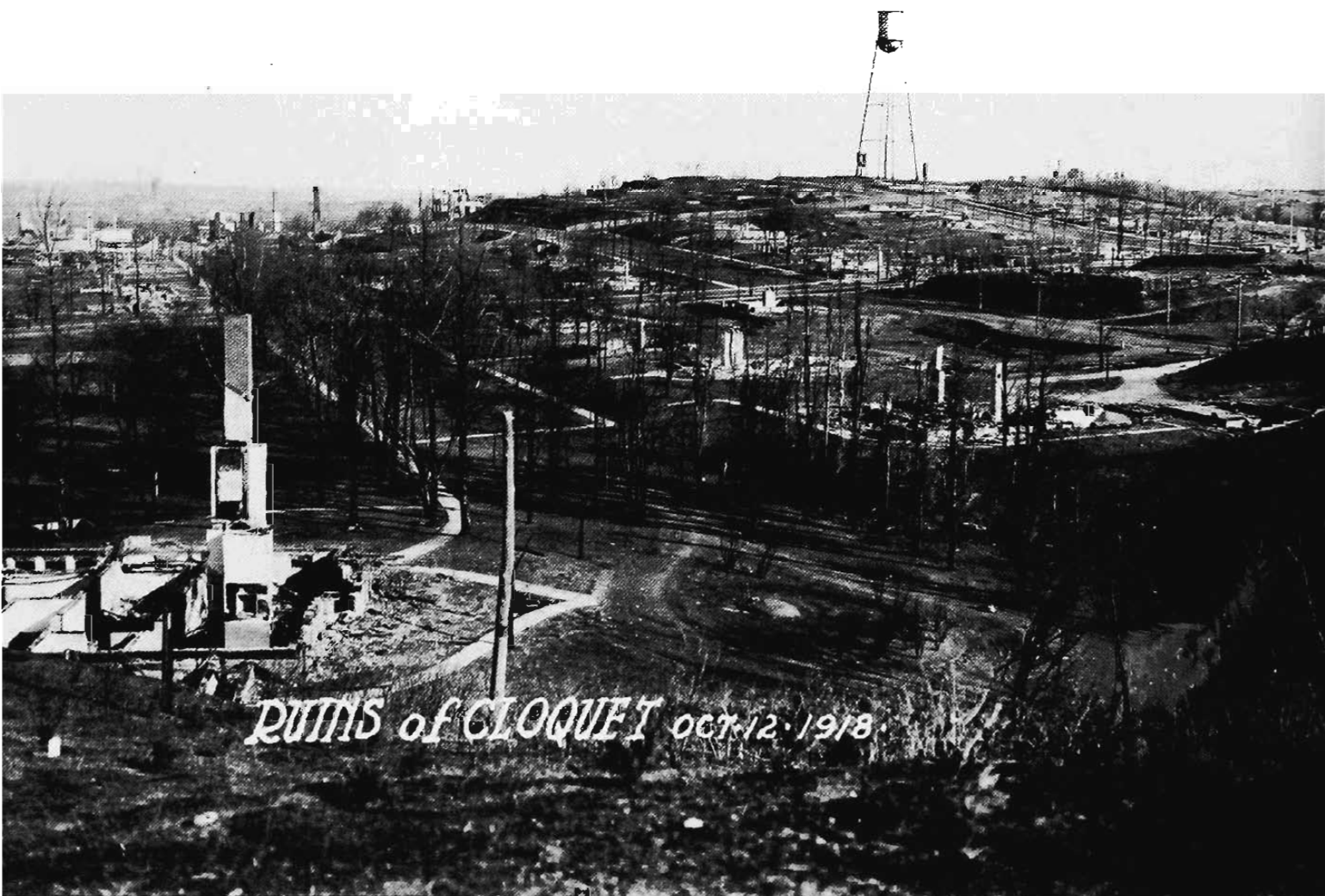


“At the time of our



RUINS of CLOQUET OCT. 12, 1918.

misfortune'' Relief Efforts following the 1918 Cloquet Fire

Francis M. Carroll and Franklin R. Raiter

MINNESOTA has never been free of forest fires. But those fires that followed in the wake of logging operations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were perhaps the most destructive of all time. Of these, the most devastating was the 1918 Cloquet fire. In Carlton

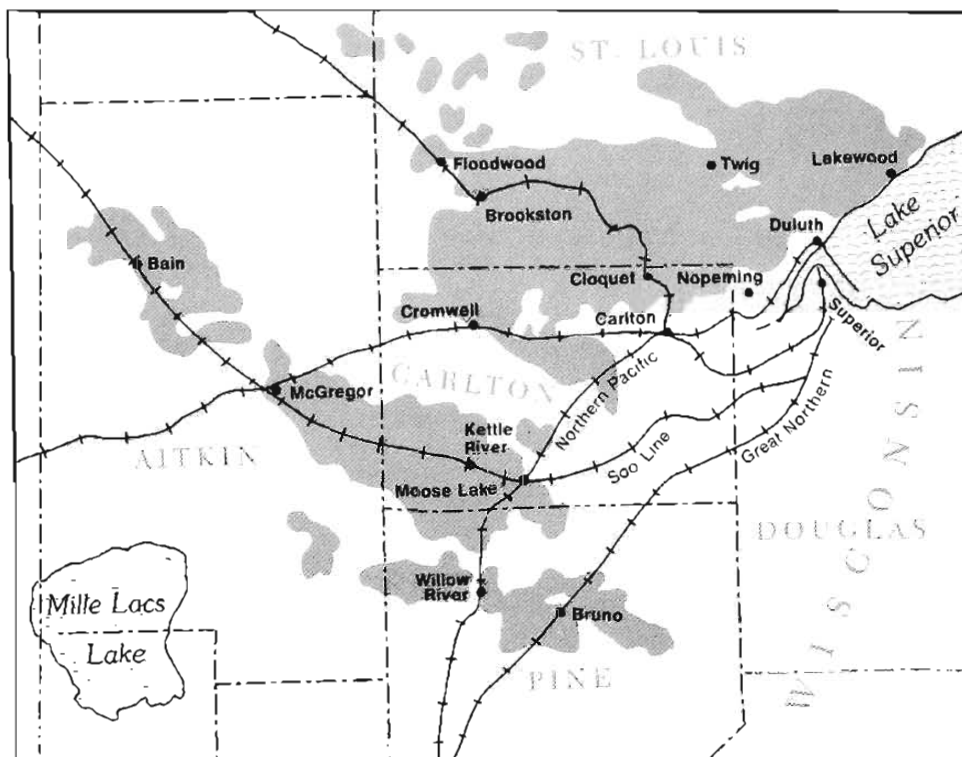
¹There is no proper history of the Cloquet fire and nothing currently in print. The best general account is Stewart H. Holbrook, *Burning an Empire: The Story of American Forest Fires*, 31-45 (New York, 1943); a brief but useful account is Ralph W. Hidy, Frank E. Hill, and Allan Nevins, *Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story*, 197-199 (New York, 1963). Under a general title, "The Holocaust in Minnesota," *American Forestry*, a technical journal, published two articles, an editorial, two pages of comment, and many pictures; see E. G. Cheyney, "A Greater Hinckley"; J. F. Hayden, "The Great Minnesota Fire"; "Minnesota's Forest Fire Disaster"; and "Press Comments" — all in *American Forestry*, 24:642-655 (November, 1918). The earliest technical analysis was by Duluth weatherman, H. W. Richardson, "The Northeastern Minnesota Forest Fires of October 12, 1918," in *Geographical Review*, 7:220-232 (April, 1919). His expertise was used in later court cases to determine the responsibility for the fires.

For the first official report on the fire, see the statement by William T. Cox, "The Recent Forest Fires," dated November 1, 1918, and appended to State Forestry Board, *Annual Report . . . July 31, 1918*, 15-19 [St. Paul, 1918?]. The November 26, 1918, report of the state Forest Fires Commission appears as an appendix to *Inaugural Message of Governor J. A. A. Burnquist to the Legislature of Minnesota, 1919*, 32-40 [St. Paul, 1919?]. The most comprehensive and authoritative of these official documents is Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission, *Final Report* (Duluth, 1921), hereafter cited as *Final Report*.

Francis Carroll, a graduate of Carleton College who holds advanced degrees from the University of Minnesota and Trinity College in Dublin, is currently associate professor of history in the University of Manitoba. Franklin Raiter, a history graduate of Brown University who served for seven years as an officer in the Navy, is presently a civil servant in the International Activities Division of the United States Maritime Administration. Born in Cloquet some 20 years after the fire, both men grew up very much in the shadow of that community experience.

County fires were recorded as early as 1819. More recent disasters were those at Hinckley in 1894 (where 418 were killed), at Chisholm in 1908, and at Baudette-Spooner in 1910. The largest Minnesota fire occurred at Red Lake in 1931, where four people were killed. But the Cloquet fire stands out because it had the largest number of fatalities and the highest dollar value of property destroyed. The holocaust was also known as the "Moose Lake Fire" or simply as the "Northeastern Minnesota Fire."¹

It was, in fact, several fires, and they burned over an extensive area on October 12, 1918. These fires had been burning separately for many days during an exceptionally dry autumn. Sparks from a number of trains in various parts of the area, however, together with a capricious decline in the humidity, combined to create conditions that developed to the dimensions of a fire storm. Quickly the new fires joined with those in the smoldering bogs and cutover bush, generating great heat and gale-force winds that drove the flames forward with frightening speed and momentum. What had for days been a relatively harmless and more or less endemic condition of brush fire jumped swiftly to new and destructive proportions, catching the inhabitants of the region surprised, unprepared, and unwilling to believe that a disaster was upon them. As the various fires burned together to form larger ones, people in rural areas found themselves cut off from orderly escape by blocked roads. The railroads took many people in Brookston, Cloquet, Corona, Sturgeon Lake, and Moose Lake literally out of the clutches of the flames, but in other areas residents were not so fortunate. In some places the trains could not get through, leaving people to seek what shelter they could in root cellars, wells, streams, or lakes. Many attempted to outrun the fires in automobiles or horse-drawn wagons, with varying degrees of success. Indeed, because the fires flared up and moved across the region so rapidly, the entire population was taken largely unawares.



THE AREA stricken by the devastating fires that swept northeastern Minnesota in the autumn of 1918

The area burned was tremendous. The largest of the fires stretched in the north from near Floodwood to Brookston to Twig to Lakewood, an eastern suburb of Duluth, where it burned right down to Lake Superior. In the south, this fire ranged from Cromwell to Cloquet to Adolph to Nopeming, on the brow of the rock outcrops overlooking West Duluth. Other fires ran along the Soo Line Railway tracks from Bain to McGregor to Kettle River to Moose Lake, and farther to the south another fire surrounded Willow River and Bruno. Only a change in the wind, bringing cooler, more humid air off Lake Superior stopped the progress of the fire and prevented an even worse disaster. The fire consumed approximately 1,500 square miles in a territory that centered in Carlton and St. Louis counties but touched six other counties as well. Of the 36 towns or villages destroyed, the largest were Cloquet, with a population of over 8,000, and Moose Lake, which numbered over 500. These statistics, however, were insignificant compared to the human tragedy of 453 people killed (200 in Moose Lake alone), 85 badly burned, and 2,100 injured. Naturally, many others suffered and were uprooted. Records show that 52,371 people were displaced by the fire, many of whom became refugees whose homes, possessions, and livelihood were destroyed. The story of the fire and the escape of those who survived it is both dramatic and frightening.²

Equally remarkable, however, is the story of the relief efforts. The first impulse of authorities and indi-

viduals in Duluth and Superior had been merely to rescue and to aid the needy survivors, but this effort was quickly expanded by state and national authorities — as well as by many local survivors — into a major relief project that encouraged the recovery and reconstruction of the area. Although the damage done by the fire seemed almost overwhelming, the burned-over region was, with great effort, reoccupied and rebuilt. The credit for the area's revival must be shared by all the settlers who were determined to come back and start again. Great praise must also be given to the organizations and individuals who, almost in the midst of the fire itself, began the relief and reconstruction struggle.

RELIEF efforts began in Duluth on Saturday afternoon, even before the extent of the fire was fully known. Captain Henry L. Tourtelotte and Lieutenant Karl A. Franklin of the 4th Regiment, Minnesota Infantry, National Guard, received a call at 3:00 P.M. to assist north of Duluth along the Rice Lake Road, where cars were needed to pick up people who had begun to flee in the face of the flames. There the two officers conferred with Duluth Mayor Clarence R. Magney, Chief of Police Robert D. McKercher, and others. Captain Tourtelotte drove back to Duluth (taking with him an elderly woman and eight children) to mobilize the units under his command. By 5:00 P.M. the two companies of the National

²Final Report, [3], 4-6, 12.

Guard in Duluth were ordered to report to the Armory in old clothes, ready to fight fire. Within two hours they set out, equipped with fire tools from the city supplies, to the farm land around Hermantown, northwest of Duluth. There they found the situation too far out of control for the troops to contain the flames. Their efforts very quickly turned to rescuing people who had been cut off by the fire or who were helpless and without transportation.³

Meanwhile the commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard, Major Roger M. Weaver, concluded that a major emergency was developing. By late afternoon he offered the battalion's services to Chief McKercher and conferred with Captain Tourtelotte who had returned from north of town. By 5:40 P.M. the fire chief requested Major Weaver's troops, and the mobilization procedures were set in motion. Within about an hour, 70 men had assembled at the Duluth Armory and were dispatched to fight fire, the first group being sent to Woodland, a suburb in the east end of Duluth. As additional troops reported to the Armory they were sent to various fire fronts. In the evening, a major effort up on the hill west of Duluth saved the Nopeming Sanatorium, the county tuberculosis hospital, and the St. James Catholic Orphanage. At 10:00 P.M. some 50 men went to rescue the patients and to save the buildings if possible. More than 200 patients and employees were evacuated and transported to the Denfeld and Irving schools in western Duluth some eight miles away. Later in the night the fire seemed to threaten the buildings at Nopeming once again, but the flames were eventually brought under control and the \$350,000 institution was saved.⁴

By great good fortune, two of the Minnesota Home Guard units in Duluth were companies of the 7th Battalion, Motor Corps, under the command of Major Henry J. Mullin. Their early involvement provided a

high degree of organized mobility to both fire fighting and rescue operations. The Motor Corps was able to deliver both National Guard and Home Guard troops quickly and in large numbers at various fire sites around the Duluth area. Its members also performed the even more critical task of taking fire victims without means of transportation away from the fire scene and into the Duluth Armory. The corps ferried refugees from the train stations to the Armory and to various hospitals, and it served as an essential courier service. Indeed, transportation became so critical that the Motor Corps accepted assistance from local citizens; when that proved inadequate, it pressed private automobiles into service. The Standard Oil Company stations in Duluth stayed open all night and made no charge for the gasoline dispensed to facilitate the transportation needs of the emergency. One volunteer driver, who had seen the fire come within a half mile of where he had been staying, brought three loads of people into Duluth on Sunday morning and then from noon to 10:30 in the evening moved supplies to the hospitals. For the next several days after the fire the Motor Corps remained the principal means of moving relief goods into the fire districts, rescuing survivors in remote areas, searching for dead bodies, and making preliminary assessments of the damage. Both Major Weaver and Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist singled out the Motor Corps for high praise after the fire. They concluded that the death toll in the Duluth area would have been higher but for the heroic services of these volunteers who provided both their own vehicles and uniforms.⁵

When the news arrived at 3:00 A.M. that the fires near Nopeming had got out of control, Major Weaver left the Armory with additional troops to fight the blaze. Finding the fire there being successfully contained, he decided to travel "by machine" to Carlton and Cloquet to assess the situation. In Carlton he found a large number of refugees who had fled from Cloquet, and he was asked for assistance there for food and supplies. Weaver immediately passed these requests back to the Red Cross in Duluth. Making his way to Cloquet itself, the major found it almost completely deserted and many fires still burning. Surveying the smoldering city, he concluded that the ruins, including bank vaults and many store safes, and the remaining buildings and mills would need immediate military protection, and that substantial relief facilities would have to be created.⁶

Weaver returned to his headquarters at the Duluth Armory and conferred again that night with Captain Tourtelotte. Lieutenant Franklin and 50 National Guard troops who had been fighting fire all night were called for immediately and by 8:30 A.M. on October 13, Sunday morning, they were taking up their stations in the town. Property was to be protected; no one was allowed to return without some proof of ownership, a measure

³Tourtelotte, Report of Companies "C" and "D," 4th Regiment, Minnesota Infantry, National Guard, October 27, 1918, in Roger M. Weaver Scrapbook, Northeast Minnesota Historical Center (NEMHC), University of Minnesota, Duluth.

⁴Weaver to Adjutant General [Walter F. Rhinow], November 3, 1918, a report on the work of state military forces in fire relief, hereafter cited as Weaver Report, in Weaver Scrapbook, NEMHC.

⁵Weaver Report; Frank Murphy to "Dear Mother," October 15, 1918, in Frank Murphy Papers, NEMHC; *Carlton County Vidette* (Carlton), October 25, 1918, p. 1. On the Motor Corps, see Arnold L. Luukkonen, "Brave Men in Their Motor Machines — and the 1918 Forest Fire," in *Ramsey County History*, Fall, 1972, p. 3-8.

⁶Here and two paragraphs below, see Weaver and Tourtelotte reports, both in Weaver Scrapbook. For a good description of Cloquet before the fire, see Walter O'Meara, *We Made It through the Winter: A Memoir of Northern Minnesota Boyhood*, 3-7 (St. Paul, 1974).



AWFULLEST FIRE HORROR IN STATE'S HISTORY! Probably 900 Lives Gone! Property Loss Also Terrible!

**City of Cloquet Wiped Out
By a Seething Holocaust
With a Loss of Prob-
ably Twenty Mil-
lion Dollars!**

**Moose Lake and Ket-
tle River, 24 Other
Towns Wiped Out
With Hundreds
Of Lives Lost!**

Begging description was the awful cat-
astrophe which visited this section,
hurricane of flame and
smoke which

INSURANCE NOTICE!

Adjusters for Hartford Fire Insurance Company are on the ground. Claimants please address or communicate with Agent C. P. Osburn, either at Cloquet or Sellwood Building Duluth.

left. Most of the Cloquet lumber yards on Dunlap Island are saved, and most of everything north of the Great Northern Railroad tracks, but everything south of the tracks is completely clean—even the blown away by Cloquet, der- getic, der some

SPECIAL NOTICE TO FARMERS

The Carlton county authorities urge every farmer not to sell their stock. Un- buyers have the co- of

LODGES HASTEN TO RELIEVE THEIR MEMBERS

The local lodges came to the relief of their members in splendid shape. Dr. Edward H. Hall, state commander of Maccabees was in Carlton and Cloquet Wednesday night to select to mem- ban.

OCTOBER DRAFT CALL IS CAN- CELLED NOW

The local draft board, in view of the big calamity, made heroic efforts to get our coun- ty out of the draft for a season.

*THE VIDETTE
joined with the
Pine Knot to produce
this first postfire
newspaper.*

that eliminated sightseers and souvenir hunters. Sanitary regulations were posted and enforced; public latrines were provided. Unburned buildings on Dunlap Island in the St. Louis River became the headquarters, and within a matter of days a barracks for soldiers was built at the corner of Cloquet Avenue and Second Street. Sergeant Gus Apel set up a dispensary in the Northeastern Hotel, where he looked after refugees, ministered first aid, and put dressings on burn victims for 36 hours without rest. The National Guard also ran a mess service for several days, serving hot food to refugees returning to Cloquet to inspect their losses. The troops made themselves generally useful to the returning residents. One survivor recalled how a guardsman instructed his family about the procedures of returning to one's property and then later broke open the safe of the family store when the combination had been forgotten.

In the aftermath of the fire, troops moved to several other towns as well as Cloquet. First Home Guard and later National Guard units served in Carlton, assisting Sheriff Harry L. McKinnon by patrolling the town, keeping watch for fires, and regulating traffic into Cloquet. Major Weaver sent Home Guard troops into Bar-

num and Moose Lake by train on Sunday morning, where they were later joined by troops from southern Minnesota under the command of Colonel LeRoy D. Godfrey. Another Duluth detachment traveled to Brookston to take charge of relief operations and to

OPENING a fire-scarred safe in Cloquet



establish military protection until normal civilian control could be resumed. Smaller groups of soldiers were posted to places like Floodwood and Brevator. To relieve the Duluth troops, many of whom had been on constant duty for over 30 hours, soldiers mobilized from Two Harbors, Grand Rapids, Bemidji, Eveleth, and several other range cities joined in suppressing the fire for several days after October 12. Moreover, they were the principal agency for dispensing medical and relief supplies and for protecting property. Roads had to be cleared and in many cases rebuilt (wooden culverts burned out during the fire causing the road surfaces to collapse); a pontoon bridge had to be built across the St. Louis River at Brookston to reach areas cut off from any other means of access; livestock was rounded up and fed. Both living and dead fire victims had to be sought out in remote rural areas, coffins provided, and dragging operations undertaken in lakes where people had taken refuge only to be drowned.

In short, until civil authority was restored and until some of the normal population returned, the troops performed whatever tasks were asked of them. Walter F. Rhinow, the adjutant general of the Home Guard, established his headquarters at Moose Lake, joining some 275 National Guard troops, 13 army trucks, 12 civilian trucks, and 12 Motor Corps automobiles kept in constant use. Home Guard Captain Dr. Frederick L. Smith of the Mayo Clinic ran a hospital in the repaired Moose Lake

High School. Altogether, the military operations were very large and involved a substantial number of people drawn from the volunteer ranks of both the National and Home guards. Generally speaking, the relations between the troops and the communities they served were excellent. Gradually the number of troops involved was reduced as things began to return to normal and civilian groups moved to take over the tasks of relief operations. On December 13 General Rhinow was asked to withdraw troops from Moose Lake. This final process took much longer than was expected, both in Moose Lake and several of the other affected communities, with the result that the previous good relations were eroded a bit. By the end of January, 1919, however, all remaining troops in the Cloquet and Moose Lake districts had been sent home.⁷

THE RED CROSS in Duluth, like the troops themselves, mobilized early on Saturday. By coincidence, a number of Red Cross women volunteers were working at the Duluth Armory on Saturday afternoon when it became clear that a disaster was in the making. Major Weaver asked Mrs. W. Sumner Covey to take charge of establishing an emergency hospital in the National Guard dormitory in the Armory building. Mrs. Covey, who worked without rest for the next 24 hours, earned warm praise for her organizational skills in anticipating the needs of the fire victims and in getting all of the facilities ready. Both the Red Cross women and the medical corps of the Home Guard worked as hospital

⁷ Hubert V. Eva to Adjutant General Rhinow, December 13, 1918, and to J. A. A. Burnquist, January 2, 1919, file 648c, in Governor's Records, Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); *Pine Knot* (Cloquet), November 1, 1918, December 6, 1918, both on p. 1; *Star Gazette* (Moose Lake), December 19, 1918, p. 1.

THE DULUTH ARMORY, headquarters for the Red Cross and National Guard fire relief efforts



and dispensary staff. Thus, when burned or injured people began to arrive at the Armory, the facilities were set up and ready to receive them. Even these preparations were soon overwhelmed, however, by the numbers of refugees. Additional cots were brought into the temporary hospital, raising the number of beds from 50 to 75, and then cots were set up in long rows on the drill room floor of the Armory. At the same time the medical staff was expanded to handle the number of sufferers. Doctors and nurses in the city were requested and volunteered readily. John B. Adams, the manager of the Duluth Red Cross chapter, undertook to get medical supplies, cots, beds, and bedding from Duluth hotels and stores.⁸

When it was learned that Cloquet had burned and that there would be many more refugees from there descending on Duluth, the Red Cross made arrangements to place them at the Court House, the Masonic Temple, the Shrine Auditorium, the YMCA buildings, and several centrally located churches and hotels. Each building had an assigned doctor and several nurses, together with bedding and medical supplies. The figures vary, but it would seem that within the first 24 hours approximately 438 serious cases were treated. In addition to the medical services and shelter, the Armory's mess facilities were also utilized. Hot food was served continuously all night Saturday and all Sunday to nearly 3,000 refugees by both the Home and National Guard cooks who worked without rest for over 24 hours. Frank Murphy, a volunteer driver, wrote his mother several days later describing the scene: "I will never forget the sight at the Armory. The main floor was filled with cots and people sleeping there[,] some of them not knowing where the rest of their families were or whether they were alive or not." Murphy's own conclusion was appropriate for the whole experience: "It was one wild night."

When the immediate crisis was over, the most serious cases were moved to St. Mary's and St. Luke's hospitals under the supervision of the doctors who had first treated them. The drill floor of the Armory was emptied in order to convert that area into operations headquarters for the disaster relief effort. As quickly as possible attempts were made to minister first aid and treatment for burns to people in the areas outside Duluth. In Cloquet a dispensary opened on Sunday morning, and teams of doctors and nurses went as soon as they could from Duluth into the outlying districts. During the next few days it was possible to send doctors and nurses into rural areas on day trips, giving follow-up treatment to patients.⁹

In the western fire district, a Red Cross headquarters established in Aitkin's Willard Hotel on October 13 provided 100 refugees with medical aid and shelter. Many people in the western reaches of the fire were also sent south to Sandstone, Hinckley, and the Twin Cities. The

world-wide influenza epidemic, which was aggravated locally by the onset of chilling rains on October 18, further complicated the general medical situation. The National Guard's chief medical officer, Major E. L. Paulson, traveling with General Rhinow around the district after the fire, ordered that all people in the burn area wear influenza masks. In fact, 106 deaths were attributed to influenza and pneumonia.

By early November the number of people who had been looked after at the Armory and other Duluth facilities numbered 761, and countless more were served in the outlying districts. The medical officer of the Duluth Home Guard battalion reported that 29 physicians, 15 nurses, and 21 helpers gave their services. Eventually a Red Cross hospital built in Cloquet served 1,445 patients over the following year; 375 were bed cases, 1,000 clinical cases, and 70 maternity cases. In addition to providing medical care, the Red Cross brought into the area 51 trained social workers, who assisted the refugees in locating family members in getting back to their homes, and in keeping records for each of the 15,000 families registered. The Red Cross urged refugees to register with them, and lists of names and temporary addresses were published in the newspapers in order to facilitate the reunification of families.

The Red Cross also opened a Bureau of Legal Advice at the Armory on Tuesday, October 15, and published in the Duluth newspapers immediate and direct appeals for specific contributions such as women's dresses, children's clothes, wagons, and harnesses. On October 31, Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo, Director General of the Railroad Administration, in Duluth to inspect railroad ore dock facilities, visited the Armory and praised the Red Cross work of Colonel Hubert V. Eva, Jessie B. Raiskey, and others for their efforts in the fire crisis.

Superior, Wisconsin, was not directly in the path of the fire as was Duluth, but it became a major center for

⁸ Here and below, see Report of Frank J. Bruno, October, 1918, in Report of Division Director of Civilian Relief, 34-36, in American Red Cross, Northern Division, Minneapolis, Minn. Papers, 1915-1921, MHS; Weaver and Tourtelotte reports, and Arthur N. Collins, Report of Medical Activities, October 26, 1918 — all in Weaver Scrapbook; Murphy to "Dear Mother," October 15, 1918, NEMHC. Refugees not needing medical attention were housed and fed in numerous public buildings, churches, and private homes; *Duluth News Tribune*, October 14, 1918, p. 7.

⁹ Here and three paragraphs below, see Collins Report, October 26, 1918, Weaver Scrapbook; C. A. Hanna, "Remember the Moose Lake Fire," in *Conservation Volunteer*, September-October, 1961, p. 56-59; Bruno reports, December, 1918, p. 97, January, 1919, p. 76, 77, Red Cross Papers; *Pine Knot*, November 1, 1918, November 21, 1919, both on p. 1; *Duluth News Tribune*, October 15, p. 7, October 16, p. 2, 4, October 17, p. 2 — all 1918.



A RELIEF TRAIN from the Twin Cities brought warm clothing to fire refugees in Carlton County.

Red Cross relief. Superior's strategic position in relation to the fire grew out of the fact that the Great Northern and Soo Line railways that passed through the western fire district ran into that city. Thus the trains loaded with refugees from Brookston, Cloquet, and Carlton unloaded their passengers in Superior. Once again the Red Cross moved swiftly on Saturday evening to meet the crisis. As the trains came into town, the injured and burned were taken to local hospitals; others were sheltered in churches, schools, stores, the YMCA, and club buildings such as the Masonic Temple — some 18 places in all. Later, many people were housed in private dwellings. By Sunday the Red Cross began providing hot meals for the refugees in one of the central churches. Over Saturday night the organization was put into motion so that early Sunday morning Superior committees were functioning, asking for volunteers to work at refugee centers, for contributions of clothing, and for houses where people could be sheltered. Years later, Iva Dingwall recalled being told of the relief needs by a neighbor whose car had been used all night to shuttle refugees around Superior. By 11 o'clock that Sunday morning she was at the Red Cross headquarters "with a parcel of clothing," and she volunteered to house three people in her home.¹⁰

¹⁰ Here and below, see Report of J. L. Gillin, October, 1918, in Report of Division Director of Civilian Relief, 71, Red Cross Papers; Iva Dingwall, "Memories of the Cloquet Forest Fire," 3, MHS; *Final Report*, 14-23; Superior Fire Relief Committee, *Report to Donors*, 3-23 (Superior, 1919); *Duluth News Tribune*, November 2, 1918, p. 4. The final number of refugees registered at Superior was 9,039.

Committees of finance, housing, clothing, food, health, registration, and labor were set up under the general administration of Mayor Fred A. Baxter of Superior and Mayor John Long of Cloquet. The Superior Red Cross, which organizationally was part of a different geographical division, worked carefully and cooperatively with its counterpart in Duluth. Several social workers arrived from Chicago to assist, and by the end of October Governor Burnquist was informed that of 8,375 refugees taken care of in Superior, 3,685 had left and 4,690 remained. There had been 295 cases of influenza with two deaths, and there were 110 refugees suffering from burns or injuries in hospitals. The people of Superior had privately housed 735 refugees, organized their own fire relief committee, and had raised a fund of \$126,819.33. Governor Burnquist sent his thanks to the state of Wisconsin.

EARLY the next week Governor Burnquist and a number of other state officials including State Forester William T. Cox traveled to inspect the fire district. Burnquist went first to Moose Lake on October 14 and then on to Cloquet and Duluth, where he had an opportunity not only to see the devastation but also to talk with people about what should be done in the aftermath of the disaster. The first major step was to create a state government committee authorized to deal with the situation and to co-ordinate the relief efforts of the several groups who had stepped in to the emergency. This was done on October 16 when the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (CPS) met in special session in Moose Lake at the governor's request. The commission

authorized both St. Louis and Carlton counties to spend all the available monies in their general revenue fund for immediate relief. More important, the commission created the Minnesota Fire Relief Commission that ultimately assumed over-all responsibility for relief operations in the fire district. Later in the month the CPS placed \$300,000 at the disposal of that commission, and somewhat later the state legislature formally authorized the commission. The legislature also appropriated \$1,850,000.00 for the commission on February 7, 1919, but only after debate and a visit to the fire area by the relevant legislative committees.¹¹

The members of the commission were appointed with a view to both relief experience and representation of various involved parties. The chairman was William A. McGonagle, who had had relief experience in the 1910 Baudette-Spooner fire and was chairman of the Red Cross chapter in Duluth; Colonel Eva of Duluth, who had also served on the Baudette-Spooner Commission and had been on military duty at the Hinckley, Virginia, and Chisholm fires, was the commission's secretary and general manager; and Mayor Clarence R. Magney and Charles A. Duncan represented Duluth. (When McGonagle resigned later in 1919 for reasons of health, Duncan succeeded him, and Hiram R. Elliott, a Duluth meat packer, was added to the commission.) The group also numbered Clarence I. McNair of Cloquet, Charles F. Mahnke of Moose Lake, Ben R. Hassman of Aitkin, and George H. Partridge of Minneapolis. Emil G. Steger of St. Paul co-ordinated the affairs of the com-

HUBERT V. EVA, general manager of the relief commission, seen here in army dress uniform



mission with those of the Northern Division of the American Red Cross.¹²

On Thursday morning, October 17, the commission met in Moose Lake. Inasmuch as the new group was to assume responsibility for the kinds of work that the Red Cross, the military, and the other private groups had been carrying out, a considerable amount of organization was necessary. Both short-term and long-term emergency relief and long-term reconstruction had to be planned and co-ordinated. The Armory in Duluth, which was already serving as a center for relief operations, became the headquarters, and several departments were created to carry out the organizational and administrative tasks of such a large job. Men were placed in charge of departments of purchasing and supply, legal aid, auditing and finance, general replacement, building, and survey; their efforts eased the confusion of the immediate crisis and made the work of the commission more efficient.¹³

As for the immediate emergency relief, the commission gradually assumed a larger share of the burden of both expense and manpower from the Red Cross, the military units, and the various private groups, although the commission worked with those bodies until their jobs were done rather than simply replacing them. Thus, first aid, food, shelter, and the like continued to be handled through the same people who had served on the first Sunday morning after the fire. The commission, however, handled the financing and additional manpower, as well as over-all co-ordination.

The commission decided at its first meetings that some permanent or long-term relief measures were necessary if the region were to recover and return to some semblance of normal, prefire living. Its philosophy was to "help every man to help himself," and to that end it formed a Central Replacement Committee with four district committees in St. Louis, northern and southern Carlton, and Aitkin counties. These district groups, made up of local people, scrutinized applications for assistance and listened to appeals. The members were expected to know the local situations and to be able to deal more fairly and confidently than strangers or professional social workers. To this organization were added

¹¹ Burnquist, public announcement, [October 15, 1918?], in J. A. A. Burnquist Papers, 1884-1961, MHS; Minutes, October 16, 22, 29, 1918, in Commission of Public Safety (CPS) Records, Minnesota State Archives, MHS; *Duluth News Tribune*, October 17, 1918, p. 1, 3. For issues arising out of the question of appropriating public money for relief, see *Pine Knot*, January 10, p. 2, January 24, 31, February 7, 14, 21, 1919, all on p. 1, Minnesota, *Laws*, 1919, p. 53. On other activities of the Commission of Public Safety, see Carol Jensen, "Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 43:42-57 (Summer, 1972).

¹² *Final Report*, 14-21.

¹³ Here and below, see *Final Report*, 20, 21.

local committees from the destroyed communities. Offices and warehouses were established in 11 towns, and in 12 smaller communities temporary distribution centers were operated. Swiftly implemented procedures allowed refugees returning to the burned-out areas to go to a relief commission representative, identify themselves, describe the dimension of their losses, and the scale of their needs. The commission, through these local committees, would then dispense relief as it fitted the circumstances of the particular refugees.¹⁴

As early as October 23, emergency relief work had gone so well that McNair, the commissioner from Cloquet, could write to Governor Burnquist: "It gives me great satisfaction to report, that owing to the generous relief poured into this district from all sections, there has been no suffering from want of food or clothing, and that this relief thus far has been wisely and effectively locally administered by the Committees named." McNair went on to say that the dimensions of the disaster were such that, although the immediate crisis was being met, relief needs were elaborate and would continue for some time. Several days later, Chairman McGonagle was able to make a similar report to the governor for the whole commission.¹⁵

THE REFUGEES fell into two broad categories of urban workers or businessmen and rural farmers. Of course, both groups required food, shelter, and clothing. The commission provided food rations which enabled people to do their own cooking rather than be dependent on public mess halls run by the military or the Red Cross. Refugees were also given lumber, hardware, and furnishings to make a small shelter. Plans were immediately drafted for two styles — a small 12-by-16-foot structure for small families and a larger 12-by-20-foot building for bigger families. Elaborate forms had to be filled out to prove loss and show that one had no significant resources, but the supplies to construct these shelters were quickly forthcoming, with the result that people returning to the area in October and November were able to have a structure to call "home" within a few days of their arrival. In fact, by November 15, one newspaper

reported that more than 250 such shelters had been constructed in Cloquet. To be sure, these were crude and sparse, but they were intended as temporary quarters that would enable people to get through the winter.¹⁶

Later in 1919 state appropriations enabled people to put siding on the shelters and to make them more comfortable. Many of these structures survive in the Cloquet area today as rather elaborate garages on the lots of older houses. The lumber mills in Cloquet furnished \$175.00 worth of rough lumber to each of their employees and many others and allowed them to build their houses and to help their neighbors while on company time. The commission spent \$872,706.65 on building materials for fire victims; \$263,941.97 on hardware, stoves, and implements; and \$161,306.75 on furnishings and bedding. This was an incredible undertaking. By the end of December, in part thanks to a relatively mild winter, most of those who had returned to the burned-over area were living in some kind of shelter of their own. Clothing was also distributed. Most of the fire sufferers fled on October 12 with little more than what they could carry, if anything at all. A major and immediate need was for warm clothing as winter came on. The commission spent \$184,599.68 on clothing and shoes, but it also assigned a great deal more which had been contributed from around the state.

While both urban and rural groups were eligible for the same kind of food, shelter, and clothing assistance, the commission soon decided that farmers would need more help if they were to get back on their feet. A farmer, it was reasoned, required shelter not only for his family, but also for his farm animals and crops. The commission therefore provided lumber for the construction of barns and outbuildings appropriate to the kind and size of farm that had been destroyed by the fire. Lost farm implements and equipment also had to be replaced. Furthermore, the surviving farm animals had to be fed and, because the hay and feed had probably been destroyed by the fire, these too were provided by the commission. For those who had lost all of their animals, the relief group attempted to make a start at replacing them. The United States Department of Agriculture, the University of Minnesota, and the state Guernsey and Holstein Breeder's Association helped in this by giving assistance and lending prize animals to reproduce decimated herds. The commission also provided the seeds for various crops in the spring of 1919 so that the whole farm economy could begin functioning again. Indeed, when hail destroyed the entire crop of the Sturgeon Lake and Split Rock areas in 1919, the commission furnished food for the farmers and feed for their livestock during the winter; it also supplied fresh seed when the abnormally wet spring of 1920 destroyed the potato crops in the burned district. Altogether the relief organization spent \$172,036.55 on farm wagons, harnesses,

¹⁴*Final Report*, 19–23. The expression "long term" has to be used with some caution. In response to an inquiry from the House Appropriations Committee of the state legislature, Attorney General Clifford L. Hilton said that public money could not be given for "long term relief" or permanent rehabilitation, but only for emergency circumstances; *Pine Knot*, February 21, 1919, p. 1. The commission, which of course also had private money at its disposal, took a very broad interpretation of the attorney general's opinion.

¹⁵C. I. McNair to Burnquist, October 23, 1918, and W. A. McGonagle to Burnquist, October 26, 1918, file 648c, Governor's Records, MHS.

¹⁶Here and below, see *Final Report*, 8, 22–24; *Carlton County Vidette*, November 15, 1918, p. 1.

and implements; \$52,281.71 on livestock; \$118,112.45 on seed; and a very large \$807,422.95 on hay and feed.¹⁷

The fact that farmers got more assistance in dollar terms and generally over a longer period of time did not pass without comment or controversy in the burned-over district. Many people felt that, while the fire had destroyed equally the entire worldly possessions of urban and rural dwellers alike, the commission had attempted relief and reconstruction on a far grander scale for farmers than for city dwellers. Others in the towns argued that relief should be distributed on an equal basis. They maintained that it was unfair that one family got a rude shelter, some old clothes, and a few weeks' worth of food while others were supported for almost a year and were virtually re-established in their former agricultural occupations. These feelings naturally gave way to accusations of bad faith and favoritism. The commission defended itself in its report, saying that "mistakes have been made, . . . but if we did not make mistakes, we would be really inactive" in the distribution of relief. Any errors were minor in view of the scale of the relief effort.¹⁸

Supported by the Red Cross, the commission claimed that the inequality of relief distribution for rural and urban fire sufferers was necessary because there were fundamental differences in the two situations. Once the urban worker or businessman obtained food and shelter he could go back to work or reopen his business, the commission argued. (To be sure, the surviving lumber companies in Cloquet did resume production in October, 1918, but they neither operated at capacity nor employed as many men as before the fire.) To assist local businesses, the commission attempted by 1919 to buy all of the goods it distributed from merchants in the fire-stricken area rather than buying in large quantities from some metropolitan center. But farmers, the commission held, had no alternative source of income until their next year's crop came in or until their livestock could begin producing again. Not only their homes but also their incomes had been destroyed by the fire and at a time of year that gave them no other resources for many months. Rural areas, therefore, needed greater assistance, and the commission argued that in a disaster where only limited relief could be extended, need, rather than equality, was the overriding consideration.

The commission was convinced that only its promises and relief program brought 95 per cent of the burned-out farm settlers back to the land in the aftermath of the fire. Yet rural people complained too, particularly those whose equipment or livestock feed had been confiscated in order to fight fire or facilitate relief efforts. Compensation did not come quickly enough, and they argued that they would have been self-sufficient but for the need to get back what they had sacrificed. Disgruntled letters continued to flow to various authorities into 1919.¹⁹

THERE were also special situations with which the commission had to deal. Many people who were burned or injured remained in hospitals for prolonged periods of time. Fire-related medical necessities were almost immediately overtaken by the influenza epidemic, which fell particularly hard upon an area where people were living in crowded and inadequate circumstances at the onset of a cold and rainy autumn. In the fire area, influenza became part of the misery of the whole experience, but it was left for the commission, together with the Red Cross and the Home Guard, to deal with it medically as part of the disaster. Many elderly people who were dislocated by the fire were incapable of returning to their farms or to any form of reconstruction. Some of them were placed in homes for the aged, and others were settled in towns untouched by the fire. The commission allocated money for grants to take care of these people. Similarly, orphans and widows with children received funds which would, in the words of the commission, "insure a bare livelihood."²⁰

All of this work by the relief organization was prodigious. Within five days of the fire it had assumed responsibility for upward of 50,000 people, and it would continue to function for the next several years. Although it had the help of the Red Cross and the military — both of which paid their own expenses — the commission had the immediate task of raising funds to carry out its mandate. When Governor Burnquist announced the creation

¹⁷ *Final Report*, 8, 22–30. By mid-April farmers were encouraged to apply for seeds and farm implements; *Pine Knot*, April 25, 1919, p. 1.

¹⁸ Here and below, see *Final Report*, 8, 21–30. See also Bruno Report, January, 1919, p. 76, Red Cross Papers.

¹⁹ Charles Koster to Henry W. Libby, December 16, 1918, and Perry W. Swedberg to Thomas W. Cox, January 11, 1919, main file 262, CPS Records; Charles F. Mahnke to Burnquist, May 21, 1919, file 648c, Governor's Records. For a public discussion on the equity of the relief distribution policy, see *Pine Knot*, March 7, 14, 1919, both on p. 1.

²⁰ *Final Report*, 23–30.



of the body, he also issued an appeal for public support, asking people to send money to either the Commission of Public Safety or the Relief Commission. "I cannot urge too strongly," he said, "upon the people of the State, the immediate necessity of large funds to care for the personal needs of those suffering and to aid in restoring the settlements that have been destroyed." Those who had survived the fire and lost homes or family needed the support and sympathy of the rest of the state, the governor pleaded. The state responded to his appeal. By October 15, clothing and supplies for the fire victims were being collected at five different locations in Minneapolis, and this kind of work continued until the middle of November. Voluntary contributions of money reached \$1,101,310.75, and the governor's records show that the money came from towns, clubs, churches, schools, and merchants. Most of the checks were accompanied with expressions of sympathy and encouragement, and they came from every part of the nation. Prince Axel of Denmark conveyed his concern to Burnquist less than a week after the disaster; governors of other states sent official condolences and offers of help, frequently adding private contributions of their own. And plain citizens, touched by the tragedy in Minnesota, dug into their pockets with gifts of money that ranged

from \$.50 to a munificent \$1,000 from a man in Olmsted County. By February, 1921, the Forest Fire Relief Commission had raised and disbursed \$3,145,840.60.²¹

Efforts outside the machinery of the commission were significant also. The role of the railroads was of critical importance, for example. Not only had they been instrumental in taking people out of the fire itself on October 12 but they were vital to the relief effort. The Great Northern, Northern Pacific, Soo Line, and Omaha railroads all ran numerous special trains into the devastated areas in the days following the fire. These trains carried National and Home Guard troops, fire fighters, search parties, doctors and nurses, relief supplies, and, eventually, returning refugees. They charged only the troops, transporting refugees and relief supplies free throughout the crisis. Company representatives meeting on October 15 with state officials — and urged on by the federal Railroad Administration's regional director — developed a joint policy which was designed to be as helpful as possible.²²

State Superintendent of Education, Carl G. Schulz, took the initiative in mobilizing the school system to collect clothing from all over the state to be channelled into the relief area. Clothing was to be brought to the schools from October 23 to 25, sorted and labeled on the weekend, and sent en route to the fire area on the following Monday. This clothing was often disbursed from the remaining school building in the fire area, the Garfield School in Cloquet. In Duluth the *News Tribune* began receiving money for a relief fund before any of the agencies could get their programs started. This fund only ran for a week, but collected over \$40,000. Organizations such as the Superior Fire Relief Committee in Wisconsin raised and allotted \$128,177.36, and the Northern Minnesota Finnish Relief Society raised over

²¹ *Final Report*, 4, 26, 30; Burnquist, public announcement, [October 15, 1918?], Burnquist Papers; Adjutant General, Minnesota Home Guard, Civilian Relief, Records of Miscellaneous Departments, Minnesota State Archives, MHS. On letters of sympathy and offers of help see, for example, Thomas Van Lear, October 14, Rotary Club of St. Paul, October 15, A. R. Wright, October 15, E. L. Philipp, October 15, Samuel W. McCall, October 17, Frank O. Lowden, October 19, Prince Axel, October 19 — all 1918, in file 648c, Governor's Records. On the closing of the relief offices in Cloquet, see *Pine Knot*, August 1, 1919, p. 1.

²² Memorandum, October 15, 1918, President's subject file, Northern Pacific Railway Company, St. Paul, Records, 1861-1970, MHS; R. H. Aishton to W. P. Kenney (telegram), [October 16?, 1918], file 648c, Governor's Records.

RIISING FROM THE ASHES of the 1918 holocaust, the rebuilt city of Cloquet looked like this a mere ten months after fire gutted the city; in the background the St. Louis River flows around unscathed Duulap Island.



\$36,000.00, some of which it turned over to the commission and some of which it distributed itself. Private organizations such as the Masons, the Shriners, and the Odd Fellows made extensive efforts to look after fellow members. Through the organizational facilities of the Red Cross many private individuals, in their capacity as skilled carpenters and builders, donated a day's labor to build shelters in the fire district in the weeks after the fire. St. Paul architect Clarence W. Wiginton, offered his services in a letter to the governor, saying, "as a citizen and architect" he would be "pleased to be called at any and all times." Private individuals also made many generous contributions.²³

THE COMBINED EFFORTS of all of these groups — the National and Home guards, the Red Cross and the Minnesota Forest Fire Relief Commission, the governor and the legislature, the railroads and the private individuals — culminated in a major sustained effort at relief and reconstruction. The devastated region could never be fully restored, nor could the suffering and damage be altogether eased; nevertheless, the fact that relief of some kind had been available and that local authorities, the state, the Red Cross, and countless other institutions and individuals had encouraged the refugees to return and had worked to assist people to get a new start goes a long way to explain the eventual recovery of the area. It was a monumental task and one for which there could have been no practical planning or anticipation. The need created it.

A year later, on Sunday, October 12, 1919, the region took pause to mark the tragedy. There was an interdenominational religious service held at noon at the new Leb Theater in Cloquet, and an outdoor public meeting was held later in the afternoon at Pinehurst Park. Mayor John Long presided while the governor and other dignitaries — Mayor Magney of Duluth, McGonagle of the Relief Commission, and Henry Oldenberg of Carlton — spoke. The official party toured the recon-

structed city and had dinner in the newly built Solem Hotel, while being entertained by the city band. The governor addressed memorial services in Cloquet and Moose Lake, and the city council of Cloquet, while emphasizing "the impossibility of expressing the sentiment in the heart of each of us," passed a resolution of thanks on behalf of the city and the people of Cloquet. The council declared, "That we do hereby extend to the people of Carlton, Superior and Duluth; to the Governor and other Officials of the State of Minnesota; to the American Red Cross Society and especially the branches at Duluth and Superior; to all the people of the State of Minnesota and other states contributing to our assistance; and to the Legislature of the State of Minnesota, and each of the members thereof, our sincere appreciation and gratitude for all that they have done for us at the time of our misfortune." It was a fine sentiment.²⁴

²³Schulz to Superintendents and Principals, October 19, 1918, and Wiginton to Burnquist, October 14, 1918, file 648c, Governor's Records. See also *Final Report*, 32; *Star Gazette*, December 19, 1918, p. 1; *Pine Knot*, October 10, 1919, p. 1; *Duluth News Tribune*, October 18, 19, 1918, both on p. 6.

²⁴On the resolution, see City Council of Cloquet, Minute Book, October 6, 1919, p. 267, Cloquet City Hall, Cloquet. See also *Star Gazette*, October 16, 1919, p. 1; *Pine Knot*, October 17, 1919, p. 1. In his remarks at Moose Lake and Cloquet, Burnquist said, "The generous aid . . . from many places . . . did much to awaken courage and hope when the people of the city were in despair. But to the people of Cloquet themselves belongs the greater share of the credit for the magnificent work that has been done." Burnquist to Orlo B. Elfes, October 16, 1919, Burnquist Papers.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on p. 270, 277, and 280–281 are from the Carlton County Historical Society, Cloquet; the one on p. 275 is from *The Fury of the Flames*, [9] (Duluth, 1919); that on p. 278 is from the Northeast Minnesota Historical Center, University of Minnesota-Duluth; the map on p. 272 is by Alan Ominsky; all other illustrations are from the MHS audio-visual library.



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