

## CULTURAL MOMENT FOR APRIL 7, 2026 CELEBRATES THE 1910 KENILWORTH MILL EXPLOSION

Long before highways stitched the countryside together and electricity hummed quietly behind walls, the lifeblood of a rural settlement was its mill. Where there was a mill, there was work, warmth, and the promise of permanence. Settlers followed them the way rivers follow valleys. Most mills leaned on the steady patience of water – rivers and creeks turning wheels day and night – but Kenilworth, without a river or stream, turned instead to steam.

At the edge of the village stood O'Neill's chopping and sawmill, both trades housed under one roof and driven by a great iron boiler that breathed fire and pressure. The mill was built by Ab O'Neill, proprietor of the Kenilworth Hotel, and entrusted to his brother Tom, whose days were measured by whistles, belts, and the rhythmic pulse of machinery. It was a place of noise and purpose, where timber was transformed and the village quite literally built itself.

Then came noon on May 19, 1910.

With a sound like thunder tearing loose from the sky, the boiler gave way. The explosion was said to be the most spectacular the county had ever known – an instant of violence that scattered iron and timber like autumn leaves. Sections of the boiler were hurled across the road and over the home and shop of Mr. Lyons. Windows burst outward in the Methodist parsonage and nearby houses. Pieces of the mill were later found miles from where they had stood that morning.

By fortune that still feels almost unbelievable, no lives were lost. The men had gone to lunch. The sawmill, long quiet, was shut down, and only the chopping mill was operating on its Monday routine. Even Michael Seiz, a local farmer passing by in his horse and buggy at the very moment of the blast, escaped unharmed (as did his horse), though his buggy did not.

In the years that followed, the story has been told and retold, growing edges like all good stories do. People remembered the roar, the flying debris, and the luck that spared the village. And they remembered, too, that steam – so powerful and promising – had already taken lives elsewhere, as it had at Alf Bishop's mill in Conn a few years before.

Kenilworth's mill was gone in an instant, but the story of that day became part of the village's memory, a reminder that progress always walks hand in hand with risk – and that sometimes, history spares us just enough to leave behind a story worth telling.

*Submitted by the Wellington North Cultural Roundtable*



*The remains of the Kenilworth Mill following its explosion on May 19, 1910. (Photo from Wellington County Museum and Archives)*

The remains of the Kenilworth Mill following its explosion on May 19, 1910. (Photo from Wellington County Museum and Archives)