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TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Matchless Aurora

By Jacqueline Stuart

Christmas was the last thing on the time traveller's mind on December 22, 1924, as he hurried eastward along Connaught Avenue, heading toward the big match factory next to the railway. There apparently had been an explosion there and such an event in such a setting had to be bad news.

When he joined the crowd outside the building he learned that two men had been seriously burned. Edward Shortill, the factory's manager and mastermind, and George D. Reid, a druggist by trade, were on their way to hospital in Toronto.

The men had been mixing a batch of the material needed to tip a million matches. It was a secret formula and no one else was allowed into the special chemical room. Jacob Peterman, who managed the building, had urged them to be careful and to take their time, but Mr. Shortill said he had to get on with it because he wanted to be home in Toronto that evening.

Immediately after the explosion, Mr. Peterman rushed to the room where he found both men in dire straits. Even as he looked aghast at Edward Shortill that man's clothes burst into flame. Machinery had been blown apart, doors in the building had burst open, and windows were broken.

The time traveller thought back to the first days of the match factory.

The original building on the site had accommodated a furniture maker, Office Bureau. That structure burned down in suspicious circumstances in 1918, just one day after a winding-up order had been granted. The Town of Aurora was a principal creditor and became owner of the property. It was two years before the Town found a purchaser for the site: the Continental Match Company. The company planned to build a fire-resistant structure on the surviving foundations and would also make some additions; it expected to employ about thirty men.

There were many delays but in the summer of 1924 assurances were made by Edward Shortill that regular production would soon begin. The procedure in the chemical room that December afternoon was one of the final steps toward achieving that goal.

As he was leaving the scene, the time traveller heard that Mr. Shortill had died in the ambulance soon after leaving Aurora.

People were muttering about the future of the match factory and the traveller knew their concerns were justified. The business would be wound up six months later. The building would then be occupied by one enterprise after another, each starting up with high hopes, only to fail after a few years. Dishwashers. Dehydrated foods. Even another match company, the Aurora Match Corporation: that one did for a short time actually produce matches, in the late 1920s.

Leaping far ahead, the time traveller surreptitiously accompanied a Town committee on a visit to the main building in the mid-2000s. It was an eerie space then: vast, silent, and empty. What sort of industry could occupy such a huge structure, steps from a residential neighbourhood?

The traveller returned to December 1924. He did not need special gifts to know that it would be a sad Christmas for Mr. Shortill's family and an anxious one for Mr. Reid's. But perhaps for a few days the rest of the Continental Match employees would be able to put aside their fears for the future and enjoy a happy holiday.