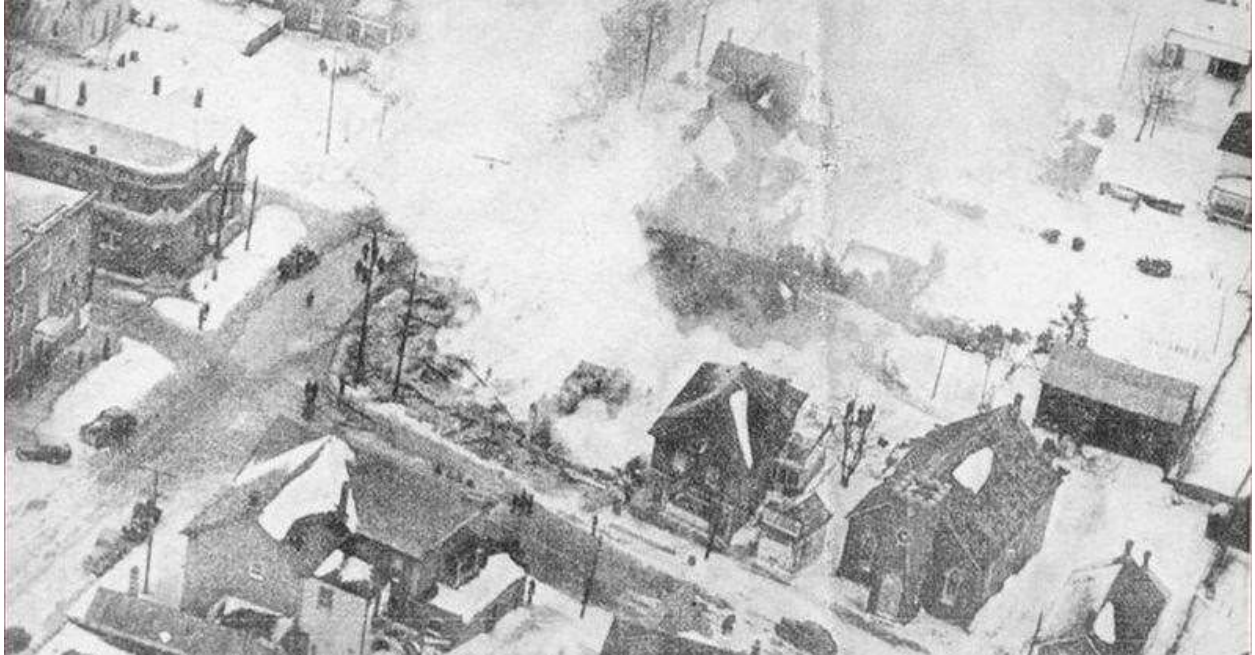


The day Sunderland went up in smoke

COMMUNITY May 04, 2018 by Larry Doble Brock Citizen



This postcard shows the devastating fire in Sunderland in 1949. - photo courtesy of Joe Allin



This aerial photo appeared in Jan 6, 1949 edition of Toronto Telegram. Doyle's Store (beside Masonic Temple) is south of the fire site. Across the intersection, to the north, is the Bank of Commerce and Brock House. Taylor's Store is across the street to the west. - Toronto Telegram photo



Citizens of Sunderland worked together to fight the fire in 1949. - photo courtesy of Joe Allin

Today with modern fire departments, smoke alarms and sprinkler systems, we often fail to realize how devastating a fire can be until it is too late.

The damage from heat, smoke and water can make a beautiful home uninhabitable in just a few minutes.

In earlier times, fire as a force of nature was virtually uncontrollable. Even in 1949 the town of Sunderland was vulnerable to the savage flames that struck on a cold winter morning in January.

George Clay, owner of a restaurant in the 80-year-old McDermott Block, had gone next door to get a pound of butter from Doyle's Grocery Store when he heard the screams that made him aware of a kitchen grease fire in his building.

The fire department was just up the street in a building that was once Free's Creamery. From 1940 to 2009, it was the Brock township fire hall and is now the Dark Horse Studio.

Church bells rang out as a warning system to call on volunteers to help in this community emergency.

After the main fire truck broke down, only a chemical fire truck consisting of two 25-gallon containers on a trailer was left. It was pulled around by a tow truck from Gordon's Garage.

Its baking soda /acid system was ineffective in freezing cold weather. Fire departments from nearby towns arrived to find that the wells were dry and no water was available.

A crew of citizens punched a hole through the ice of the Beaver River east of town and a series of pumps and 3,000 feet of hoses was just long enough to carry the water up River Street to the source of the fire.

The post office, McPhadden's Grocery Store, Henderson's Barber Shop and Pool Hall, Clay's Restaurant and Cooper's Butcher Shop were all destroyed in a matter of minutes. Four families living in the apartments above had to flee for their lives and lost all of their possessions.

Kay Sheldon had been up most of the night with her young daughter teething and only constant pounding on her apartment door above the fire roused her so that she could escape in time.

Other nearby buildings were in danger of catching fire.

Several employees were on the roof of the CIBC bank, Doyle's Grocery Store and the egg-grading station putting out the embers as they fell on the shingles. Bill Doyle, Bernadette Steffler, and Marion Miller carried thousands of eggs and hundreds of chickens out of the egg station and into waiting trucks.

Jack Allin and Harry Brandon managed to save the mail in the post office. Bank employees were locking all the documents in the vault in case the bank burned down.

George Shier, owner of the Brock House Hotel, stood on its roof and ran a bucket brigade from local wells to protect his building.

This whole section of town shown in the Atlas of Ontario County of 1877 as the Porritt Block was never rebuilt. Recently, the site was the Fox Fire Restaurant and is now a real estate office.

This was not the first fire in downtown Sunderland.

In 1913, the Calhoun Block burned to the ground as a result of an overheated stove. Nearby the tower and roof of the Presbyterian Church (now the Masonic Lodge) was damaged. The block was later rebuilt to become Doyle's Grocery Store and now is the Century House Grill on Albert Street.

Only newspaper articles remain to help remind us of the once central commercial part of Sunderland.

Larry Doble is president of the Sunderland and District Historical Society.