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Fire pays many visits to the fishermen of Port Maitland!

Some writers tell you stories based on all form of facts. This story, though well researched, is mostly based on memories of old-timers, some still living, others who have gone to their Maker. Enjoy the article, but do not place any large bets on any particular fact. Think of it as Old Men's Memories, with a good dose of details thrown in!

Times have long been tough for the fishermen who earn their living on the lakes. Not all tragedies occur on the water. Some took place before the vessel left the dock!

The first recorded disaster I find affecting Port Maitland commercial fishermen took place when the W. Dougher and Co., property and nets were totally destroyed in a fire on Christmas Day in 1886. Total damage was estimated at \$1,800 while only \$1,500 was insured. As was too often the case local suspicion had it that the fire was incendiary. Over the years, I have often heard old-time fishermen use a phrase when referring to the other fellow's misfortune. *It was started by the friction between the mortgage and the insurance policy!* How often this was correct, I do not know. I have never found one shred of evidence that has proven any of the fires you are about to read about was arson, but local competitiveness, seemed to bring out those views. Usually as the building or boat was still burning!

In 1904, Wm Taylor, lost his fish and ice-house as well as nets belonging to himself and the Crumb Bros, in a fire costing the two companies a total of \$1,500. There was no mention where this fish-house was located, but I suspect it was along the river on the east side, nearing the mouth.

In July 1915, twenty-three year old J. Percy Siddall went below the deck of the *Kaiser*, his gasoline *auxiliary fishing tug to start the engine, when escaping gasoline exploded, caused by his lighted lantern. He was badly burned on the arms and head before the flames which caused about \$50 damage were extinguished. (*The *Kaiser* was built as a sailboat.)

George W. Miller, a pound net (usually pronounced pond net.) fisherman of Lowbanks, who was located on the S-bend east of the cemetery lost his net-house on April of 1924. Also the son of Ernest Miller received burns, as did Mr. Tom Spray.

In the early 1930s, a number of fish-tugs caught fire at the dock and were either burnt loose or in an attempt to prevent further damage they were set adrift. This would seem a good tactic if it were not for the fact that once the flaming boat was adrift, it could not be controlled nor extinguished. This sometimes led to the speculation that something was amiss and maybe the fire was not an accident. The theory being that a total loss is better than a partial one. Worse than not being able to extinguish the fire on the affected vessel, it now became a mobile torch endangering the rest of the harbour.

On April 27th 1930, the *Ellen V.*, a fish-tug built in Stromness by Archie McLean, in 1913, for John Crawford, Frank T. Ross and himself would go to her fiery grave. She had also been owned by George (Shorty) Gorrell and John

A. Mossip. She was found burning, moored where normally the *C. C. Lloyd* should have been docked. The flames endangered a number of west Port Maitland fish-houses, so she was cut loose and towed into the centre of the river by George Siddall using a row boat. Out of reach of any fire equipment she was left to burn and drifted about a hundred and fifty yards up-river. Once the fire burned through her hull, she sank just off-shore from the present day Port Maitland Sailing Club. The *Ellen V.* was considered to be one of the strongest tugs in Port and had often been used to tow other vessels. That spring was one of those times, and as a result, she did not have her fishing equipment on board. It is not known when John A. Mossip took complete ownership of her, but strangely enough, I have records which show him as the owner in 1935, a full five-years after she burnt. With the assistance of divers, a cable was attached to her boiler and then dragged across to the east side of the river. The boiler was repaired and installed into one of Port Maitland's more prominent fish-tugs, the *Maitland Rose*, owned by Stephen McKeown. There is some indication this boiler replacement took place in 1933. During summer of 1933, the *Maitland Rose* spent several weeks laying at dock.

The most disastrous fire the commercial fishermen would experience took place in the spring of 1931. Normally, the *Caldera*, was docked on the west side of the Grand, but on May 4, 1931, she was taken to the Dock of the Port Maitland Fish Company to have her boiler washed and was left there for the night. As late evening approached, fire was discovered leaping from the fish-tug and spreading to the fish-houses. The docks were clogged with fishing gear as the fishermen prepared for another summer on the lake. A bucket brigade was formed in an attempt to save the buildings and the gear but to no avail. The ingredients were there and up went the Port Maitland Fish Co., owned by a conglomerate of local fishermen, including Percy Siddall, owner of the *Caldera*. The *Caldera's* ropes burnt through and she drifted out into the river settling near the east shore just south of the mouth of the Feeder Canal. The losses amounted to \$15,000, not taking into consideration the loss of ability to work until a new boat could be found. Insurance covered only part of the losses. An interesting side story to this fire is that beside the fish-house there was an ice-house. In the daylight, there stood a pile of ice, little of it had melted! Not wanting too lose what the fire didn't take, walls were built around the pile from lumber belonging to the Siddall Bros. That might have been the end of the story except for the following article from the Dunnville Gazette regarding a fire on October 18, 1931. *The Dunnville Fire Dept. made two trips to Port Maitland on Sunday, one at 1:30 a.m. and the other at 11:00 p.m. The first fire broke out in a cottage owned by Mrs. Edith Thomson of Dunnville . . . On Sunday night the fish-house and ice-house, the property of the Independent Fish Co., on the east side of the river were burned to the ground. In this instance a cooler containing two or three tons of fish, was saved, but the buildings were razed to the ground. Both fires were of unknown origin . . . Siddall Bros. were renting the property at the time. Some *lumber, was the property of the Port Maitland Fisheries. The lumber had been used as a temporary ice-house since a fire earlier in the year. In only a few short months the fish-houses and ice-house on the north side of the Feeder Canal were destroyed ending many years of commercial fish-packing at this location. (* The ownership of the lumber changed hands since it was used to rebuild the ice-house in May of 1931.)*

One would think that would be enough for this small community, but on August 8, 1931, the fish-tug *C. C. Lloyd* owned by Frank T. Ross, met her demise by fire of undetermined origin. The *C. C. Lloyd*, in her short life span had a number of owners, starting with Charlie Crumb and Frank T. Ross. Charlie soon wanted out of the arrangement and his interest changed hands a number of times. First it went to Barney McIntee, Byron House, Roy Lindsay, and finally complete ownership fell to Frank T. Ross. The *C. C. Lloyd* was a sixty-two foot, 40 ton oak steam tug propelled by a left-hand direct connect pump manufactured by Doty. The engine, in turn, was powered by a 6x9 Scott's marine boiler. The *C. C. Lloyd*, was built in Stromness, by Archie McLean, in 1915. As with most "human residents" at Port Maitland, the *C. C. Lloyd*, was nicknamed. She became known as *The Bull Moose*, due to her blunt bow which pushed the water up and in front of her.

The *C. C. Lloyd* was moored to her dock when the fire broke out. To save the fish-houses and other buildings she was cut free and set adrift until she floated to the opposite bank of the river near the *Maitland No One's* slip. Sitting there the Fire Department could not reach her, so a line was attached and she was towed [by a row boat manned by

Carroll Kenney] part of the way back across the river. Unfortunately she was just out of reach of the twin streams of water from the hoses, and nothing could be done for her. She again drifted across the river, this time settling just south of the passenger ferry, where she continued burning most of the night. The losses which reached \$10,000, was only partly covered by insurance.

Another fish-tug, that had an interesting past, and met her end at Port Maitland was the *Glen Erie*. This was the second boat to carry the name *Glen Erie*. She was built in 1918, for Howe Fish Co. Ltd. of Port Stanley. The original had a gasoline engine, something still quite uncommon for those days, so naturally, the engine would be saved and placed into the new boat. That was a short-lived idea as the engine was so large, or so powerful that it nearly sank the *Glen Erie* before she even fished one day! By 1925, she called Port Maitland home, where she was owned by the Siddall Bros. This arrangement did not work out! Some have suggested that the three brothers in business together was like mixing gasoline and water. *Not only did they not mix, it was too damn explosive!* Another brother, Bill, the father of Wayne Siddall, took over ownership by 1931. Circa 1938, the *Glen Erie* was burnt to the waterline and sank, while she was tied to the dock in the Feeder Canal.

January 24, 1955, proved to be a night to test of endurance for a local boat builder. A few days after a disastrous fire at his boat works a photo was printed in the Dunnville Chronicle with the following caption. *The gutted remains of Stephen Powell's Boat Works, nothing was left but charred remnants by the time fire had swept through the Stephen Powell boat works in Dunn Twp. on Monday of last week. A partially constructed boat, tools, equipment and records all went in the blaze which enveloped the building in a matter of minutes in spite of the efforts of both the Port Maitland and Dunnville Fire Departments.* In paraphrasing the main story from the same paper we find a reporter's comments: *You can't keep a good man down, say's the old adage, and Steve Powell seems to be the proof of the saying. On page one appears a picture showing what was once a well-equipped workshop, and if you look closely you can see under the debris, the skeleton of a boat in the making. This week you may see the boat again if you wish but to do so you will need to go in a different direction. Steve's workshop is a little farther away from the lake, but it is as active as it ever was. Realizing he had a group of men to keep employed and a number of jobs to keep them working, Steve looked for a new workshop and immediately contacted Smith and Fitzgerald where he rented their big building on the Rainham Road, in South Cayuga. The boat frame was put on wheels and taken to the new location. Work continues on the hull, and when it is finished, it will be brought back on the same wheels and lunched at Mr. Powell's launching base on the lower river. The same rule applies on other boats Mr. Powell has on hand or planned, and work will continue without interruption as long as other circumstance's permit.* Steve Powell would become a well-known shipbuilder, building many of the fish tugs and other marine vessels, including gas drilling platforms, work tugs and numerous barges.

The first fire at Port Maitland this author remembers witnessing took place on July 13, 1959. On this night a fire completely destroyed the fish-house and equipment of the William McIntee Fishery. The fire was discovered by Fred (Hungry) Clay, the owner of the *F. B. Clay*, and a fellow known for his great ability to tie flies and his knowledge of local angling sites. By the time Fred discovered and reported the fire to the fire department who responded in short order the fire was too engulfed to put out. The McIntee's loss was estimated at between \$65,000 and \$70,000. The flammable nets added to the intensity, and lead used to hold the bottom lines of the gill nets down melted, resulting in hot melting lead poured freely from the foundation of the burning building. In something of a twist from earlier practices where it was feared the burning boat would harm the fish-house, this time the tug *Playfair* was pushed clear of the dock to prevent her catching on fire. A near tragedy did occur when Bill McIntee suffered a slight heart-attack. Bill still lives in Dunnville, now in his nineties.

The last of the fishermen's fires, to be mention here took place on July 8, 1962. My mother had purchased a 35mm camera using Pinky Stamps from the Grand Union Carroll's store. Earl Siddall, would unluckily provide Mom's first opportunity to use her new camera at night. It was a still July evening, as we watched from the east side of Port Maitland, amazed how the flames seemed to shoot uncontrollably into the sky. Earl would lose his net-house with

an estimated loss of \$15,000. The neighbours had a bit of damage to their homes. Hughie Stouph, a volunteer fireman, who with his family owned the Maitland Arms Hotel, was overcome by smoke and after getting some oxygen he recovered quickly at the hospital. Mom got some great slides!

Other fish-tugs would meet their end in the Grand River. Unfortunately I have not been able to locate records giving me the dates of their demise. Often the information about the boats and their fires vary depending on who provides the story. The *John Logie* owned by the Moss Bros. holds one such mystery, in that it has been said she burned and sank circa 1929, in the Feeder Canal. I have a photo of the Feeder Canal during that era and am told that the remains of the *John Logie* can be seen in it. Others suggest she burned and sank a bit later than that on the west bank of the Grand near the end of Kings Row Road. The *John Logie* came to Port Maitland from Goderich where in 1906 while working on Lake Huron, she escaped disaster after she was rescued from the ice by William Lambert the lighthouse keeper of Chantry Island Lighthouse off the Bruce Peninsula.

Prior to 1930, the *John R. Moore*, another of the many boats from Port Stanley to find their way to Port Maitland was owned by Benny Crumb. The story has it, that Benny bought her in the fall of the year (circa 1925). Benny had a couple of piles driven into the west bank of the river, above what is now the Port Maitland Sailing Club. Before she was able to fish the following spring and while the ice was still in the river she caught fire and burned to the water's edge.

While there have been many recorded events, memories still bounce around in the heads of old men's. These are memories of many more fires which took place along the Grand River. They are the memories which need to be told of work tugs, pleasure crafts, and various forms of marine vessels which have burned to ruin, but then there is only so much space to tell these tails!

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