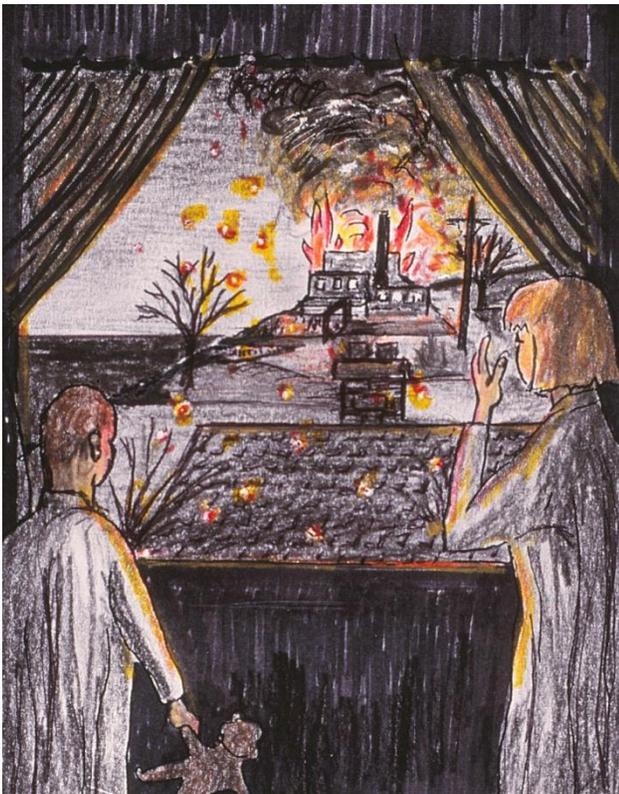


A FIRE CHANGED MOUNTAIN HISTORY by Robert Williamson

The trauma of a December 21, 1914 fire on a chilly Sunday night was seared forever into the memory of nine-year-old Hazel Florence Summers. She and her little brother, Raymond Ambrose, watched in horror from their third floor tower playroom as flames lit up the escarpment edge to the east at Upper Wentworth Street and Mountain Park Avenue beside the incline railway terminal. Sparks from the fire, carried by a strong easterly wind, showered down on their mountain brow home at 91 Mountain Park Avenue. From their window they watched the theatre world of the Summers Stock Company burn to the ground. Mount Hamilton's finest attraction was wiped out and life for one of Ontario's most distinguished theatrical families and Hamilton's cultural community would never be the same.



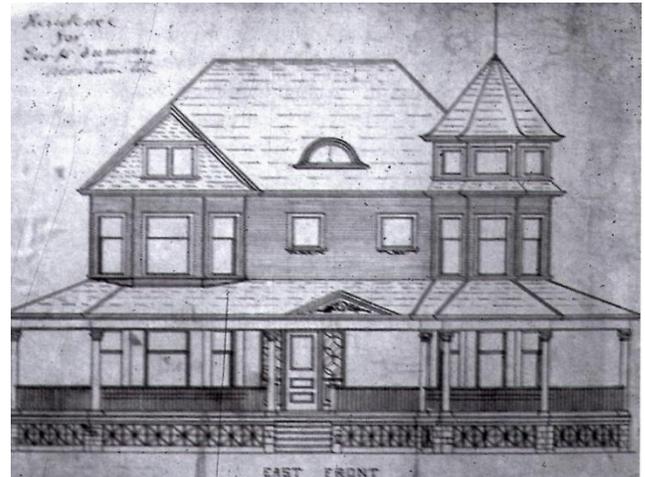
A sketch by R. Williamson based on Hazel Summers' memoirs.

The family's Mountain Park Theatre preceded the Stratford Summer Theatre by fifty years and was a benchmark for the development of other professional theatres in Canada. With a capacity of seven hundred seats, ticket sales for each summer season reached 73,000, over 20% higher than the actual population of the city at that time. Business was so good that even before the fire, George Summers had instructed the architect firm that had built the James Street Armories, to design a new 2,000 seat, concrete and steel, year-round theatre and motion picture casino with a plaza containing a restaurant, cafe, band shell and public garden.

However, on April 15, 1915, George Summers' application to re-build the Summers Mountain Park Theatre was denied by the City Solicitor as the result of a petition by mountain residents who wanted the theatre property expropriated by the Parks Board in order to protect the peace and quiet of their mountain seclusion.

Can anyone imagine how the history of Hamilton Mountain might have changed if George Summers had been allowed to build his wonderful entertainment complex? Like the Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Ontario or the Shaw Festival Theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Hamilton Mountain with its magnificent Head-of-the-Lake vistas and unique incline railway, might have become a great tourist Mecca - A World Stage.

The irony is overwhelming! What was once a thriving site of overflowing crowds, unbounded laughter and unrivaled entertainment is now a small park with a plaque to mark a calamity that saw a family's theatre legacy dismantled, a great comic genius driven away and an opportunity for Hamilton to achieve pre-eminence in the theatrical world, lost.



The east facing 1908 architect's elevation plan of the Summers' home called Buena Vista. The third floor tower room is on the right. Courtesy of the Smith family

To purchase a copy of: "OUR WORLD'S A STAGE", The Summers' Family Story, see the Society's website Hamiltonheritage.ca

Mountain Memories, by Robert Williamson for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society appears monthly in the Mountain News.