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Bruce Mol looks over Vernon News clippings about the Okanagan Hotel fire in 1909 and reminisces on the rich history.

Marking an anniversary of heroism

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Anyone walking through Polson Park will notice a solitary cairn tucked near 32nd Street, but the heroic story behind the monument has largely been lost to time.

And that certainly was the case for resident Bruce Mol as he took a moment to pause and look at the tribute to Archie Hickling, who pulled people out of the burning Okanagan Hotel Aug. 10, 1909.

"I was going through the park and noticed that 2009 was going to be the centennial of the fire," he said. "So I went down to the museum and asked if anyone was doing anything to commemorate it."

There wasn't anything planned, so Mol, as a videographer, decided to launch a video project that commemorates Hickling's efforts.

"Here's this young fellow who'd only been in town for six years," said Mol of the labourer.

"Everyone said Archie was fearless. He went into the building three times and the last time he didn't come out. You can tell by reading the newspaper of how people were in awe of his service."

In the Aug. 12, 1909 Vernon News, the editor writes of the devastation caused by the fire and the 11 lives lost.

"The full significance and heart-rending horror of the terrible calamity which has overtaken us is only beginning to sink into the numbed faculties of our citizens," stated the paper.

"Archie Hickling may have lived a life of toil among poor and sordid surroundings, but his spirit was worthy of encasement within an emperor's frame."

Mol insists there is a

need for the present-day Vernon to acknowledge Hickling 100 years later.

"It's a great story because it's an act of bravery. People like this need to be honoured," said Mol, adding that Hickling was a product of his time.

"He's saving women and children and that's what men did then."

The video will include documentation as well as interviews with historians and firefighters.

"It will also be about what life was like in Vernon 100 years ago and what fighting fires was like 100 years ago. There's a lot of mood setting," said Mol.

It's also hoped the video will increase awareness about the fire victims, many of who were likely just passing through Vernon.

"None of those families were ever notified," said Mol.

"I hope the video will

spread those names out beyond Vernon. Is this part of your family?"

The fire at the Okanagan Hotel — which was where Liquidation World now is on 30th Avenue — continues to be the greatest loss of life in Vernon.

"It was a three-storey hotel and there was only one fire escape. The walls were made of oil cloth so people died of smoke inhalation," said Mol.

The cost of the video project is about \$22,000, and once his expenses are covered, Mol hopes the video will become an ongoing fundraiser for the Greater Vernon Museum.

Donations are currently being sought from residents, service clubs and businesses.

"I hope people will be interested in Vernon and how it developed," said Mol.

"There's something in Vernon that gets Vernon

to volunteer and do good public work. The Hickling story is the epitome of good work."

Anyone interested in the video project can contact Mol at 306-2894 or by going to www.bmidd.com/ohf.