

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: "Black Hand" grips Aurora

By Jacqueline Stuart

In the very early morning of an April day in 1909 fire broke out in one of Aurora's oldest houses. Later that day the Time Traveller slipped in to Town and caught up with the gossip about the event.

The home belonged to Mr. Frank Cook, a relative newcomer, and was at the north end of Aurora on the east side of Yonge Street, just south of Mark. The house might well have dated back to the 1840s.

The buzz around Aurora, and quickly picked up by the Toronto papers, was that the house fire was arson, and that the Black Hand was responsible.

The Black Hand was not an organization but a form of extortion which appeared in Italian-American communities in the United States in the first decade or so of the twentieth century.

A victim would receive a letter demanding money, with threats of damage to property or to persons, even going as far as murder.

Those attacked were usually wealthy Italian-Americans, not the middle classes of small-town Ontario, but the method was adopted by other criminals.

Mr. Cook had received such a letter and had followed its instruction to put up a notice in the post office indicating, in language dictated by the Black Hand, that he would pay up.

Mr. Cook, his father, and the police all kept an eye on the notice to see who paid attention to it, but no one was identified.

Mr. Cook received a second letter, mocking the attempt at entrapment.

Frank Cook was not the only Auroran to be threatened.

Another was a widow living at the south end of town, Mrs. Young. After she reported the letter to the police, chief constable Petch arranged for a young constable to dress up as woman and go to the pre-arranged meeting place.

?A long skirt disguised his manly frame,

while round his masculine throat feminine furs clustered. As the shades of evening were falling, Hiram minced along the deserted street?but although Hiram held his skirt coquettishly in one of his hands, while in the other he bore a satchel apparently loaded down with money, the sly blackmailers came not.?

Or so reported the Toronto Daily Star.

At one point there was a report of several armed men lurking in a wooded area of Town, but they turned out to be a group of eager citizens on the hunt for the Black Hand perpetrator.

A fire inspector came from Toronto to examine the damage at Frank Cook's house. Probably to the disappointment of some local people he concluded that the fire was caused not by arson, but by accident.

The Time Traveller was as intrigued as everyone else by the possibility of a Black Hand crime, and he was puzzled by the fact that he was learning about it only from town gossip and the Toronto papers.

The local paper reported the fire, of course, and mentioned the possibility of arson, but said nothing about the Black Hand.

In the weekly's next report, following the official investigation, editor Sylvester Lundy tersely scolded the Toronto press for their exaggerated stories, and that was the end of that.