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## The Great Fire of 1916

On Friday, July 29, 1966, an historical plaque was unveiled beside Highway 11, three-quarters of a mile south of Matheson, commemorating the disastrous forest fire of 1916. This plaque was one of a series erected throughout the province by the Department of Tourism and Information acting on the advice of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario.

The ceremony, which was arranged and sponsored by the Ontario Forestry Association, started at 2 p.m. in the curling rink at Matheson. The Association's President, Mr. T.E. Mackey, acted as program chairman. Other guests included: His Worship F.S. Hembruff, Mayor of Matheson; Mr. J.D. Hughes, District Forester, Swastika; Mr. A. Brightwell, Reeve of Black River Township; the Honourable J.W. Spooner, Minister of Municipal Affairs and M.P.P. (Cochrane South); Dr. E.S. Rogers, representing the province's Historic Sites Board; and the Honourable A. Kelso Roberts, Minister of Lands and Forests for the province of Ontario.

In 2003, the plaque was relocated to Alarie Park on Highway 11, Matheson.

The provincial plaque reads:

### **THE GREAT FIRE OF 1916**

On July 29, 1916, fires that had been burning for some weeks around settlers' clearings along the Temiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway were united by strong winds into one huge conflagration. Burning easterly along a 40-mile front, it largely or completely destroyed the settlements of Porquis Junction, Iroquois Falls, Kelso, Nushka, Matheson and Ramore. It also partially razed the hamlets of Homer and Monteith, while a smaller fire caused widespread damage in and around Cochrane. The 500,000-acre holocaust took an estimated 223 lives, more than any other forest fire in Canadian history, and led to the development of improved techniques and legislation for the prevention and control of forest fires.

## **Historical background**

Begun in 1902, the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway reached Cochrane in 1908. Scattered settlement began immediately and a number of hamlets came into being along the right of way. The summer of 1916 found settlers still clearing land in the time-honoured fashion – cutting down trees for building material, pulpwood or fuel, and burning the “slash” or unwanted debris.

There had been no rain for several weeks and the woods were tinder-dry. By July 27, several of the settlers’ fires had spread to dangerous proportions. Two days later, all of them were united by high winds into one vast conflagration, extending forty miles from Nellie Lake to Ramore and burning easterly at from 25 to 40 miles per hour. In that one terrible day, the settlements of Iroquois Falls, Porquis Junction, Kelso, Nushka, Matheson and Ramore were largely or completely destroyed, and the hamlets of Homer and Monteith partially razed. A smaller fire largely levelled Cochrane and did much damage in the surrounding region.

For several days, the fire shared headlines with the First World War, and the newspapers were filled with stories of horror and heroism, of sudden death and miraculous escape. Most of those who survived owed their lives to the proximity of some body of water, while others escaped by train. The actual death toll will probably never been known, but the official estimate stands at 223 – the majority of them in Matheson and Nushka.

Fire-fighting efforts were largely futile and it was only rain early in August that finally removed the danger of the further outbreak. For Porquis Junction and Cochrane it had been the second disastrous fire in five years. The “Matheson Fire” was by far the worst in Canadian history, from the standpoint of lives lost, and it was exceeded in this respect only by three other forest fires in all of North America. It destroyed some 500,000 acres of forest, bad enough though less than the destruction caused by the Porcupine Fire of 1911 and the later Haileybury Fire of 1922.

Apart from the heart-warming response it elicited from individuals, official bodies and businesses throughout the province, the Matheson Fire had one further good result. It made horrifyingly plain the need for organized counter-measures against forest fire and in December 1916 a Forest Protection Branch was added to the Department of Lands, Forests and Mines. Dr. E.J. Zavitz, its first head, celebrated his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday [in 1966], and maintained a lively interest in the activities of the Department. In 1917, the Forest Fires Prevention Act was passed by the Ontario legislature, the basis of our present forest protection legislation and the keystone of our conviction that no such catastrophe as the Matheson Fire can ever happen again.