

AUG 31 BLAZE

## SG LEMBING FOLK MISS THEIR ICONIC LANDMARKS

Homeless victims finding it difficult to move on after the fire tragedy, writes **T.N. ALAGESH**

KUANTAN

**A**LMOST all the victims of the fire that razed 32 buildings in Sungai Lembing here have a story to share — not just about the ordeal, but of the town, which was opened in the 1930s.

They lived in a tight-knit community for more than eight decades, and friendship blossomed during the heyday of the tin-mining activities when they worked at the British-owned Pahang Consolidated Company Limited (PCCL), which ceased operations in 1986.

The 53 homeless victims from 29 families are mostly senior citizens, aged between 70 and 85, and had occupied the razed wooden premises consisting of 20 shophouses, 11 terrace homes and a library for several generations.

Now, many find it tough to start a new life without the familiar landmarks, as some are staying with their children, relatives and friends elsewhere.

An elderly woman has even moved to Kuala Lumpur.

Former PCCL worker Leong Fook Pin, 79, described the incident as a disaster as it left them in misery and displaced.

Leong, whose double-storey shophouse was among those in Jalan North Canton destroyed in the Aug 31 fire.

He said he was saddened by the incident, which killed his friends, Ho Yok Fun, 74, and Chow Kim Mul, 70.

"Only the elderly lived here and we knew everyone.

"We used to meet daily and greet neighbours as we had known each other for more than 50 years. Some of us even grew up together, studied at the same school and worked at PCCL.

"Every old building in this town, including those destroyed in the fire, has a story to tell.

"The shophouse I lived in was where my father raised me and my eight siblings. We used to run, play and scribble on the wooden walls... *banyak sedih tau* (very sad, you know)," said Leong, who was the last victim to vacate the SJK(C) Sungai Lembing hall on Sept 10, which served as a temporary shelter following the incident.

Leong, who is currently staying in a wooden quarters provided by the Sungai Lembing Village Community Management Council (MPKK), said he was the only one who remained in the former mining town while his other siblings lived elsewhere. Some had migrated.

The third of nine siblings, Leong said in the incident on Aug 31, he was sleeping on the upper floor of his shophouse when he heard screams. He managed to get out of the building in the nick of time.



Thirty-two buildings were destroyed in a fire on Aug 31 in Sungai Lembing, Kuantan. PIX BY MUHD ASYRAF SAWAL

"Since my house is the last building in the street, the fire took some time to spread. Due to my physical condition, it took me awhile to come downstairs and leave the building.

"Sadly, my two friends (Ho and Chow)

could not escape," he said, adding that he lost everything and was left with only the clothes on his back.

Leong hoped the authorities would assist the victims in rebuilding their homes.

"We have spent our entire lives staying here, so let us remain. Our lives revolve around this town and it will be tough to move elsewhere."

The 1.30am fire destroyed the buildings, some of which were about 100 years old.

Lam Shun Ling, 82, said when he heard loud explosions, he thought it was the sound of fireworks for the National Day celebration. However, he later realised the row of houses was burning.

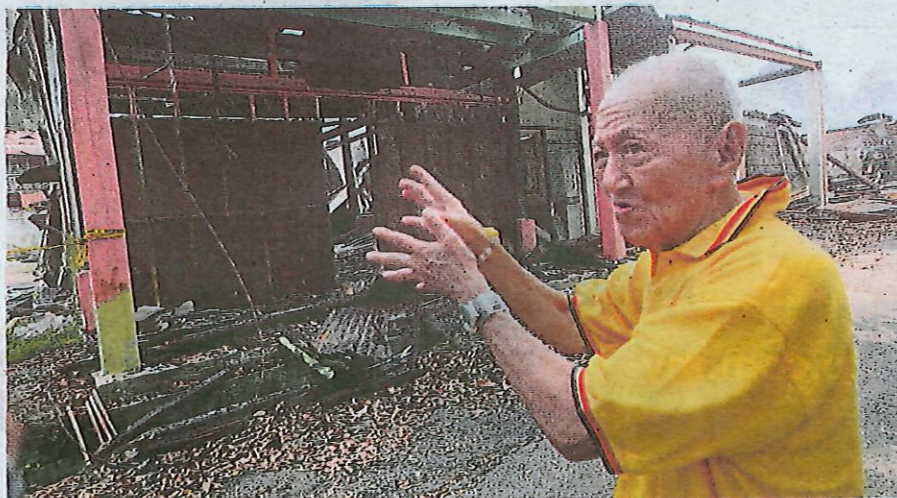
He said the shophouse, which belonged to his grandfather, was filled with memories.

"I was born in 1937 and grew up in that house. Later I worked at PCCL as a shaft worker and continued living there even after I got married.

"We had countless family gatherings and festive celebrations. Suddenly, the place is gone.

"A lot of souvenirs collected during the tin mining days were kept in my house.

"I hope the government will help rebuild the destroyed homes," he said, adding that his wife became unwell after the incident and required a wheelchair to move around.



Leong Fook Pin showing his razed shophouse.