

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Cloquet Fire Sometimes referred to as The Fires of Autumn 1918	Incident Date & Time: October 12, 1918
Incident Location: Carlton County, Minnesota	Incident Size: 250,000 acres
Type of resources involved: Civilians and Minnesota National Guard	# of Fatalities/injuries: 453 fatalities officially listed (some estimates are higher)
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ Civilian mass casualty event 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>The summer of 1918 in northeast Minnesota was the <i>"driest season in 48 years,"</i> according to the U. S. Weather Bureau's H. W. Richardson.</p> <p>What is often called simply the Cloquet Fire was really 50 or more fires which combined into a single incident. It had two major theaters, one called the Cloquet–Duluth Fire, mainly in Carlton County and the Moose Lake Fire. Carlton County was known for its logging industry during the early 20th century. As was the case in the 1910 “Big Burn” both these fires burned over dry, harvested slash covered land that was vulnerable to wildfire.</p> <p>In 1918, Minnesota and its residents were confronted with a series of devastating events which put communities to the test. First, as the nation immersed itself in the global conflict later known as World War I, some 118,000 Minnesotans served in the war effort, both at home and "over there." While more than 1,400 Minnesotans were killed on the battlefields, an additional 2,300 soldiers were struck down by another destructive force working its way across the globe in 1918; the influenza pandemic, which left more than 10,000 dead in Minnesota alone. Then, in mid-October, fires raged across 1,500 square miles in seven counties of northeastern Minnesota.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>On October 10, two men working near a railroad siding at Milepost 62 northwest of Cloquet saw a Great Northern passenger train pass by the siding, and soon thereafter discovered a fire burning through grass and piles of wood. It smoldered for two days, then came alive when a cold front brought stiff winds and a steep drop in humidity. On October 12 at about 13:30 the fire began to move and pushed by gusty and dry southwest winds the fire spread rapidly combining with many other fires in the area. The peak wind measured by the Weather Bureau was 76 mph at 17:52 with a five minute wind speed of 65 mph. It reached the Fond du Lac Ojibwe Indian Reservation around 19:15 and the city of Cloquet around 20:00. The speed of the fire was such that news of its approach on Duluth had barely arrived when the fire entered Duluth, in the Woodland neighborhood, shortly after 18:00.</p> <p>When asked about the scene at Cloquet, Albert Michaud, a police officer in Cloquet, was quoted by the New York Times, <i>“At 6 o'clock last night, a forest ranger gave warning that unless the wind died down the townspeople would have to flee ... The scene at the station was indescribable. There came a rush of wind and the entire town was in flames. The trains pulled out with the fires blazing closely behind them. Women wept and clung to their children, while others cried frantically for their missing ones. The flames licked at the cars. Windows in the coaches were broken by the heat. The engineers and firemen alternately stoked, to give the boilers all the fuel they could stand.”</i></p> <p>Several organizations and volunteers risked their lives to help save people and property. The Minnesota National Guard was called in to help in the relief process. At about 15:00 on October 12, Lieutenant Karl A. Franklin and Captain Henry Tourtelotte of the Fourth Regiment of the National Guard were contacted to aid the Rice Lake Road area. After speaking with Cloquet's mayor and its police chief, Robert McKercher, Tourtelotte and nine other people headed for Duluth to assemble his troops and offer immediate assistance. A couple of companies were assigned to controlling the fire, which they were unable to do despite their best efforts. After torrents of flame battered them down, they instead began to focus on the survivors.</p> <p>This scene was repeated on the nearby Moose Lake fire, at least five fires combined, which had started on October 4 along railroad tracks near Tamarack in Aitkin County. It too stayed small till the increasing winds and falling humidity of October 12 whipped it up early that afternoon. It burned southeast toward the towns of Kettle River and Moose Lake. As the fire neared Moose Lake around 19:30 relief trains rescued a few hundred people. Most who survived, however, did so by taking refuge in Moose Lake though there were many who drowned trying to avoid the fire.</p> <p>In total, over 450 people lost their lives in these fires with an untold number of injuries. The hardest hit areas were Moose Lake, Cloquet and Kettle River. Thirty-eight communities were destroyed, 250,000 acres were burned and \$73 million (over a billion in today's economy) in property damage was suffered.</p>	

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Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Extreme fuel loading left by logging practices of the day
Record drought conditions
A cold front arriving in the area
Multiple fires burning in an era when “mop-up” was not a common practice

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Lack of dedicated wildland firefighting equipment and personnel

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The fire left much of western Carlton County devastated, mostly affecting Moose Lake, Cloquet, and Kettle River. Cloquet was hardest hit by the fires; it was the worst natural disaster in Minnesota history in terms of the number of casualties in a single day. To this day the Cloquet Fire remains one of the deadliest fires in North American history.

Links to more information on this incident:

https://www.weather.gov/dlh/MooseLake_Cloquet_1918Fires
<https://libguides.d.umn.edu/1918fire>
<https://www.mnopedia.org/event/cloquet-duluth-and-moose-lake-fires-1918>
https://storage.googleapis.com/mnhs-org-support/mn_history_articles/65/v65i07p248-259.pdf
<https://firelibrary.org/event/414/>
<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1918/10/12/cloquet-fire-of-1918/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloquet_fire

Books:

- Cloquet, Duluth, and Moose Lake Fires, 1918 ~ by Paul Nelson
- The Fires of Autumn: The Cloquet-Moose Lake Disaster of 1918 ~ by Francis M. Carroll & Franklin R. Raiter
- Minnesota 1918 ~ by Curt Brown
- Hellfire in Hermantown ~ by Connie Jacobson
- Firestorms ~ by Christine Skalko & Marlene Wisuri

Videos:

- <https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/breaking-the-news/minnesotans-remember-deadly-1918-cloquet-fire-in-wake-of-maui-disaster-wildfires/89-de2c00a5-b46d-4bf6-a326-e85ac7743572>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdIOYUHAsHw>

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center offers an excellent site which provides information on many wildland incidents:
[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Incident Review Database \(IRDB\) \(wildfire.gov\)](https://www.wildfire.gov/wildfire-lessons-learned-center/incident-review-database)

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THE FIRES OF AUTUMN 1918



The Cloquet-Moose Lake forest fire of October 12-13, 1918, which almost reached this location, was one of the most destructive forest fires in Minnesota's recorded history. Like other major fires, this one took place on cutover land—the stumps and waste that remained after the great pine forests of north-eastern Minnesota were harvested for lumber.

Consisting of five or six major fires and several smaller ones, the Cloquet-Moose Lake fire started during a severe drought in the fall of 1918. It burned 390 square miles. Official reports listed 453 people killed. Years later, in 1929, the State erected a monument in the Riverside Cemetery, in Moose Lake, commemorating the residents who lost their lives. Large portions of Cloquet, then known as "the white pine

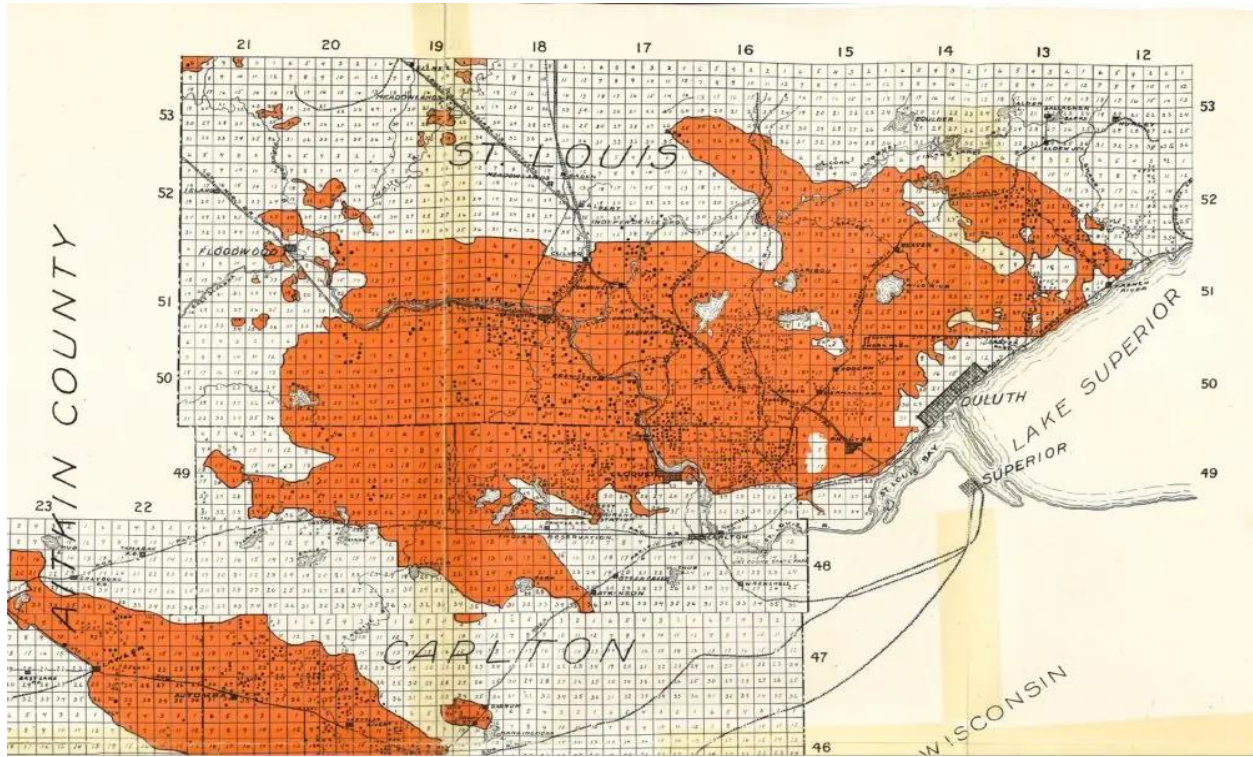
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There was not just a single fire, there were numerous fires spread through northeastern Minnesota as can be seen by the red colored areas in the map above.