

The Carleton County Fire

(August 17-23, 1870)

In August of 1870, Carleton County was suffering from a severe drought. There had been no rain for two months, and many creeks and rivers had run dry. With everything being so dry, there was little that anyone could do when a huge forest fire swept down from Fitzroy and Huntley Townships, completely destroying the small village of Stittsville. The fire then moved through Bell's Corners, and on towards Ottawa.

Stittsville families watched in horror as their homes and farms were destroyed in the space of an hour. Fields and homesteads were left in blackened ruins. Only a few buildings, such as Kemp's Tavern and Stittsville Methodist Church (which is now the United Church), survived the fire. Hazeldean resident Robert Grant died while trying to save church records from his burning home. Mrs. Patrick Hartin was also killed, having run back into her house to save a treasured family clock.

When the fire reached the City of Ottawa (which was much smaller than it is now), city officials released the dam at Dow's Lake. This flooded the low lying areas of the city, saving Ottawa from total destruction.

It is difficult for us to fully understand the terrible effects of this fire. Today, our fire departments have pumper trucks and water-dropping planes. In the 19th Century, families could do little more than start bucket brigades to save their homes. Most families just cleared out of the area, taking whatever they could carry, and headed to the safety of a creek or river. Some families hid their children in wells to escape the flames.

Most people did not have insurance at this time. Many families lost everything they owned in this fire. After the fire, communities worked together as families began to rebuild their farms, businesses, and lives.

Imagine that your family has just survived the Carleton County Fire of 1870. What would it have been like to witness such a huge forest fire?

or

If a forest fire were still ten miles away, and a pioneer family had enough time to save ten household items, what might these items be?