

The Great Miramichi Fire



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CHAPTER I

October 7, 1825, was a sad day for everyone on the Miramichi. It was the day of the Great Miramichi Fire. This was the fire that destroyed six thousand square miles in the Miramichi area in eight hours.

The summer of 1825 was warm and dry. A large crop grew that year. The barns were filled with these crops. Most of the barns and homes then were made of wood. Wood burns easily.

October is usually cool on the Miramichi, but that year it was very warm. People were hoping for a good winter. Because it was so warm and dry that year, there were many other small fires in the north of New Brunswick. No one knows the real cause of the fire. A possible cause was the Spruce Budworm which helped to dry out the woods.



Farm on Miramichi in early 1800's.

CHAPTER II

On the morning of October 7, the lives of the people on the Miramichi changed. A large fire broke out on the Northwest Miramichi. On its way to Newcastle, the fire killed twenty-two people. It burned at a speed of one mile per minute. It was helped along by violently strong winds.

William Wright worked in the woods. He saw that it was becoming a large dangerous fire. He ran into Newcastle to warn the people. He warned them by beating a drum. No one listened. They thought it was a rain storm. Because they could not see the flames, they did not worry. By ten o'clock in the morning, the flames were burning along the whole north shore of the Miramichi River.

When the townsmen saw the flames, they felt God was angry at them. They thought that God had opened up the sky and had rained the flames down on them. Newcastle, a town of one thousand people, was burned to the ground in less than three hours. Out of two hundred and sixty buildings, only twelve were left standing.

The fire continued to burn along the north side of the river. Moorefield and Douglastown were the next to be destroyed. At that time, Douglastown was a lively village almost as big as Chatham. Only six of its seventy houses were left standing. It took but one hour for the village to burn.

One of the few houses left standing in Douglastown was the home of Alexander Rankin. The Rankin House still stands today. It was used as a school for many years. Presently it is being restored. It will stand as a monument to Alexander Rankin.

The Indians in the area thought the fire was sent to kill the White Man. Rankin had been a good friend to them. They thought this was why his house did not burn. After the fire, he opened his home to those who had no place to stay.

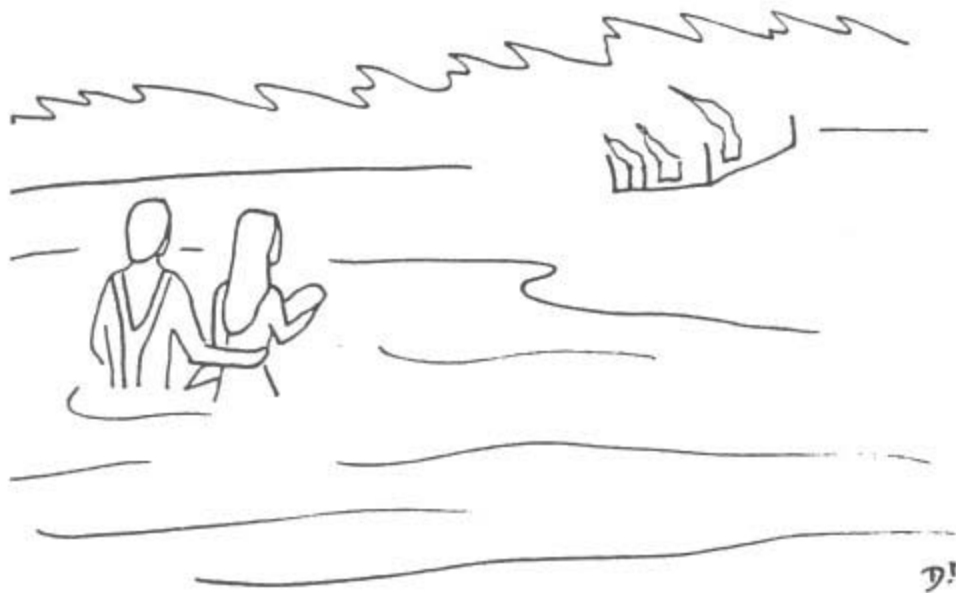


People running from the flames.

As the fire moved along the Miramichi, many ships were burned. Some of them carried the flames to the south side of the river as the ships tried to get away. As well, the fire jumped the river in many places. For example, the fire burned most of Bushville. Only St. Paul's Church on the south side of the Miramichi River was left. Napan and Black River were also destroyed. About sixty people died in Black River.

The town of Chatham and the village of Nelson were not touched by the fire. Nearly five hundred people from the north side made their way to Chatham. They had to walk through deep ashes. In fact, the ashes landed in many far-off parts of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and even as far away as Bermuda. The ashes also fell into the water. These ashes killed many of the fish.

To get away from the fire, men, women and children stood in the river. They stood in the river all night long. The water was nearly to the top of their heads. Because it was so warm, they had to put their faces in the water. Many of the animals from the woods also lived by getting to the water. Because of their fear of the fire and smoke, most farm animals couldn't be brought to the river. Altogether, about eight hundred and seventy-five cows died. Some women even had their babies on the river and on Strawberry Marsh near Newcastle.



People standing in water.

CHAPTER III

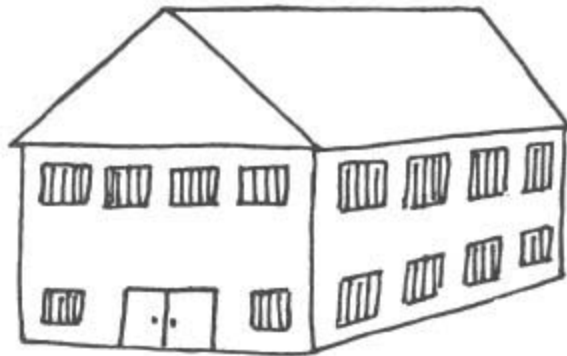
When speaking of The Great Miramichi Fire, there are many well-known human interest stories. One of these stories tells of a Bushville man. He thought St. Paul's Church might burn down. He went to throw water on the church. It didn't burn. When he got home, his house had burned. All his family died in the fire.



St. Paul's Church

Another story tells about two brothers. They saw the flames coming quickly. They ran to an opening in the woods. They thought they would be safe there. They were wrong. The next day their bodies were found. They died while hugging each other.

One last story tells of a black woman in the Newcastle Jail. She was in jail because she had killed her daughter. Those running from the flames heard her cry for help. They broke down the jail door. It was too late. The fire burned the jail and the prisoners in it.



The Newcastle Jail

CHAPTER IV

Those who lived through The Great Miramichi Fire never forgot that awful night. The next day they went back to find their homes destroyed. Nothing was left. All the crops had burned. The only food they could find was potatoes. They had baked in the ground from the heat.



Picture of fire nearing river.

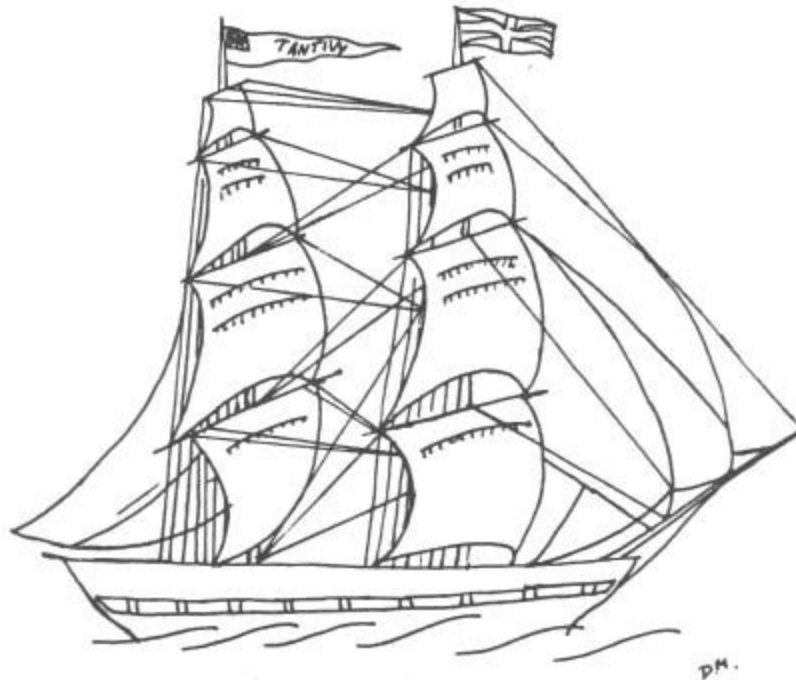
Many people at that time did not keep their money in the bank. Some kept it in their cabins or in holes in the ground. Often the money was never found because of all the ashes.

In all, the fire destroyed five hundred and twenty-five buildings. About one hundred and sixty people died. Most of them were laid to rest where their bodies were found. The Miramichi Fire burned an area of fifteen miles between Bartibog and the Northwest Miramichi. About one fifth of all New Brunswick was damaged. On the night of October eight, it rained very hard. This helped to put the fire out. As well, most of the trees had now burned and there was no place for the fire to go.

Winter was coming quickly. The people needed help badly before the river iced over. A group was formed to help the needy people. Alexander Rankin led the group of fifteen men. Sir Howard Douglas also came from Fredericton to offer his help. He was the Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick. The village of Douglastown was named after him.

He called on England, the United States and other parts of Canada for support. Together, they sent a lot of money, food and clothes. A few days later, a ship came from Halifax bringing these things for the needy people.

The townspeople who lived had to have places to stay for the winter. Some stayed with friends. Others were able to help build new places. There was a lot of wood because the fire only burned the tops of the trees. One year later, the towns of Newcastle and Douglstown had been built up again.



Ship bringing supplies to the needy.

Before the Miramichi Fire happened, the forest industry was very important here. Many men made their living in the woods. They got some of their food by catching wild animals. They used the trees to build cabins. The highest trees were used for building ships. Much of the forest was burned. Enough of it was saved for the industry to carry on. For example, Gilmore, Rankin and Company went on to make a lot of money in the forest industry. Even today, the forest is still the most important industry on the Miramichi.

For many years on every October 7, people didn't eat. Stores closed for the day. They did these things to thank God for being saved from the awful flames. To this day, people still tell stories about the Miramichi Fire as if it happened yesterday.

WORD LIST

flames

ashes

jail

forest

industry

Acknowledgements:

Information for this book was taken from the following: “The Miramichi” by Esther Clark Wright, “By Favourable Winds” by James A. Fraser, “Songs of the Miramichi” by Louise Manny, and newspaper and magazine articles taken from the Old Manse Library in Newcastle.