

Blackened Ruins

Destruction of Queen's Avenue Methodist Church and Wesley Hall—A Surprise for Many of the Members—Bare Walls Mark the Site of One of London's Largest Public Buildings—The Brigade's Desperate Battle With the Flames—Kindly Offers From Sister Churches—Interesting Reminiscences.

Great indeed was the surprise that awaited many of the members of the congregation of the Queen's Avenue Methodist Church when they neared their accustomed place of worship yesterday morning and found a pile of black and smoking ruins where for over 40 years has stood one of the finest churches in the city. Not a stick that could burn from basement to tower remained, and behind the church was the ruins of Wesley Hall, not so completely destroyed, but rendered utterly valueless. Nothing but bare brick walls—good solid walls, bearing, by the way, every trace of having been most substantially put together, and standing a silent witness to the thorough masonry of the 50's, as against the paper-mache tendency of the present day. The feelings of some of the worshippers can be better imagined than described. Many had gone to the Queen's Avenue Church all their lives, and had grown up with it, and the demolition, so unexpected and so complete, came upon them with stunning force as they walked about, Bible and hymn books in hand, or stood in little groups and talked the matter over.

FELT LIKE CRYING.

"I feel just like having a good cry," one middle-aged lady was saying to another. "I feel as if my home had been burned over my head."

Expressions of sorrow and regret were heard on every hand, while one man, a philosopher turn seemed to take a great deal of comfort in remarking, "Well, there is one blessing; the fire might have visited a poorer congregation."

Queen's Avenue was the pioneer of London Methodism, and the largest Protestant church in the city. It numbered among its congregation many of London's most prominent and wealthy citizens, and while that was so it numbered also some of the other extreme. It was a church for the masses, and there were no class distinctions. The poor man felt just as much at ease as the wearer of broadcloth. The church was an historic pile, and many of the great men of the Methodist ministry have spoken from its pulpit. General Booth completely filled the vast edifice just a week ago tonight, while only in September last its walls re-echoed with the voices of clergymen from all parts of the earth gathered together conducting the business of the Methodist Quadrennial Conference.

THE ALARM.

It was just 11:39 when a man rushed up to P. C. Green at the corner of Park Avenue and Dundas street, and told him to call the brigade—the church was on fire. About the same time Harry Cromarty, a coupe driver for Brown's livery, dashed down the street, urging his horse toward the same fire. He was going a trifle faster than the law allows, but it was a case of necessity. It was from this man that the brigade received its first intimation of the fire at 11:40 p.m. About the same time a telephone message was received from Mrs. George F. Jewell, who lives near the church. Mr. Clare Powell and a couple of other young men were passing Queen's avenue just as the flames burst from the windows on the west side of the building, directly over the furnace.

This was before the firemen arrived, and the young men broke into the front door and made their way into the vestibule. They got inside just in time to see the flames bursting through the floor in every direction. In fact, the flames had been raging for some time in the basement before it broke through and was discovered.

MADE GOOD TIME.

The fire brigade had two streams on in less than two minutes after they got the alarm, and other streams followed fast, until within a few minutes the building from seven different branches. Five thousand feet of hose were laid, from the corner of Queen's avenue and Park street; Dundas street, in front of W. J. Reid's; Queen's avenue and Richmond street, and from the hydrant in front of the Bank of Montreal. So many streams were laid that the pressure on two of them was very weak, indeed.

Within five minutes of the first discovery of the fire, flames were mounting heavenward with a roar from every window in the place. This lit up the sky and brought hundreds running from every portion of the city. The position of the glare led many to think that one of the business blocks was burning, and as the fire appeared to grow fiercer for at least an hour thousands found their way down town.

THE GALLERIES FALL.

By 12 o'clock, so fiercely did the fire burn, the galleries fell in with the floor, and a shower of sparks shot upwards. Small darts of flame started to creep and play around the spire, while the roof was fast becoming a prey to the devouring element. The firemen had long before realized that it was only a waste of water, pouring it into the fiery cauldron that the church interior presented, and they set to work to save Wesley Hall and Mrs. Hiscox's house on the west side. For awhile it was doubtful if they would save either. A line of hose was run up through Mrs. Hiscox's house, and from the roof a stream was kept playing. Once smoke began to make its way through the roof and the flames were discovered under the window and put out.

FURNING TOWER.

On the roof fell in sections, and a pyrotechnic display followed. Sparks were sent skyward, and the force of the draught, which were carried in a northwest wind, and the acres of snow as Victoria Park received a shower of black. Watchers of the fire saw a very beautiful sight on the west side. The lofty spire, glowing and steaming for now in full blaze, and the swirling around the base and licking the weather vane,

obedient yet to the caprices of the atmosphere, industriously pointed north-easterly. Behind the spire was a cloud of light, with its shower of myriads of ever-changing ever-dancing sparks. And against this brilliant background stood the tower, every linament and angle radiant in flame. For a time it stolidly refused to bend before the fiery storm. At last, with a tremor, the peak wavered and fell outward, while the balance of the structure appeared to be drawn irresistibly into the furnace of flame. A resounding report and a brilliant cloud of tiny sparks marked the downfall of the tower, and watchers breathed freer, thinking the fire was now completely under control.

A BITTER COLD NIGHT.

The glare steadily decreased, and the hard work of the firemen seemed almost finished. The night was bitter cold, and although fighting with fire, the firemen suffered severely. It was 3 degrees below zero, but luckily there was no wind. There was just the very light breeze from the southwest. This carried the sparks away from the business portion completely. Just behind the church was situated a livery stable that would have made a fierce fire if the wind had been in the opposite direction. Next to Wesley Hall is a boarding house, and then one of the finest business blocks in the city. The possibilities of what the fire might have led to on a stormy night is appalling to think of. Streams of water ran down the streets, freezing as it got further away from the heat of the fire. On Richmond street the car tracks are under several inches of ice. The firemen's clothes froze stiff, and as legs scraped together like boards. However, none of them were frostbitten. More than one laid a good foundation for that ailment that too often overtakes a fireman—inflammatory rheumatism.

WESLEY HALL GOES, TOO.

Although the fight was fierce, the firemen thought they had saved Wesley Hall. They had maintained a hard battle with the flames at the vent of the church and the hall, and with a slight wooden protection from the fierce heat they held their position. Once there was a cry that the wall was falling, and they retreated for a moment. As the intense heat died away they fought their way through the door and played on the flames from the inside of the church porch. It was 12:40 when somebody noticed that the vent on the roof of the hall was burning, and when, a moment afterwards, the flames burst through the roof in a dozen different places, the brave firemen knew that by some means the fire had worked in under the roof and got a firm hold between the ceiling and the top. In a very few minutes the entire roof fell in, and things looked bad. There were three pianos, four organs, a \$700 library inside, that might have been saved, but it was not thought that the place would burn. On Sunday morning two small organs were taken out of the hall intact, and were removed to Mr. Powell's office. The library was also got out in pretty good condition. The seven strains of water soon began to affect the volume of flame, and shortly after 1 o'clock the fire was under control again.

THE PROBABLE CAUSE.

It is generally conceded that the fire must have started from some part of one of the furnaces. There were four furnaces under the church, and one under Wesley Hall. The caretaker, Mr. James Morgan, has occupied the position for the past nineteen years. In conversation with an "Advertiser" reporter yesterday, Mr. Morgan said: "There was choir practice in the church Saturday night, and the singers and organist left shortly after 10 o'clock. I went my usual rounds and banked every fire for the night. There are four furnaces under the church, one in each corner of the basement, and only three were burning. There was no possibility for even a fire to ignite in front of any of them. The floor was of brick, and the roof was thirteen feet from the floor. There was a space of six feet between the top of the furnace and the church floor, but between the two was a covering of sheet iron, then brickwork, and, lastly, several inches of ashes."

All kindling and coal was placed at a safe distance from any of the furnaces, and there was no possibility of the fire being caused by a spark."

Trustee A. B. Powell subsequently told the "Advertiser" reporter that one of the furnaces had not been used this winter until Saturday. Then owing to the very cold spell the third one was put in use. It is thought, perhaps, that this furnace had a defective flue and in some manner caused the fire.

THE INSURANCE.

The total insurance of the church buildings, Wesley Hall and contents, is \$26,500 on a valuation of \$45,000. It is divided as follows: On the church building—\$3,000 in the London and Lancashire; \$3,000 in the Queen's. On the organ (value \$14,000)—\$1,500 in the London and Lancashire; \$1,500 in the Queen's; \$3,000 in the Commercial Union. On the church furniture—\$500 in the Queen's; \$500 in the London and Lancashire. On Wesley Hall building—\$3,000 in the Guardian. On the furnishings and musical instruments, etc., in Wesley Hall—\$300. THE SALVAGE.

The library, which is saved, is worth from \$500 to \$700. Two organs in Wesley Hall, which were saved, were valued at \$50 apiece. There is a salvage of about \$100 on one of the pianos in Wesley Hall which was damaged. The total salvage (apart from the bricks) will be about \$300.

AN UNLUCKY DECISION.

At the last regular meeting of the church board of trustees a proposal to increase the insurance by \$10,000 was vigorously debated, but it was decided that it would be difficult to carry more at present and the suggestion was thrown out. PRIVATE LOSSES. Nearly every member of the church

loses hymn books or Bibles, which are usually left in the pews. The congregational loss in this line is estimated at \$1,000.

THE PASTOR IS AWAY. Rev. J. W. Annis is unwell, and for a week past has been sojourning at Cliff Springs, New York State. It was his intention to stay three weeks. The news will be a great shock to the devoted pastor. There has been a great deal of talk for some years of building a more modern church. The site talked of was the corner of Queen's avenue and Wellington street, but since the agitation for a new building died away this property has been sold to the Free Library directors and the managers of the Y. M. C. A.

The pulpit was to have been occupied yesterday morning and evening by Rev. C. E. Keenleyside, B.A., B.D. A love feast and fellowship meeting was arranged to take place at 9:30 a.m., to have been led by Rev. Dr. Sanderson, one of the old pastors of the church. The musical service was in charge of Queen's Avenue. A special practice was held on Saturday night, and the singers did not leave the building until 10:15. The program for yesterday was to have been: Morning anthem, "The Radiant Morn," Woodward; quartet, "Remember Now Thy Creator," Rhodes; Harmony Quartet, Evening anthem, "There is a Holy City," Shelly; solos by Misses Fowler and Land; trio, "Holy Redeemer," Marchetti, Misses Hartson and Land.

CURIOUS CROWDS.

All day yesterday the scene of the fire was visited by a curious and changing crowd. The church was surrounded by a number of (in summer time) beautiful shade trees. The steam from the burning pile caught on the bare limbs of the trees, and the night, and as the morning sun came out the glistening covering of frost made a very pretty sight. The thoroughfare past the church on Park avenue was closed for traffic owing to the tottering state of the church walls left standing. Several policemen were required to keep the inquisitive people from crowding in among the still smoking ruins.

FORCE OF HABIT.

Rev. Mr. Kennedy, a retired minister, has been a regular attendant at Queen's Avenue for a number of years. Mr. Kennedy is an aged man, and walks with his eyes towards the ground. He went to church as usual yesterday morning and noticed that the pavement was rather black under foot, but gave it no thought. He came to the church and had turned into the side hall before the situation really dawned on him.

Mr. Morgan, the caretaker, is also an elderly man, and he went to church early to the church not knowing that a fire had occurred. As he neared the scene he raised his head to note the curious sight that met his eyes. He was surprised to find that the church was on fire, and he received his first intimation of the fire.

HOW THE FIREMEN FARED.

By the kindness of Mayor Little and Ald. J. W. Jones the firemen were given hot coffee and sandwiches at Fysh's during the early morning hours. They returned to the scene of the fire until 7 o'clock this morning.

There were few casualties. Fireman John Swanwick, a member of No. 2 station, fell off Mrs. Hiscox's roof, but was unhurt, with a shaking up. A piece of roofing fell off Wesley Hall on the head of Fireman Archie Nicholson, also of No. 2 station. Luckily he had on his helmet a few minutes before, and his head was thus protected. He was stunned, but slightly cut.

The crowd gathered at Chief Roe during the progress of the fire. The firemen thought that the door of Wesley Hall was locked, and the chief went away at it vigorously with an axe for some minutes. Someone shouted "The door is open," and the chief turned the knob and walked in.

Assistant Chief Andrew McMurchie entered Wesley Hall by the south door. It had a spring lock, and when, half blind by the smoke, Mr. McMurchie attempted to leave the hall, he was held by Fireman James Gleason was just outside and with a few vigorous blows of an axe he burst the door open and released his comrade.

BROTHERLY LOVE.

The announcement of the fire from the various pulpits was the first news of it that many received. Feeling references were made in all cases. At the morning service yesterday, Rev. W. J. Clark referred sympathetically to the fire, alluding to the associations and memories that belonged to the house where men, and women, and children had been accustomed to go in and out together the house of God. Mr. Clark stated that his officials had been called together for a few moments before the service, and had decided to make hearty offer of the use of the main church for the Sabbath after.

Every other way the Park Avenue Presbyterian congregation desired to place themselves at the disposal of the Methodist brethren. Mr. Clark further remarked that, as good often came out of evil, he had no doubt the well-known energy and public spirit of the Queen's Avenue congregation would cause a new and beautiful edifice to arise phoenix-like, from the ashes of the structure that had been destroyed.

ST. ANDREW'S.

When ex-Mayor Spencer, superintendent of the Queen's Avenue Sunday School, went home at noon yesterday he found the entire board of management of St. Andrew's Church awaiting him with the following letter:

"LONDON, Feb. 3, 1895.

"To the Managing Board of Queen's Avenue Methodist Church.

"Brethren,—At a joint meeting held this morning of the session and board of management of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church the following resolution was passed: 'That the congregation of St. Andrew's Church hereby convey their deep and sincere sympathy to the congregation of Queen's Avenue Methodist Church in the great loss they have sustained by the destruction of their church and lecture hall, and we hereby place at their disposal our church on Sabbath mornings for divine service, and our school room on Sabbath morning or afternoon at an hour that can be mutually agreed upon for their Sabbath school.'

"We would also invite them to use our lecture room for week evening ser-

ices on Tuesdays, Thursdays or Fridays."

Signed on behalf of St. Andrew's congregation, REV. E. H. SAWERS, moderator; C. R. SOMERVILLE, clerk of session; J. M. MACARTHUR, M.D., chairman managing board."

OTHER KIND OFFERS.

Dean Innes, on behalf of the Church of England, offered the congregation the use of Cronyn Hall.

The Y. M. C. A. offered the use of their rooms.

Rev. Mr. Lancelley, at Dundas Centre, where many of the Queen's Avenue members worshipped, stated that the regular services this week would be subject to alteration, to permit the use of the edifice by the homeless congregation.

Mr. W. J. Reid offered the use of his cottage on Dufferin avenue for class or Sunday school purposes.

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.

A very complete history of the Queen's Avenue Methodist Church appeared in the quarter century edition of the "Advertiser," published Oct. 23, 1888. It will be read with the greatest interest not only by the members of the congregation, but by all the city, because of its reminiscent character. Here it is:

A CENTURY OF METHODISM.

"Methodism in London and suburbs has for more than half a century had for its great center the Queen's Avenue Methodist Church, a name adopted some years ago, when North street as the common name of that spacious, maple-lined highway was discarded. This congregation has from the first been the center of wealth, influence and enterprise, the possession of such vast resources of vitality making it the parent vine from which others have developed, under circumstances that soon rendered them self-supporting and strong. The splendid edifice that stands, crowned with a lofty spire, at the corner of Queen's and Park avenues, which, with Wesley Hall, the \$9,000 organ and other appointments, is valued at from \$45,000 to \$50,000, seems a long remove, as indeed it is, from the modest 'roughcast' in which a few pioneers worshipped after the manner of John Wesley on Ridout street. It is, moreover, a great advance on the more pretentious frame erected at the southeast corner of King and Talbot streets, now occupied by a hotel, and its successor, the Richmond Street Church, on the same site, a few rods south of Dundas where, about 1849, the Rev. John Carroll, whose name is a household word among older Methodists, occupied the primitive pulpit and laid the foundation of the church which soon fixed itself permanently on North street. Space will not suffice to recount the names of all the laymen in connection with the congregation whose time and means were in the past so liberally given in aid of building new local churches, and in furthering mission, Sunday school and educational work. Many young ministers performed their first work in connection with the circuit under the direction of the superintendent, who exercised a fatherly care over the little causes that grew up on St. James and Fall Mall streets, in Petersville, on Adelaide street, in London South and elsewhere. A great deal of the preaching in these places was done by the 'young man' under the North street superintendent, but he was the responsible person for the circuit and did his share of the mission work."

BUYING THE SITE.

"The old Richmond Street Church in which Father Carroll, Dr. Evans and others held forth, did not keep pace with the congregation, and under Rev. Wm. Pollard, the North Street Church came into existence. The lot was bought from one Anthony Pegler on Jan. 13, 1852, for \$700. On March 9 of the same year a trustees board meeting was held, consisting of Messrs. Wm. Glass, Geo. Tyas, John Elson, S. Peters, S. McBride and S. Screamore. Rev. Dr. Pollard presiding, when it was decided to erect a church on the site purchased. On April 9 the board decided to engage Mr. Hodgins, a Toronto architect, who received \$100 for drawing plans, superintending the work, etc. On June 26 Wm. Ellis was awarded the contract for the excavation at \$29 1/2, and in January, 1853, the tender for the brick work was let to Screamore & Grant, the contractors for George Ward on the glazing and painting to John Bonser, and the plastering to Mr. Tibbs. According to a minute in the secretary's books Mrs. Raymond was engaged as organist in November, 1853, and in July, 1854, the trustees fixed the yearly rental of pews, and decided to sell them by auction to the highest bidder. Samuel McBride received the important appointment of pew steward and collector of rents during the same month. The time at length arrived when the all-important work drew to a successful close, and the new church was opened for worship on July 16, 1854, the collections of the day amounting to \$50 1/2. Rev. Dr. Evans, now in his 86th year, and actively engaged every day in charge of the headquarters of the Western Ontario Bible Society branch in this city, took one of the services on that memorable occasion. Rev. Mr. Pollard, who was in charge during the time of opening, before, and was succeeded by Rev. Wm. Wilkinson. In the year 1856 came the Rev. J. Douce, and a couple of years later the Rev. Dr. Cooney, a remarkable man in his way, as some of our readers may remember. The St. Paul's peal of chimes were wont to ring out their music across the street while the Wesleyan service was in progress, and one morning Dr. Cooney stopped to inform the congregation that the only pleasure those bells ever gave him was when they stopped ringing. In 1860 Rev. G. R. Sanderson became pastor. After a continuous, active, ministerial service of 52 years he was superannuated at the London Conference of June, 1888, held in the same old edifice, and he is now in his declining years a member of the congregation over which he 23 years ago presided as pastor. Though on the retired list he still answers numerous calls to fill pulpits in the city and elsewhere."

OLD-TIME PASTORS.

"Following Rev. Mr. Sanderson in the North Street pastorage were Rev. R. Jones and Rev. John Potts (1863), Rev. J. E. Bishop, Rev. W. J. Hunter, Rev. Dr. Elliott, Rev. Wm. Briggs, and about 1871 Rev. Dr. Wm. Jeffers, father of Mr. J. Frith Jeffers, now of this city, and the honored superintendent of the Queen's Avenue Methodist Sunday school. Rev. James Wannon, a late president of the Guelph Conference, succeeded Dr. Jeffers, and then came the Rev. James Graham, that sturdy, outspoken, quick-witted preacher whom the London Conference last summer placed in the president's chair. The Rev. John Philip was the next regular occupant of the Queen's Avenue pulpit, and since leaving here he has held the leading pastorates in Canada, including Great St. James of Montreal. An eloquent and magnetic preacher, Rev. L. Gaetz, followed him, but the strain of the work on his nervous organism proved too great, and he sought rest."

(Continued on Page Three.)

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