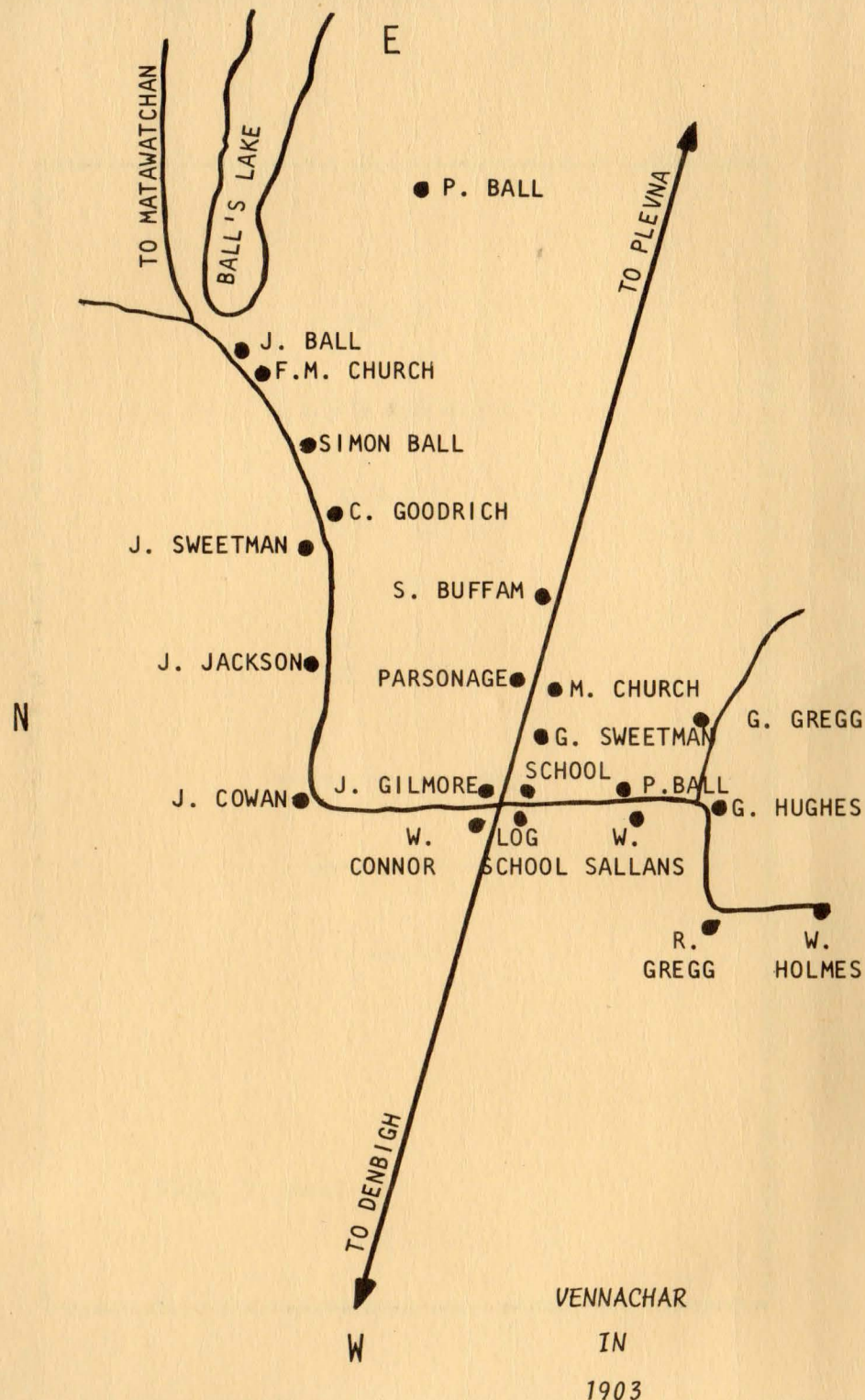


THE
VENNACHAR
FIRE
OF
1903

Lorne C. Ball



THE VENNACHAR FIRE

The year 1903 is remembered by the Old Timers of Vennachar as the year of "THE BIG FIRE". About fifty years earlier, the first settlers followed the Addington Road and the trails of the lumber companies into the northern part of Lennox & Addington County, and settled the Vennachar Community, in what came to be the Municipality of Denbigh, Abinger & Ashby. Vennachar, presumably named after beautiful Lake Vennachar in Perthshire, Scotland, is at the summit of the watershed dividing Lake Ontario from the Madawaska Valley.

As the land was cleared, houses and barns were built. These were soon followed by stores, churches, cheese factories, a log school house, and a small hotel. A couple of the farms were referred to as "Big Farms". Then came the Big Fire, which dealt such a blow to the community that it never fully recovered.

It happened during a dry time in late April. A fire, fed by brush left behind after recent timbering operations, started east of Louse Creek, in that stretch of bushland between Vennachar and Lake Mazinaw. Fanned by a strong south wind, the fire came roaring into the Vennachar Settlement. In a very short time, it had swept across about four miles of the settled part of the community, leaving behind a path of black, smoking ruins. Another fire the same day burned through the Snake Creek area west of Denbigh, where Stanley Gregg was working for a timber company. A third fire for that day is reported to have broken out in the Glenfield and Rose Hill area.

The first house to be threatened was that of Wellington Holmes. Mr. Holmes was in Denbigh at the time having some wheat ground into flour at the Petzold grist mill. Mrs. Holmes carried the children some distance from the house and waited and hoped. This was just four months before Herb was born. The fire swept past to the west of the clearing and the house was spared, but the wooden bridge at the foot of Bridge Hill did not fare so well.

At the Robert Gregg residence, the stable burned but the house escaped. Mr. Gregg was in Plevna at the time getting a hundred of flour. The homes of the following settlers narrowly escaped, as the flames raced north: George Hughes, George Gregg, William Sallans, and Phillip Ball.

Most of the loss was suffered at the intersection of the Denbigh-Matawatchan road. The comparatively new school house was destroyed, while just across the road, the original log school house built in 1866, escaped. Wesley Connor's residence, which included the Post Office and a small store, was completely destroyed. The fire got a start while Mr. Connor was helping a neighbor fight fire at his place. This combination store and post office was located just up the hill from where Mr. Connor later built a new store and dwelling. A log house near The Big Granite Boulder, a short distance west of the store, was untouched and stood for many more years. Just east of the Connor store was the Vennachar House, a small hotel attached to the John Gilmore residence. At one time, a small store had been included here. Two Jewish men operated a store in this building for a short time. Here everything burned to the foundation and was never rebuilt.

A quarter mile east, on the Plevna road, George Sweetman's large house and barn were burned. Nearby on the brow of the hill, the Methodist Church escaped unharmed. Across the road the house in which the minister lived and a new parsonage under construction, both went up in smoke, and were never rebuilt. The many buildings of the Sam Buffam place, a short distance to the east, escaped completely.

Burning embers like flying torches were carried by the strong wind a mile or so ahead of the main fire front. These started smaller fires in many places. As the fire swept to the north, six homes with their barns and the Free Methodist Church were right in the path of the fire. These were the homes of: John Cowan, James Jackson, Justus Sweetman, Charles Goodrich, Simon Ball, and John Ball. However, none of these suffered any damage to their buildings.

No one knows what further losses the community might have suffered, if a good shower of rain had not come just when it did. When it started to rain, the fire was burning in the woods across the road from the John Ball residence at the west end of Ball's Lake. Some thought the rain was a Divine Intervention, and perhaps they were right! As the dense smoke blotted out the sun and the very Heavens seemed to be on fire, Jane Jackson, a very devout Christian, knelt in the dust of the road near her home and prayed for rain. She believed that the God who sent rain in answer to Elijah's prayer, would send rain in answer to her's.

It is amazing that in spite of the number of buildings burned and the speed the fire travelled, there was no loss of human life.

Even tragedies have their human interest stories and sidelights. In this, the Vennachar fire was no exception. William Lane and his son Algernon were working in the bush near Vennachar, and it seemed at one time that the fire would trap them, but they escaped. Here's how they did it. Mr. Lane got on the horse's back. Son Al grasped the horse's tail and ran behind. They not only escaped the fire, but set something of a speed record for a man on foot, on a hot day.

Fifteen-year-old Beatrice Holmes, (Mrs. Charles Ball), was helping Mrs. Simon Ball, whose son Chelous was then two weeks old. As the fire came menacingly near, Mrs. Ball bundled the infant into the carriage and sent Beatrice with him to the John Ball home, in hopes that a measure of safety might be found near the lake. Hurrying over the rough road, the carriage upset and Chelous experienced his first traffic accident! Beatrice gathered up the baby, left the carriage behind, and ran the rest of the way with the baby in her arms.

It was indeed, a day not soon forgotten.

- - - - -

Lorne C. Ball

1967

Printed courtesy:

McNAMARA'S STORE

VENNACHAR, ONTARIO