

WHAT a DISASTER!

Sometimes it's a human mistake, sometimes it's terrible weather. Often it's both. Whatever the cause of a disaster, there have been plenty throughout Canada's past. Here are some of the worst.

FIRES

In October, 1825, after a hot, dry summer, one of the worst wildfires in the history of North America swept through New Brunswick's **Miramichi** region, destroying towns and about one-fifth of the province's forests. Hundreds died, but a year later, the survivors had rebuilt. On June 13, 1886, railway workers lit a small fire to clear land in **Vancouver**. A sudden gust of wind sent it out of control, burning up nearly 1,000 wooden buildings in less than 45 minutes. The terrible fire of July 8, 1892 in **St. John's**, NL, left the downtown in smoking ruins. Dry weather and mistakes by the fire department — they forgot to refill a huge water tank after a practice drill — meant that what could have been a small blaze spread fast and far. About 11,000 people were left with no homes and only the clothes they were wearing, but only three people died. Canada — which was then a different country — immediately sent a ship from Halifax with tents, food and other supplies.

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Vancouver after the deadly 1886 fire



Homes destroyed by the Regina Cyclone in 1912.



WHIRLWINDS

In September, 1775, hundreds of boats and their crews were fishing in **Placentia Bay** off Newfoundland when a hurricane struck, smashing boats and killing about 4,000 people. One of the worst tornadoes ever to hit Canada formed just south of Regina on June 30, 1912. The high-speed funnel-shaped storm destroyed farms and ripped through houses, stores and the city's rail yards, leaving other structures untouched. Known as the **Regina Cyclone**, it killed 28 people and left 2,500 without homes, but most of the buildings lost were soon rebuilt.

Hurricane Hazel had already caused death and destruction in the Caribbean before it hit Toronto on Oct. 15, 1954. It was supposed to weaken and pass by, but instead it poured three days' worth of rain onto a city whose ground was already soaked. Rivers and streams swelled and overflowed, washing away cars, furniture, people and whole houses as well as roads and bridges, while fierce winds blew at more than 120 kilometres per hour. People climbed onto their roofs hoping to save themselves from the icy, swirling water. By the next day, Hurricane Hazel had moved on, leaving at least 81 people dead.

MINES

The worst mining disaster in British Columbia history happened in **Nanaimo**, on Vancouver Island, on May 3, 1887. Explosions in the Esplanade coal mine killed 150 men. As word spread around the world, donations of nearly \$2.5 million in today's money arrived from all over. **Hillcrest**, Alta., lost 189 of the 235 men who had been working in its mines when an underground explosion trapped them on June 19, 1914. **Springhill**, N.S. has suffered not one but three disasters in its mines. Coal dust exploded underground on Feb. 21, 1891, killing 125 and injuring many more. On Nov. 1, 1956, cars broke off from a mine train and hit a power line. The sparks caused an enormous explosion that trapped miners below. Brave workers went down, some without breathing equipment. They rescued 88 men, but 39 died underground. And on Oct. 23, 1958, Springhill experienced the worst “bump” — a sort of underground earthquake that causes shock waves — in North American mining history. Again the rescue workers headed underground, saving 100 of the 174 trapped miners. The 1958 disaster was widely covered on live television, which was very new at the time, attracting worldwide attention. Once again, Nova Scotia was the site of a tragedy on May 9, 1992, when a gas explosion at the **Westray** Mine near Plymouth killed 26 miners. Conditions were so dangerous that the rescuers had to give up before they were finished, in order to save their own lives.

Two miners rescued from the Springhill, N.S., mine disaster in 1958





Wreckage caused by the 1903 landslide in Frank, Alta.

LANDSLIDES

In an instant, 28 homes were crushed on Sept. 19, 1889, when a huge piece of rock broke off Cap Diamant in **Quebec City** and slammed down, burying about 100 people. The rockslide killed 48, but could have been much worse — many who lived on the street were away. The worst rockslide in Canadian history occurred in **Frank, Alta.**, on Apr. 29, 1903. In just two minutes, millions of tonnes of rock rumbled down Turtle Mountain, covering nearly two square kilometres including the entrance to a nearby mine and most of the town. About 70 of the town's 600 or so people died; because rescuers couldn't find everyone, we'll never know for sure. The Jane Slide happened in the village of **Britannia** near Squamish, B.C. on Mar. 22, 1915. Mud, rock and snow 15 metres deep in places crashed down the nearby mountain, destroying cabins where miners and their families were sleeping. Rescuers dug hard and long, but at least 50 people died.





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SNOW AND ICE

On the night of Mar. 4, 1910, crews were clearing snow off the railway tracks near **Revelstoke**, B.C. Just before midnight a wall of snow swept down the mountain, burying 58 workers. After the tragedy, the Canadian Pacific Railway dug a tunnel into the mountain to protect against avalanches. One of the darkest events in our history is the **1914 sealing disaster**. It happened before Newfoundland and Labrador were part of Canada. March 30 and 31 are still remembered there as terrible days. Two ships, the *Newfoundland* and the *Southern Cross*, sailed into ice-filled waters. The men on board the *Newfoundland* jumped onto the floating ice to hunt seals. It was dangerous work even in good years, but this time, a blizzard set in and 77 men drowned or froze trying to get back to the ship; another died later. The *Southern Cross* was heading back to St. John's in hopes of claiming the prize for the first ship to return from the seal hunt. It was loaded down with pelts when it sank, taking 173 men to their deaths. Much less serious was the **ice storm** of January 1998 in eastern Canada that saw days of freezing rain pile up nearly twice as thick as had ever been seen, especially in Quebec and eastern Ontario. The weight of the ice pulled down 120,000 kilometres of power and telephone lines. It snapped telephone poles and crumpled electrical towers. More than one million homes lost power, some for weeks on end. Electricity workers from all over North America came to help.

BRIDGES

People in **Point Ellice**, near Victoria, B.C., were celebrating Queen Victoria's birthday on May 26, 1896, when a crowd of people overloaded a streetcar, which pulled the bridge down as it fell off. Fifty-five people died. The **Quebec Bridge** across the St. Lawrence River near Quebec City took 30 years to finish. It collapsed twice during construction. By late August, 1907, it was clear that not all parts of the rail and highway bridge lined up safely. The message to stop working on the bridge never reached construction crews and at least 75 of the 86 men working on the bridge died on Aug. 29 when it twisted and fell apart. About one-third of them were Mohawk steelworkers from the First Nations community of Caughnawaga. Work started again in 1913 on what was supposed to be a better design, and in three years, the bridge was nearly done. Just after the giant centre section had been lifted into place on Sept. 11, 1916, it broke away, taking 13 workers with it into the river. While the **Second Narrows Bridge** was being built in Vancouver, it collapsed into Burrard Inlet on June 17, 1958, killing 19 men. The cause was a combination of poor-quality steel, design problems and engineering mistakes. In 1994, the bridge was renamed in honour of the men who died: the Ironworkers Memorial Second Narrows Crossing.

The Quebec Bridge collapsed twice while it was being built, in 1907 and 1916





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Houses under water in the Winnipeg Flood of 1950

FLOODS

Early farmers who came to what is now the Winnipeg area from Scotland were known as the **Selkirk Settlers**. By 1826, they had already faced disease, harsh weather and battles over the fur trade. It was early May, but there was still thick ice on the Red River. Heavy rains sent huge chunks of ice along the swollen river, smashing and sweeping away houses, barns, trees and farm animals. Many settlers finally gave up and left for the United States. An earthquake off the coast of Newfoundland's **Burin Peninsula** in 1929 caused a tsunami — a huge tidal wave travelling 40 kilometres per hour — that roared up on shore on Nov. 18. It flooded villages and washed houses out to sea, killing 28 people, the most ever to die in Canada because of an earthquake. An earlier storm had broken the telegraph line, so it was three days before the government learned what had happened. When B.C.'s **Fraser River** flooded in 1948, it forced 16,000 people from their houses and destroyed 2,000 homes. Heavy fall rains, a winter with lots



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of snow and a cold spring that meant frozen ground and icy rivers resulted in the disastrous 1950 **Winnipeg** flood. The Red River was already at flood level when a huge storm of rain and snow pushed it over dikes and sandbags on May 5. The water ripped apart bridges, destroyed buildings, flooded 1,500 square kilometres of farmland and drove tens of thousands of people from their homes. The disaster prompted governments to build the Red River Floodway to control water in the future. In 1997, water levels were already high when a blizzard dumped 50 centimetres of snow on Winnipeg. When it melted, the result was what's often called the Flood of the Century, but it would have been much worse without the changes made after the 1950 flood. A month's worth of rain fell on Quebec's **Saguenay** region from July 18 to 21, 1996, triggering floods and mudslides that tore away bridges, roads, buildings and trees. The mud and water killed 10 people and caused more than \$1.5 billion worth of damage.

