

THE LONG SWAMP FIRE

An Account from the 1834 Diary of Reverend William Bell

In September 1834, the village of Perth narrowly escaped destruction by a forest fire. As recalled in the diary of eyewitness Reverend William Bell, the inferno was so intense that it burned parts of the road connecting Perth with the village of Franktown.

At Perth and across the surrounding townships, in the early 1830's the vast majority of people lived and worked in structures built of wood, surrounded by outbuildings built of wood and often enclosed by fences built of wood. In addition, behind every home and workshop there were adjoining woodsheds stuffed with countless cords of firewood. In many places even the roadways were built of wood, the infamous bone-shaking corduroy roads.

As the job of clearing the forest for farms and gardens, and the attendant burning of brush and stumps, continued daily, in the second decade of its existence the village of Perth, and the surrounding township farmsteads, were a tinder box under constant threat of the errant spark that could destroy it all. That threat of destruction was higher than ever in the fall of 1834 as the settlement endured a summer-long drought of never before seen severity.

The bush fire Bell describes began somewhere behind today's Nevis Estate B&B on the northern edge of the area now occupied by Perthmore subdivision and, burning on a front that grew to a width of several kilometers, travelled in a southerly direction behind today's Great War Memorial Hospital and Perth and District Collegiate Institute, following a track more-or-less marked on its western edge by what is now the Canadian Pacific Railway line, into what is today the grounds of Algonquin College before turning east (see sketch map). Although large portions of the 1834 swamp have subsequently been filled and obscured by housing and associated infrastructure, that the area was once a large cedar swamp is still clearly apparent along the north-west side of County Road 10 (Drummond Concession-2) from Perthmore Street eastward for several kilometers across Drummond Township.

As Bell describes, controlling the fire was far beyond the resources available, and, that Perth escaped total destruction, was due entirely to good fortune. As the flames gained hold in the swamp, they were fanned by a light breeze that allowed them to roll toward the village. Fortunately, at the last moment, the prevailing northwest wind rose to strength and drove the inferno eastward, into the depth of the swamp, along the Franktown Road, rather than into the village. The scattered farmsteads of southern Drummond Township, however, suffered extensively.

Reverend Bell mentions the 1834 fire in his diary in three different entries. The following merges those three accounts.¹

¹ The Bell diaries also describe an 1825 fire in the same swamp that came within three miles of Perth.

The fall of this year [1834] proved the driest we had ever experienced in the country. The crops, in consequence, were light, especially potatoes with us, indeed they were a complete failure. The pastures became brown, the cattle suffered not only for pasture, but also for water. Many of them had to be driven two or three miles every day to the River Tay, in which there was still a little water.

[Returning from a trip to Gillies Corners] I found extensive fires on both sides of the road, as well as the smoke of others at a distance. Many fences were on fire and others entirely burnt down. On reaching home I found that our hay in the meadow had been all burned in my absence, besides about three acres of the fence between Dr. Reade's² and mine. One of our neighbors having set fire to some stumps in his father's field, it spread endangering Mathew Bell's house³ and getting into an adjoining cedar swamp and presenting an alarming appearance.



In the evening, a breeze sprung up and carried fire over the whole swamp, destroying the timber and bushes on more than a mile square. In half an hour it presented an ocean of flame, attended with a noise like the roaring of the sea. A dense black cloud, like a vast mountain, obscured the sky, and tho' there was but little wind, the deluge of fire seemed to be rolling toward the town, creating no little alarm among its inhabitants. Fortunately, at this critical moment the wind shifted and sent the fire away back from the town.

The appearance it presented after sunset was most awful. It blazed like an immense furnace, rolling up clouds of dark smoke to the sky. The crackling of the flames was terrific, and their sullen roar through the stillness of the night resembled that of an ocean. It was the grandest and most terrific sight I ever witnessed.

Next day we found that the burning of the cedar swamp was not the only damage done ... The new road⁴ through the Long Swamp, which terminates near our house⁵, being constructed chiefly of timber and brush, covered with the combustible soil or peat of the swamp, took fire. A great part of the road was on fire and many of the logs, of which it was composed, burned.

² Dr. George Hume Reade (1793-1854), Drummond Township C-2/L-4(SW), adjoining Reverend William Bell's Park Lot on Drummond C-2/L-2(NE)

³ Drummond Township C-2/L-3 adjoining Reverend William Bell's Park Lot on Drummond C-2/L-2(NE). Matthew Bell (1799-1867) was unrelated to Reverend William Bell. Matthew Bell emigrated, with his wife Agnes Smith (1804-1897), from Northumberland, England, and settled at Perth in 1831. In 1870 his farm was purchased by Senator Peter McLaren (1831-1919), shortly after McLaren acquired the adjoining property, Nevis Cottage 61 Drummond Street West.

⁴ Drummond Concession 2 / County Road 10.

⁵ Rev. William Bell's house was located at 3 Drummond Street East, but he also owned the adjoining 25-acre Park Lot where he created a small farm he called 'Sweetbank', where the Great War Memorial Hospital now stands.

When it was at its worst the Roman Catholic Priest⁶ caused an alarm to be rung, which sent out plenty of hands. Not a drop of water being near, a great number of carts, with large barrels turned out, and brought water from the river ... but they were of no use, as there was no approaching the road from the dense smoke ... There was no possibility of remaining any time in the swamp.

[When they] got it mostly extinguished, a few men had to remain on watch all night. Nearly every day for a fortnight the fire broke out in some new spots. As soon as it, in some measure subsided, men were set to work in the ditches at the roadside to throw up earth on the burning logs, to put out the fire. It took six men more than a week to repair the damage at one spot alone.

This put those who were interested in the road to great trouble and expense, for they had to send men, both to extinguish the fire and to repair the damage it had done, for not one farthing would our magistrates contribute from the public funds.



Corduoy Road

For a week after this, most people in the country were employed, nearly all the time, endeavouring to stop the progress of the fires, or repair the damage done. We daily heard from the country the damage done in all directions. Indeed, nothing combustible was safe, and fires in all directions caused the country to smoke like a furnace burning the very soil to a depth of three or four inches.

⁶ Father John MacDonald (1782-1879).

There was much damage, and few in the country escaped scaithless⁷. Some had their houses burned, some their barns, some their crops, and others their fences. The firewood lost in this way would have lasted a year.

At last we had a thunder shower, but the earth was so dry that the rain did not penetrate an inch, and it soon was as dry as before. Fortunately, the weather was calm. Had there been much wind, a general conflagration would have ensured.

On awaking on the morning of the 23rd [September], I heard the joyful sound of rain. It certainly was never more wanted. The rain lasted for some hours, extinguishing most of the fires.

More than three decades later, in August 1870, Perth would again narrowly escape destruction when a runaway forest fire swept the Ottawa valley from northern Ramsay Township in Lanark County, southeast along the Ottawa River, through Carleton County, and then back across Lanark County through the Townships of Montague, North Elmsley and North Burgess.⁸

- Edited by Ron W. Shaw (2020)

⁷ In Scots *scaith* = injury or wound.

⁸ See *Devouring Element: The Wildfires of 1870*, Perth & District Historical Society, <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/wildfires-of-1870.pdf>