saved it, when all those big stone and brick buildings in Haileybury were gutted. Will said the best place, he thought for us, was on the open ground around the College, there being quite a clearing around it. I was very reluctant to go in that direction at all as a big fire was coming from the lake [*Temiskaming*]. The bush all around there had been burning all day and that big wind coming up had just fanned it into a blaze and it seemed to me as though we were just running from one fire into another, but as Will pointed out, the wind which was blowing in that direction would be bound to back that fire to the lake. At any rate, Mrs. Hickey, it seemed to me like a case of Hobson's choice [*no choice at all*] and, stumbling and falling through the blinding smoke and wind we made our way there. It seemed, so dense was the smoke, as though darkness had come upon us all at once, and quite as suddenly, after a day of intense heat, the wind turned bitterly cold and seemed to chill quite through to the marrow. We were afraid to enter the College where there must have been between three and four hundred people, because it looked as though it was impossible that it could escape and we knew there would very likely be a panic and stampede, but to get out of the smoke as much as we could, we kept close to one of the walls, made a bed of some bedding Will had brought upon Douglas' wagon thinking we might spend the night in the open, and there the boys and I lay, while Will along with the other men kept guard, although there

was very little they could do as there was practically nothing they could fight fire with. Well, Mrs. Hickey, I think at one time my heart pretty nearly left me. Just when the danger to us was at its worst – there were big burning embers flying all around and it seemed at any moment the College would go – I heard one man shout, “Say, we must get that powder out of that building over there,” meaning a little building quite near. I wondered then if our end was to be instead of burned alive, blown to pieces. But fortunately they found that as a precaution some time earlier in the day it had been removed. The wind then changed as though by magic, and we felt our danger was over.

The boys behaved wonderfully well. Bud for a time cried with the smoke hurting his eyes and throat but I got him placed down with a handkerchief over his face. He had heard us say the town was gone and just before he fell asleep, he said “Mother, where will we get breakfast?” He slept there until we picked him up and carried him, still asleep, into the College when all the danger was over. We were about two and a half hours in the shelter of the building outside. We entered the College, and the scene seems to me yet, indescribable. In every room of that big building, men, women and children were lying on the floors and all in total darkness. Quite a few Haileybury people were there. All afternoon automobiles were carrying the people out from Haileybury to New Liskeard and Cobalt but when the road to Cobalt got impassable, they turned and brought them back to the College – it being the only place that seemed to be at all safe. It was pitiful to see friend look for a friend. In the room we were in every little while one would hear this – being in the darkness – “Is there anyone in this room from Haileybury?” and on getting the answer “Yes”, would ask if there was, naming them such a person, there, and it was always “No”.

Well, Mrs. Hickey, it was something spectacular to see the Northern Lumber Mills up at the station [railway station] burning. I went up to the top floor and into the room which commands a view of the town to see it burning and I think I will never forget the sight as long as I live. When the big shaving pile went up, the whole Heavens seemed to be on fire, burning shaving flying all over the town. Standing alongside me was a returned soldier [First World War] and he told me he seemed to be once again going through the burning of the town of Mons [Belgium]. He, along with some others, had taken refuge in a building similar to the College and he was standing at one of the upper windows, just as he was there, watching the town burning, but instead of those burning shavings that were flying all over the town like bright lights, it was gas bombs.

We left the College at daylight and started for Cobalt, passing on the way the ruins of our home but there was hardly a vestige of anything to be seen. It was the same with all buildings. That heat was so intense it just seemed to melt everything to nothing. A special relief train left Cobalt at one o'clock which the boys and I took for Toronto, and Toronto was surely in readiness for us. Ours was the first relief train to arrive there and meeting us were doctors, nurses, ambulances and stretchers, all in readiness for any emergency but very fortunately they were not required. My folks surely were relieved to see us step off that train safe and sound because there had been such a large number of telegrams sent out of Cobalt the day we left (they say 800 wires were sent out) and the wire Will sent was not received in Toronto until about one o'clock on the morning we arrived and I can tell you that they were uneasy about our safety until then. We stayed there two weeks.

Will came down for a few days when we were there and told me of making arrangements to rent rooms for the winter from Lloyd McMillan [Motorman for the Nipissing Central Railway, North Cobalt later owner of MacMillan's Garage, Cobalt] where he had been boarding since the fire and we went there on our return north, but only stayed another two weeks, as meantime Mr. Brooks asked Will if he would like to occupy a house on their property at the Princess Mine and we jumped at the chance although both Lloyd and his wife [Olga] could not possibly have been kinder or nicer to us and I'll never forget that kindness especially coming at a time when it was so much needed.

Well, here we have been for nearly a month now and not settled yet by any means. The house is large and although we did not attempt to occupy it all for the winter, yet we doubt if can live in the small space we are in when the real cold weather comes. We are on the lookout for a smaller place although we are in a kind of quandary now as until Will is settled in work again we do not care about making another move until he sees where his work is going to be. It seems funny for me to speak of him being out of work, this being the first time I have known him to be idle and, of course, it had to come at a bad time. But the LaRose for the present are not milling. They may resume doing so at any time or it may not be until Spring. But, of course, if it can be avoided he does not want to wait until then doing nothing and yet he cannot undertake manual labour any more and jobs in his line are not too plentiful.

Well, dear Mrs. Hickey I have run myself out of paper, so will come to something I should have mentioned before and that was to tell you that at the time your letter came we could not accept your kind invitation, and although work doesn't prevent now, yet we have much to keep us at home. We have the boys' pony and the cow, which escaped the fire and a few chickens. I hope at some time or other it will be possible to go up and see you as I would just love to do so.

I guess you would be pretty anxious about your folks when you knew of the fire here. How is your mother keeping and are you coming down at Christmas? If so, try and make us a visit. You get off the car [Nipissing Railway] at the McKinley mine and the Princes just adjoins it. If you send a card and let me know, I'll surely be there for you.

Hope this finds you enjoying that richest of God's gifts – "Good Health". Will joins in sending warmest regards to you and Tom.

Very sincerely yours,

"Elizabeth Clarke"

Note – if anyone has any information regarding Mr. and Mrs. Will Clarke, their son Bud or Mrs. Tom Hickey, The Cobalt Historical Society or the Haileybury Heritage Museum would be most interested in hearing from you.

HOUND CHUTES REDEVELOPMENT

The bluff overlooking the Montreal River at Hound Chutes offers a great view of the coffer-dam being built to divert the water for a new Hydro generator there plus three new ones. Work began this past summer and will be completed in two years.

As well an inflatable weir to control variations in the water levels is being installed. This will please the Marsh Bay Conservation Authority if it lessens flooding, prevents shoreline erosion and damage to fish spawning beds.

Keiwit-Alarie, a joint venture construction company is handling the work – Peter Kiewit Sons Company is from Milton and Leo Alaire and Sons Construction is in Timmins. The cost of the four projects is estimated to be 200 million dollars.

COBALT HISTORY GOES ONLINE

The Society was recently awarded a grant of \$174,410.00 from the Canadian Historical Information Network (CHIN), of the Federal Ministry of Culture. Our CHIN grant in 2005 enabled the Society to produce an online programme of mining equipment, their uses and photographs of early mines. See www.virtualmuseums.ca scroll to Ontario, then Cobalt, then Silver Trail.

This new proposal will create a virtual reality online show about the history of Cobalt from 1903 to 1923. The viewer will be able to choose what character to follow through the history - the story of a nurse will not be the story of a miner for instance. The producers of this project are Drew Gauley and Brit Griffin. They will also utilize elementary students, actors and the 70,000 photographs at the Cobalt Mining Museum. The final product should be ready for viewing in October 2009. Anyone wishing to learn more or to be involved in this project can reach Drew Gauley at Good Gauley Productions at 647-8019 or email drew@ontera.net.

MUSINGS AROUND TOWN

Definition of a ghost town: a place where people no longer live especially a former Boom Town. - Webster's New Lexicon Dictionary.

According to Webster's, Cobalt is not a ghost town because there are people and buildings. What are missing are the former locations and their signs. This becomes a problem when talking to people seeking directions or explaining sites to newcomers. No one used to refer to street names, it was always to buildings.

Where once it was simple to refer directions relative to the Pop Factory, the FINA Station, the Hilltop Confectionary, Brosko's Shoe Repair, The Laundromat, Silver City Grocery, it is now intersecting street names that count. Of course, when talking to Cobalters, one also has to take into consideration just when they left so as to refer to the appropriate buildings. Further, we have the consideration of geographical location on a street, *to wit.*, Lower, Middle and Upper Nickel Street.

And to add to the problem, as Cobalters know, it makes a difference if the enquirer is on foot or mobile. For pedestrians there are staircases to walk as shortcuts while drivers must navigate the roundabout roads. Only in Cobalt!

Information compiled by: Vivian Hylands, President of The Cobalt Historical Society