Wisconsin's Incredible Fire Disaster

BOOKS of the TIMES

By GEORGE VUKELICH

Fire at Peshtigo

By Robert W. Wells, Wisconsin Tales and Trails, Inc., 244 pages

"What it was like, my grandmother used to say, wasn't the way it was written down in a lot of the stuff that's been printed. I wasn't there myself, of course. But I've talked with others who went through it. I think I know something about it and I'll tell you what it was like in Peshtigo that night. It was just plain hell."

—Woman whose grandmother survived the fire

The Peshtigo, Wisconsin, fire was the most disastrous in American history and yet it has long been overshadowed by the famous Chicago fire which occurred on the same tragic date: Oct. 8, 1871.

The Peshtigo fire killed five times as many people as the Chicago fire. In one terrible night, 1,200 persons perished — the exact death toll is unknown to this day, it is estimated to be "around 1,500."

The Peshtigo fire devastated over a million acres of land, much of it filled with towering 100 foot pines in a time "when a squirrel leaping from tree to tree could make its way from Upper Michigan across Wisconsin to Minnesota without once touching the ground."

Like the careful reporter that he is (a feature writer and columnist for The Milwaukee Journal), Wells recreates the fateful autumn of 1871, and of a sudden you're there, seeing the tough lumberjacks loving hard liquor, soft women, chewing "chaw" tobacco, and disdaining cigaret smoking ("Get them pimp sticks out of here.").

The shanty boys — the loggers — were expected to work 16 hours a day in the woods and restricted to camp except for Saturday nights and Sundays. When you realize there were 60 lumber camps in the vicinity of Peshtigo, that explains the 14 saloons in town and the "painted camp followers" in a "burg" of only 2,000 population.

After the great fire, one Green Bay newspaper compared Peshtigo to Sodom, adding: **"It seems as if the wickedness of the place had mocked God until his fiery thunderbolt was loosed for its destruction . . ."**

The author points out that virtually every lumber town in those days set aside "a district" for the lumberjacks. Some communities pursued the lumberjack "trade" so enthusiastically that they won a reputation against hard competition.

"It was said, for example," Wells writes, **"that the three toughest places in the universe were Hayward, Hurley and Hell."**

As Stewart H. Holbrook wrote of the lumberjacks:

". . . they were different from the farmers and the town dwelling clerks, a tougher race. The lumber they produced was required by the nation pushing west beyond the Mississippi to settle the treeless plains. They took in stride the days when the thermometer stood two feet beyond zero . . ."

The lumber they had produced in the Peshtigo area in 1871 was over five million board feet — that's logs converted into lumber. Now to convert the downed trees into logs required the lopping off of all branches, so the bare logs could be "skidded" out of the woods to the mills.

This lopping and trimming left mountainous piles of "slashings" throughout the big woods.

It was always a potential tinder box and fires were usually burning somewhere in the woods until the good soaking rains came.

In 1871 the rains were a long time in coming.

By fall, a drought was upon the land (it hadn't rained since July) and small fires broke out and burned throughout the woods.

"In the backwoods communities," Wells says, "residents sometimes groped through smoke thick enough to obscure the sun."

In this day of fire wardens, burning permits and Smokey the Bear, it's hard to conceive of people not alarmed by fire in the woods.

But as Wells points out, fire in the woods was a fact of life then. The slashings burned and the fires spread until the rains came down and what of it, anyway? There were plenty of trees, "an endless sea" of trees.

By early fall of 1871, small fires smoldered in the woods in an area **one hundred miles long and seventy miles wide.**

The Green Bay paper reported:

". . . the flames would insidiously work their way into the swamps and here develop almost a furnace heat, actually burning from one to three feet into the ground, and completely burning out the peat, roots and alluvial soil, leaving nothing but ashes and the subsoil of sand. Thus the fires lived and increased for weeks . . ."

In September, the fire reached Peshtigo and the people fought and turned it back.

In October, the fire returned and this time there was nothing on God's earth that could turn it back. It was a hurricane, a firestorm, a molten sea melting window panes into liquid; burning human flesh and bones into little piles of ashes in which only garter fasteners and pocket knives remained.

Peshtigo was turned into a crematorium, the bulk of its survivors neck deep in the river, their faces in the blast furnaces of hell.

Today there is a Fire Museum in town and the cemetery on Oconto Avenue but "the talk at La Valley's, Pete's Uptown, and the other small taverns along French Street is not apt to be about history."

The best evidences of what the fire did to Peshtigo, Wells writes, are the tombstones. I agree with the author. But to them, I would add the pages of his haunting book.

Fire at Peshtigo was first published by Prentice Hall in 1968 and has been reissued by Wisconsin Tales and Trails, Inc. Editor Jill Dean says, "This is the first reissue in what we hope will be a continuing series. There are a number of titles that have been allowed to go out of print, and we believe there is a continuing interest in them. We will reissue two additional books this year, 'My Life on Earth' by Edward Harris Heth and 'Side Roads: Excursions into Wisconsin's Past' by Fred Holmes."