

Moose Lake News Fire Prevention Special Conclusion

By Jim Onarheim & Tammy Graham

The Peshtigo WI Fire of 1871. America's Deadliest Fire

(Jim) From Sunday, October 8 through Tuesday, October 10, 1871 wildfires claimed thousands of lives and destroyed millions of acres across the Upper Midwest. The most famous fire struck Chicago, and claimed about 300 lives while destroying over three-square miles of the city, including more than 17,000 buildings. For many years, the cause of the fire was attributed to a cow housed in a barn on 137 DeKoven Street. The cow, owned by Mrs. O'Leary, purportedly knocked over a lantern that set off the blaze. A reporter later admitted to fabricating the story, but it continues to endure in popular culture. The actual cause of the fire was never determined, but weather conditions across the entire region during the summer and fall of 1871 produced conditions conducive to large, rapidly-spreading fires should one ignite.

Large wildfires also struck several areas in Michigan, with Holland, Port Huron, and Manistee seeing the most significant damage and loss of life. Although the exact death toll from the Michigan fires is unknown, it likely claimed more than 500 lives. However, the costliest fire in terms of loss of life occurred in and around Peshtigo, Wisconsin, and remains to this day as the deadliest fire in American History.

Fire reached Peshtigo during the evening of Sunday, October 8, 1871. By the time the fire ended, it had consumed 1.5 million acres, and an estimated 1,200-2,400 lives (exact number unknown), including approximately 800 in Peshtigo. Only one building in the town survived the fire. What we know of the fire is primarily taken from the first-hand account of Reverend Peter Pernin. His account details several personal stories from those who were present in Peshtigo during the fire, and many of those personal stories are displayed alongside graves in the cemetery adjacent to the Peshtigo Fire Museum. One such story details the experience of the Kelly family.

"Terance Kelly, his wife, and four children lived in the upper Sugar Bush. When the fire came with the terrible wind and smoke, the family became separated. Voices could not be heard above the roar of the fire. Mr. Kelly had a child in his arms, as did Mrs. Kelly. The other two children clung to each other. In search for safety, each group lost track of the others. The next day, Mr. Kelly and a child were found dead nearly a mile from his farm. The mother and another child were safe. The other children, a boy, and a girl, five, were found sleeping in each other's arms near the farm. The house, barn, and all the outbuildings had burned to the ground."

The fire in Peshtigo resulted from several factors, including prolonged drought, logging, and clearing of land for agriculture, local industry, ignorance, and indifference of the population, and ultimately a strong autumn storm system occurring in the presence of conditions supportive of a large, rapidly-spreading fire.

To better understand the large-scale weather conditions leading up to the fire, data from the 20th Century Reanalysis (which covers the period from 1871-present) was analyzed. A large upper-level ridge was present across the region from July through September, which would have set the stage for warm and potentially dry weather.

Temperatures from July through September were above-normal, from the central Plains into the upper Midwest.

At the time, Fort Embarrass, approximately 60 miles southwest of Peshtigo, kept detailed weather records. Comments from their observers in several entries indicate smaller fires prior to October 8, as well as a record of the deadly fire itself. Dense smoke was observed for several days leading up to the fire, and temperatures in the 70s were reported on October 8. Although observations were scarce at the time, a surface weather map on the day of the deadly fire was reconstructed from the available data, indicating a strong low-pressure system over the central plains. which would have produced strong southwesterly winds across the region. These winds, in combination with the warm temperatures and dry conditions, likely led to the rapid spread of pre-existing fires and any new fires that ignited.

The fires of October 8-10, 1871 helped serve as a wake-up call to many about the land use practices of the time. Timber from cleared land was discarded without regard to its potential to fuel wildfires. The subsequent 144 years has seen an evolution in how to mitigate wildfire potential with varying degrees of success, but awareness of the issue has dramatically increased. Weather support has become an integral part of fire operations, for both planned burns and wildfires. The National Weather Service has Incident Meteorologists trained in providing remote and onsite support to firefighters who battle wildfires across the United States, and have also supported operations internationally. Although wildfires will always occur and continue to claim lives and property, improvements in weather information, land management, and general awareness of the danger of wildfires helps ensure tragedies of the scale that occurred in early October 1871 will not be repeated.

We hope that we will never experience a fire of this magnitude in our life time. Structural fires, we can prevent by better building codes, sprinkler systems, smoke alarms, CO alarms, fire retardant furnishings etc. Wild fires we must depend a lot on Mother Nature. Yes, we can encourage people not to burn during dry weather but lighting strikes wind and dry conditions, we have no control on.

(Tammy) The lake has been slowly coming down over the last week, even with the lower water there were still several boats out with people fishing this weekend. Between the lowering of the lake and the chill in the air it really brings home the knowledge that winter is coming quicker than we may like. The leaves are still coming down so we probably have another month of leaf blowing. I am hoping that the snow holds out for at least that long.

Christina's Y-Pines has a couple of upcoming events. They will be having Halloween party on October 28 at 7pm. There will be live music, catered food and prizes throughout the night including a best costume prize if you want to dress up. Christina's Y-Pines is going to be working with Santa this year! & Parents have your kids write a letter to Santa and have them deliver their letter and put it in the special Santa mail box at Christina's Y-Pines. They will also be hosting a party for the kids; handing out the gifts and doing crafts. If you are interested in more information please reach out to Christina.

(Jim) Test your smoke detectors, Clean your chimney of your wood stove/fire place. Be careful when using candles this fall/winter. Keep combustibles a safe distance away. It is the time of year for structure fires. I have always said, fire follows people. People are starting to spend more time indoors so we will start to have more structure fires. On this day Sunday October 22nd Sawyer County had a structure fire

that totally destroyed a home in the Radisson area. One person was taken to the hospital for treatment. Be careful!

Birthday wishes this week go to, Ryan Turner, Pat Cease, and Past resident Mark Snyder, all celebrating their birthdays on the 30th of October. Courtney Briggs has his birthday on the 31st. On Wednesday November 1st Dorothy Briggs will have her birthday. Happy Birthday to all of you. There are no anniversaries this week. Enjoy your week. Stay safe. Please send your items of interest to jonarheim@centurytel.net or 715-462-4448, 715-577-8880. Moose Improvement association website is www.mliahaywardwi.org The Town of Round Lake Web site is <https://www.townofroundlakewi.org>