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# Forest Fires in Manitowoc County — 1871

by: Walter Vogl,  
Highway 42, Two Rivers, WI

## THE PESHTIGO FIRE — as it entered Manitowoc County on October 8, 1871

"FROM TWO CREEKS TO TWO RIVERS, THE WOODS ARE BURNING. HEAVY RAIN IS OUR ONLY SALVATION. ALL THE ROADS ARE IMPASSABLE AND THE WORST IS NOT YET KNOWN." So wrote Henry Marshall of Milwaukee on October 5, 1871. He concludes his report: "Very fortunately I reached Two Rivers in safety and pen this account on my experiences in this section of the steamer SHEBOYGAN.

October 7 and 8, 1871, are the dates of two savage fires: The Peshtigo Fire and the Great Chicago Fire. They will long live in our history books. Terrible disasters to be sure. But the dry summer and fall of 1871 spelled misery, panic, heartbreak and poverty for hundreds of Lakeshore residents in Manitowoc, Kewaunee, Brown, Calumet and Door Counties, as fires swept through the countryside prior to the disaster dates.

Little has been directly documented about the problems of farmers and village residents, but it is an important part of our history which should receive some attention and recording. The Manitowoc County Historical Society is still seeking present or former county residents who may be able to relate anecdotes which might have been passed on by friends and family about the 1871 fire in Northern Manitowoc County.

Henry Marshall, in his message about his escape from Kewaunee County, speaks of boarding the steamer SHEBOYGAN at Two Rivers. And it must have been with a great deal of relief, as he left the smoke and flames of the burning forests, fields and farmsteads behind him. This tells us a bit about life on the lakeshore in the late 1800's.

Traveling on the many ships on Lake Michigan was a popular way of travel in those days. The ports in Two Creeks, Two Rivers and Manitowoc were throbbing with activity: busy men, teams and wagons loading and unloading produce. Arrival of steamers' passengers and crew was

exciting and important to the locals and newspapermen. They were bearers of news from other localities. Communications were difficult, and it is understandable that important news like the fire at Peshtigo and Chicago were sketchy and incomplete and late.

The only information about the Great Chicago Fire on October 7 to be later printed in the **Kewaunee Enterprise** newspaper was obtained from a steamer passenger. Crosier Tufts had stopped off at Kewaunee on his way to Clay Banks. The editor hedged with the headline "Frightful-if True" in his October 11 edition, as he reports the disaster. And well he might hedge as such reports surely would often be embellished or inaccurate. Sadly, the Chicago Fire was true; the final report even worse, as final news of destruction and loss of life became known.

Henry Marshall's report was true, too, as he just touched on a part of the fire destruction in Kewaunee and Manitowoc Counties in the September and early October of 1871.

He was traveling out of Ahnapee (the name later changed to the present Algoma). Through his report, one can about feel the near panic which must have been with Lakeshore residents during those frightful weeks.

Marshall wrote, "On Saturday I hired a team to make my escape to some point further out thinking to reach Kewaunee. After a drive of 7 miles the smoke and fire became intolerable. I was obliged to turn back. (Editor note: *We must remember trails and roads were quite crude and narrow with trees and bush crowding the road.*) The return I found most difficult. The roads were almost impassable through burning trees which had fallen across it, and so dangerous was our situation I despaired of saving the team. Knowing it was my only means of escape, I used great exertion and succeeded in saving the houses which were badly scorched in running the fiery gauntlet."

On Sunday he tried again by another

road. He continues, "We had to ford streams, the bridges suffering destruction. We counted locations of 22 dwellings and barns which had been reduced to cinders.

"North of Ahnapee flames were lapping up everything on Saturday and Sunday sweeping all barns, horses, stores, piers in its course. So dry were the wells that people are obliged to draw water from the lake, every available team being employed for that purpose.

"Scarcity of water was everywhere, and in many places we found that money could not buy a pailful for the horses.

"From Kewaunee south to Two Creeks the fire has swept away everything and should a high wind set in the latter place (Two Creeks) will suffer almost total destruction. I saw farmers burying household goods in the ground. From Two Creeks to Two Rivers the woods are burning but I passed over the road during night so I couldn't tell of the devastation. All the roads are impassable and the worst is not known." Two Creeks then was a busy village of 60 resident families on the Lakeshore east of its present location, 10 miles north of Two Rivers on Highway 42. Marshall traveled the old stage-coach road near the Lake.

What led to these widespread forest fires which ravaged these counties?

The stage was already set in the winter of 1870-1871. There was virtually no snow. No compensating rains fell in spring, so farmers were entering a crop season in spring of 1871 with little moisture in the soil. Summer rains were immediately sapped up by the dry soil leaving no traces of moisture in a few hours.

One can assume the open winter made possible more lumbering and wood cutting than normal resulting in an excess brush and slash lying in the forest — ideal to kindle a hot fire. Questions are raised as to why the fires began to burn in forest over such a wide area seeming to ignite almost simultaneously. Perhaps the small



fires which had started by lightning, carelessness in burning brush piles or trash, sparks from railroad locomotives, general carelessness and perhaps arson were suddenly exploded into full scale forest fires by the cyclonic dry winds.

Fires in woodlands were not that unusual, and, if of any size, were left to burn unabated. Often fire was used by railroad crews and farmers to clear land. Just a few decades before this colonists considered forests frightening menaces.

It is strange that even in view of the devastation and destruction in townships like Two Creeks that Falge in his **History of Manitowoc** simply states: 1871-October "Extensive Forest Fires in northern part of the county." Again, this understatement was probably due to poor communications and records, the early settlers being quite stoic in face of near disaster and the occurrence of frequent fires.

Merk states in his **Economic History of Wisconsin**, "During Civil War decade forest fires were an appalling source of loss as loggers took best pine and left forest floor full of slashings dry as tinder in a year of drought ready to start a major blaze. Smoke from a Lake Superior blaze in 1863 made the atmosphere murky as far south as Milwaukee.

And, "In 1864 came an account of raging seas of smoke and fire in Brown, Kewaunee, and Manitowoc Counties. Scores of villages and hamlets were threatened with destruction. Wausau, Neillsville and Two Rivers fought off engulfing flames only by heroic efforts of their entire populations. These fires were scarcely noted in newspapers in southern Wisconsin."

Fire was a constant threat in towns and villages because of wooden construction of buildings, bridges, sidewalks, wood shingle roofs, rail

fences etc, and limited help from local fire departments. Farmers were ever more vulnerable for help would consist only of crude effort by neighbors with pails or barrels of water.

The summer of 1871 was a dry one. On July 27 the **Manitowoc Pilot** newspaper tells of early good harvests of winter wheat and awaiting a good crop of spring wheat to mature later. Wisconsin was still a heavy wheat growing state. A week later the newspaper would be hoping for rain complaining of dry conditions and dusty streets. The situation farther north was worse. After a dry period a rain on August 3 would be the last of the summer in Kewaunee County and one can assume northern Manitowoc County was in equally bad shape. Crops were suffering. Hot, dry winds made parched the country even more.

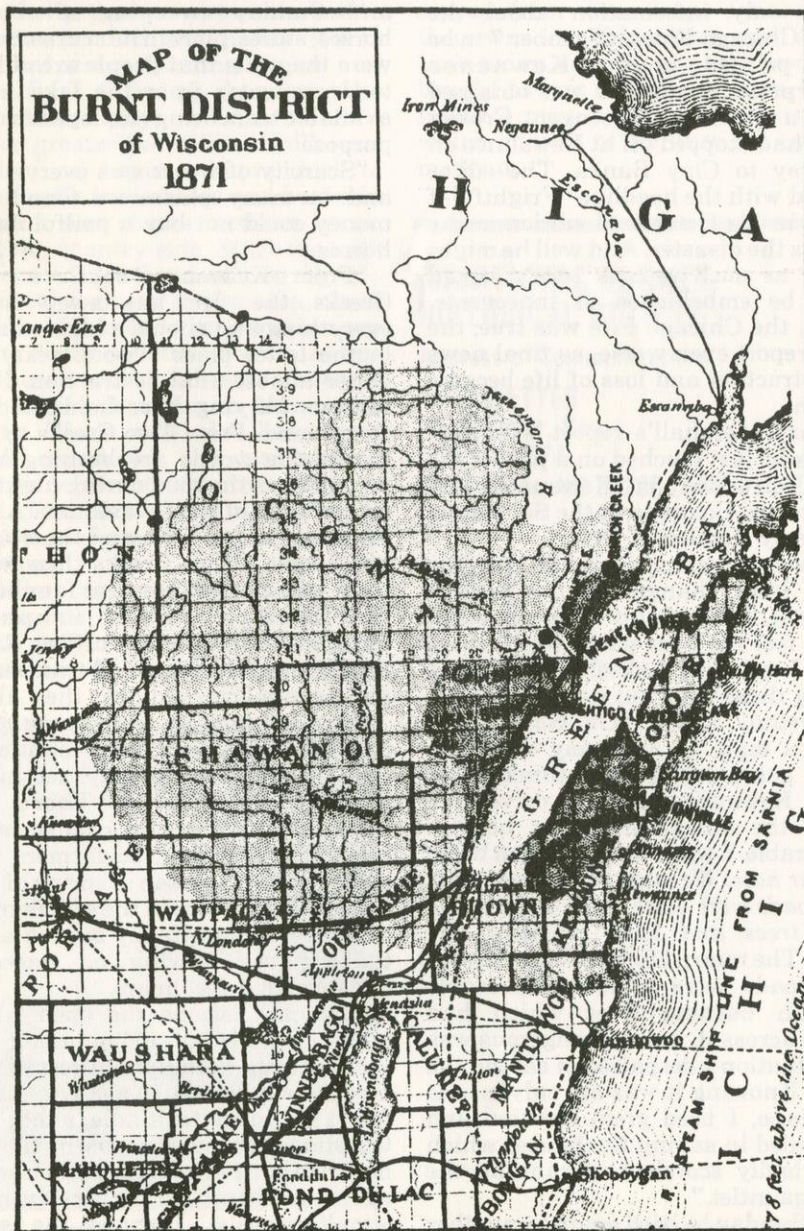
The extra farm work entailed in a drought period is endless. Natural ponds, creeks and water holes which may have provided water for livestock would disappear. This meant doing alot of extra pumping water by hand or pulling up buckets on a rope to fill stock tanks, water the much needed garden etc. Wells would fall dangerously low. Some would dry up, as they were shallow hand dug wells. The worry of obtaining a less than bumper crop, then as now, was a source of real worry. Pastures would be short, parched and overgrazed in field and woods. (Cattle were oftened pastured in woodlands.) The 1871 farmer was extremely vulnerable.

It can be assumed that the dry weather was a factor in the loss of Chris Hohneman's brewery and dwelling worth \$2,500 (Insurance \$1,700) in Two Rivers as early as July 26, 1871.

On August 17 barn, house and out buildings were lost in a huge blaze at the Brinks farm near Manitowoc.

The Door County Advocate stated in late August, "The continued dry weather of last three weeks has inflicted considerable damage on growing crops and unless relief is soon had in shape of copious showers, our farmer friends will suffer. Potatoes will be damaged beyond recovery with a few more days of such dry weather as we have had lately."

The "copious showers" would not appear and crops would be in bad shape. Day after day, farmers and their families would look for black clouds which might carry the blessed rains. None came. (The black clouds they did see were from — **FOREST FIRES!**) The drought with thirsty crops and livestock were bad enough. Here was an enemy which could completely destroy the straw and hay in stacks or mow, and the wheat and oats stored in grainery. There would be grain stacked in bundles waiting to thresh late in fall.





Round the clock, watchers were set up in some localities, and exhaustion was ever-present as farmers in harder hit areas not only watched but fought the fires as well, as they tried to save their buildings. Neighbors shared in bucket-brigades.

The **Green Bay Gazette** learned from parties on the bay shore "that fires are raging extensively in the woods between Menominee and Peshtigo. The inhabitants of that region are putting forth great exertions in fighting the fiery fiend. A large amount of valuable timber will be destroyed unless flames can be extinguished." Little did that reporter know that the loss would not only be in timber but in human lives — more than 800.

Incidentally, newspapers at this time were also running ads like: "500 men wanted to work on the railroad. \$1.50 per day. \$3.00 a week for boys. (Minimum wage and child labor laws did not exist then!).

As farmers were still in process of clearing farms, one can understand how fires could spread through the woodlands rather easily. Woodlands were close together if not contiguous. With such parched conditions, sparks and cinders carried by the dry winds would find good spots to ignite yet another area.

In 1871 after the Peshtigo Fire, Frank Tillton collected many anecdotes and facts about the fires prior and during the calamity. He pointed out that fires north of Green Bay to Menominee could have been occasioned by the debris of the railroad workings.

But fires were not restricted there, having sprung up on both sides of the bay in places remote from each other extending nearly to Fond du Lac. Fires a distance of 150 miles. In telling of the harrowing experiences of these fires he said, communications were cut off entirely to the north, telegraph lines destroyed and fire along the road. "Eastward from Green Bay, the case was about as bad," he said. This would include Door, Kewaunee and northern Manitowoc Counties. Fires extended from the Wolf River on the West to Lake Michigan on the East.

Bridges on the Manitowoc Road, he said, were destroyed by the fire and circus traveling from Green Bay to Manitowoc fortunately just made it before the bridges were taken by the fires. Even new culverts made of heavy timbers were burned. One is amazed as to how dry the earth must have been as fires traveled underground. A new plank road was destroyed. Tree roots would be consumed and the 100 foot majestic white pine would crash with an ear splitting roar spewing up flames, sparks, smoke and cinders.

In item after item he tells of occurrences of mills and farms being

destroyed. "A team of horses and an Indian were burned to death at Oconto on Monday," was a typical report. He documents fires in Manitowoc County. "In Cooperstown, 18 miles east of here, several dwellings and barns and many stacks of wheat, hay and oats were consumed. Added to this is the loss of timber, cordwood, fences, hemlock bark and other products of the forest.

### CITY OF MANITOWOC HAS CLOSE CALL

To properly relate this story about Manitowoc's narrow escape from being wiped out by the fire, the following story in the October 5, 1871 issue of the **Manitowoc Pilot**, outlines the extent of the fires:

#### *The Fire in the Woods No Abatement of the Destruction*

*"The fire which has been devastating the surrounding country for the past three weeks shows no abatement of its ravages. From all parts of the lakeshore range of counties to the north our exchanges come to us filled with accounts of its destructive progress. High winds and the long continued drouth helping to spread it all over the county. On Tuesday morning a high wind from the west sprang up, and very soon our city was enveloped in smoke so dense as to obscure the light of the sun, and the wind, which seemed like the blast from a hot furnace, bore on its wings burnt leaves and other debris from the conflagration, which seemed at that time to threaten with destruction*

*everything within its reach. Everyone turned an anxious eye toward the western end of the city, knowing that if the fire once invaded our midst there would be no telling when it would stop.*

*At about half past 4 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon the alarm bells of the fire engine houses and the Catholic church gave notice to our citizens that their worst fears were realized, and that the fire fiend had entered our city. The sparks blown over the hill on the south side had ignited the stumps of cedar trees and other inflammable material in the cedar swamp at the foot of the hill leading out on the Calumet Road just inside the city limits.*

*The fire department was quickly on the ground, and, by the most untiring exertions on their part, with the help of the citizens who, gathering there from all corners, immediately began tearing down fences and all other material which would afford food for the flames, succeeded in staying its progress.*

*A strict watch was kept up all night and at this writing all present danger seems to have been averted. The smoke hung over our city like a funeral pall, extending many miles into the lake. So dense was it that the fog bell at the entrance of the harbor kept sounding during the night.*

*Too much praise cannot be accorded to our fire department for the exertions they put forth to stay the progress of the devouring element.*

*We are informed by Mr. J. Murphy, of Clark's Mills, that the fire in the woods is still raging in his vicinity, and that constant watchfulness is necessary to*



Blackened bottom of stump is a result of the 1871 Peshtigo Fire in northern Manitowoc County.



preserve property from destruction. The residence of Mr. W. Smith took fire Sunday afternoon last from the flames in the swamp (which is four miles in extent and one mass of flames) near Clark's Mills, and was totally destroyed, scarcely saving any of his furniture. He lost about 100 bushels of grain. The inhabitants are in hourly dread of their dwellings taking fire in consequence of the high wind prevailing which tends to spread the fire in every direction.

On "Uncle Ben" Jones' place about a mile and a half northwest of the city, the fire is raging fiercely, having approached within a few miles of his barn, stock, etc. and he is compelled to keep a number of men constantly on the alert to prevent them from catching fire from the sparks and cinders which are blown about by the wind.

Parties coming into the city who are only a few miles out, give accounts of destruction of their property by this fearful visitation. Cordwood, barns, cattle, etc., have fallen prey to the fire, and it is only by the most super human exertions that they are enabled to save their dwellings from destruction. The losses must be very heavy, in fact, incalculable.

#### Later Thursday Morning

This morning at half past 1, our citizens were aroused by an alarm of fire. The wind was blowing, a perfect gale, and the air was filled with smoke, and the horizon for miles around was lurid with the fires encircling us. The alarm was caused by the rekindling of the fire in the locality mentioned above, and which had a very threatening appearance, and was rapidly spreading, so much so that some of the people in the neighborhood were packing up their household effects preparatory to removal in case of necessity.

The firemen were promptly on the ground and by fighting it inch by inch, we are happy to state that it was once more under control.

Our city at this writing 9 a.m., is enveloped in a thick cloud of smoke. Where this will end we are unable to say. There is no indication of rain and the prospect looks gloomy indeed."

And so the Manitowoc Pilot reporter ended his story and with those words of despair. Happily firemen and volunteers were able to keep the flames out of the city until the rains and favorable winds came.

\* \* \* \* \*

With fires burning over almost the entire Northeastern Wisconsin, the smoke was intense. People moved into cities to escape danger of fire and because of the suffocating effect of the smoke. Northern Manitowoc County was also smothered in smoke. Flying

flakes of ash and cinders filled the air.

"On the Bay the steamers navigate by compass, and blow their fog horns, the shore being invisible."

Messengers came into Green Bay from Brown, Kewaunee, Door and Manitowoc County with news of death and destruction."

Noted Tillton that Manitowoc County was included in the relief area to be serviced from Milwaukee after the fires abated.

As the fires burned in townships of Two Creeks, Mishicot, Two Rivers, Gibson and Cooperstown, damage was done to more than forest and fence, crops and buildings.

While the flames leaped from tree to tree to convert a beautiful forest into a field of dried poles, fire would creep into the swamps, develop a furnace heat, burn down 1 to 3 feet, consuming plant, roots, alleveial soil leaving nothing but ashes and loose, life-less, sand-like soil. Potatoes were baked in the ground in these strange underground fires.

Alvin Steckmesser, a farmer near Hwy. 42, five and a half miles north of Two Rivers, before his death in the 1970's, told the researcher that his parents and farmers in the area agreed that the fire was the cause of the "swamp holes" in the area which were deep and hard to drain. Before tiling became common, much expense and back-breaking work was necessitated by plowing and scraping ditches to drain these pot holes.

Even 100 years after these fires, woodlands would contain areas where no brush, trees, or common vegetation would grow. The barren whitish soil was completely devoid of organic matter. It is thought that this sterile condition was created by blast furnace temperatures in the forest fires.

Tillton describes the atmosphere: "The whole air was filled with a dense, suffocating smoke almost obscuring the vision, over a tract of hundreds of square miles; the sun shone down through the smoke with a red angry glare; and the heavens at night would be illuminated on every side with the holocaust of fire.

"The fire was sweeping over the low meadows comprising many hundreds of acres, halting but for a moment to lick up an occasional stack of hay."

What fear there must have been as one could see the huge trees literally exploding as the fire roared through the area!

Northeastern Manitowoc County was settled by many farmers in the 1850's and 60's. Immigrants from Bohemia, Bavaria, Norway, Alsace-Lorraine, Poland, various parts of Germany, the German colonies in Russia, seemed to be most predominant in this area.

This was rugged life on the frontier! Ervin Sand, an outstanding farmer and livestock shipper for over 56 years,

remembers well the stories his father, Frederick Sand, told about the area. His farm is located on Hwy. 42 six miles north of Two Rivers. The elder Sand told him that when the Ziks settled on the farm now owned by Raphael Zik, the family had only a shelter with three sides that first winter of their residence there. They kept a huge fire burning in front of the shelter all winter. They could see this fire through the trees which divided these farmsteads. The Sand name at that time was spelled "Sandt." Many names were Americanized in spelling and pronunciation.

The fire of 1871 was remembered well by Mr. Frederick Sand as he told his remembrances to Ervin and Oscar, (who passed away in 1985 at the age of 93.) They related that the farmers tore down rail fences, so fire could not travel along these to farm buildings. Milk which had soured was dumped on burning fences indicating the shortage of water and the desperation of the farm families. "The fire was hottest up on the hill," Fred Sand had told Oscar. This was one mile south of the present Vogl farm at Highway 42 and Elmwood Road.

Numerous reports of the fires in the Lakeshore Counties tell of the loss of cordwood and tamarack bark for tanneries which had been cut and stacked that previous almost snowless winter. The Sand family was no exception, as the flames consumed this all-important source of income. Ervin Sand explained that sale of cordwood made the mortgage payments on the land. With the loss of the cordwood went the loss of one of Sand's parcels of land. Forests were an important if not vital source of income then. One can almost feel the sadness and desolation landowners felt when they saw the product of their back breaking work burst into flames — the beautiful stands of tamarack, hemlock, pine and hardwoods destroyed in awesome blazes. So tall were the white pine near the Sand place that "we never saw the sun until later in the forenoon," Mr. Sand said.

In a 1932 newspaper article Mrs. Charles Steckmesser, Sr. (now Julia Vogl) related she was born in Austria (Bohemia) in 1851. With brothers and sisters and her parents, Adalbert and Theresa Vogl, they immigrated to America in 1868. With seven children they settled on 160 acres of partially cleared land at the present corner of Elmwood Road and Hwy. 52, five miles north of Two Rivers. Mr. Sand had referred to their place as "the hill".

Adalbert would pass away by 1870 leaving Theresa and a young family to carry on the farming and wood cutting operation. Theresa was a strong woman and carried on. The horrendous fires surrounding them must have panicked the recently



widowed farm mother and her children as they tried to make a living in a strange land.

Julia Vogl Steckmesser, told the reporter about the hardships created by the fires. Her exact words: "In 1871 a fire started in the woods in that vicinity and swept over a large area of country before it was stopped. A lot of timber was destroyed and considerable hardship was experienced because of it."

One of Theresa Vogl's sons, Henry, married Mary Neiner, a neighbor girl. The fire always remained fresh in her mind. She told how the family considered burying their clothing and valuables to protect them from the flames should they finally sweep into the farmstead. Fortunately the buildings were spared.

One finds frequent references to burying clothing and other items in open areas preferably a field that had already been burned over. A common sight in Kewaunee County as related by the **Kewaunee Enterprise** was families moving furniture, grain etc. into the open fields and burying certain items.

The Vogls also told of how smoke and cinders in the atmosphere created breathing problems for the people in the stricken area. Mary Vogl said that even after rains had extinguished the flames, the smoke hung heavily in the air "making many older people sick." One must assume that these fires could have been indirect cause of death for people with breathing problems. Death certificates give "consumption" (tuberculosis) as frequent cause of death.

Evelyn Vogl Murphy, a Manitowoc resident today, is a granddaughter of Theresa Vogl, that young widow who lived through the fires; Evelyn spent her childhood on the Vogl farm.

As was common in those days Evelyn and neighbor children spent a lot of time playing in the woods. She told how she would come home "black from head to foot;" she was covered with black charcoal she picked up in playing around the huge charred white pine stumps — remnants of that 1871 forest fire.

These charred stumps are to be found this day in Point Beach State Park according to Larry Ketchbaw, Park Superintendent. A few are still visible in the Vogl woods and others in the area.

(Evelyn Vogl and her brothers and sisters continued to speak the dialect Theresa and Adalbert, her grandparents brought from Bohemia. The dialect was "Bohmisch Duetsch" (German Bohemian) considered strange by her schoolmates who spoke the more common High German (Hoch Duetsch) and Mrs. Murphy well remembers how they teased and ridiculed her about her "German." Donald Eis in researching his geneology found that the Vogl's,



*Evelyn Vogl Murphy, on right Theresa Vogl Scheuer on left. Aunts to Walter L. Vogl.*

Eis's, Samz's and Grimm's all immigrated from Bohemia (now Czechoslovakia) in 1868. They all settled in Two Rivers and Two Creeks Townships and faced these same fires in 1871).

Mary Palm was 10 years old when the fires burned in Two Rivers Township. She well remembered the fires and told her grandchildren that she felt the origin of the fire was in the Point Beach area. The Palm farm was located at the present Viceroy in old Sandy Hill area. This undoubtedly was part of that major blaze which swept through the entire length of forest on the lakeshore. This must have extended from south of Two Creeks through the present Rahr Forest, Point Beach State Park on to the very boundaries of the Village of Two Rivers.

Mary Palm later married Nicholas Taddy, who continued to develop the home farm. They would have 18 children and the Taddy name continued to carry on the high respect and community leadership established by Nicholas and Mary. A stately lady of dignity and good business sense, Mary Palm Taddy, lived to an old age.

Charles Spring was a Civil War veteran who had purchased land in that section of Two Rivers Township, cleared land and raised a good family. His son, William, later carried on the farming operation. Before his death in 1985 at 93, William Sprang said that he remembered his mother telling him of the fire sweeping close to the farm

buildings. They tried to douse the flames with any convenient liquid — in this case, brine from a barrel of pickles. A log out-building was lost and deer came in later and ate the scattered pickles.

His story, again, points up the shortage of water and the extreme desiccation of the logs. Log construction might make it easier to protect from fire, but roofs were of wood shingles which must have burned like paper. William's son, Harold, and grandson, Kevin, farm on that site today.

Fires were continuing to move south in Manitowoc County. Drought conditions led to these fires in Maple Grove.

James Mullins, barn, 500 bushels wheat and oats and 15 tons hay. Loss about \$1,000.

Simon Connell, barn, grain, and hay. Loss about \$1,200.

Anton Fritch, house, barn and grain.

All partially insured in Mechanic's Mutual Company.

We also learn of losses by fire to Michael O'Leary, Pat O'Brien, John Fielden, Pat Fielden, and John Krueger, but no particulars.

(Note: The Irish names which predominated in that locality).

The above fires were reported by the Insurance Company. There is no doubt that many went unreported to the **Manitowoc Pilot**. Newspapers were long on news from afar, feature articles, educational stories with gardening, farming, and housekeeping hints. But they often seemed to find it



difficult to record happenings a few miles from the city. The **Manitowoc Pilot** strongly supported the County Fair and told of great efforts being made to have a successful Fair. People were strongly urged to participate and attend. As stated above, forest fires were nothing new in those days but on Oct. 5 the headline read: **POSTPONE-MENT OF COUNTY FAIR.** "In consequence of the destructive fires now raging in the county, the Executive Committee deems it advisable in the interest of all concerned to postpone the opening of the Fair until October 17 and 18. Executive Committee."

The fair was indeed held on the new dates as the rains had come to quench the fires.

It is regrettable that there are so few records of these dreadful fires in Manitowoc County. But the **Kewaunee Enterprise** carried rather good, though obviously understated, stories about the destruction in our neighboring county to the north.

As the fires were especially bad in the Kewaunee County Township of Carlton which borders our Township Two Creeks, one can assume that this area was equally hard hit. This is substantiated by Joseph Frank Wojta in his book **The Township of Two Creeks**: "The most destructive element to timber was the great forest fire — the so-called Peshtigo Fire of 1871, which not only brought to many settlers, though all escaped in the Town of Two Creeks, but destroyed the forests, the farm homes, barns and other buildings. This fire under pressure of high wind traveled rapidly and consumed everything in its path."

To assess the actual feel of those flames searing the Lakeshore Counties one must use the actual reports as they appear in the newspapers. The **Kewaunee Enterprise** had received the **Manitowoc Pilot** and quoted: "We learn that extensive fires are raging in various parts of the County doing much injury though no more buildings have been destroyed as yet." He evidently did not know that farmsteads had burned in Cooperstown and Maple Grove and presumably many more unreported.

"Parties coming into the city who live only a few miles out (from Kewaunee) give accounts of the destruction of their property by this fearful visitation. Cordwoods, barns, cattle etc. have fallen prey to the fire and it is only by super human exertion that they are enabled to save their dwellings from destruction. The losses must be very heavy in fact, incalculable." Many more reports to detail this early news story in the **Kewaunee Enterprise** would follow in that September of 1871. Familiar names appear as the columns reported that barns, homes and crops lost to the

flames.

"People worn out watching and working."

"No rain in sight."

"Fires in Door County."

"Families lose all."

"Village of Kewaunee almost burned. Two hours of rain did not extinguish the blaze but slowed it down."

And the sad inevitable — "Child is lost as home and barn is burned."

"The hard earnings of years have been turned to ashes in a single hour."

"Large fires on Mishicot Road west of Taylors and Bachs in Carlton."

"Kewaunee County ablaze."

"Homeless families gather on the piers at Grimms and Alaska. Lost all but clothes they wore."

"48 hours of continuous and exhausting fight — blinded by smoke and ash to save their homes. Children sit with furniture in ditch or field."

And as late as Oct. 7-9: "Fire seemed to take on new impetus. Districts which here-to-fore escaped their ravages were severely visited."

"Sunday afternoon Kewaunee almost went, as cedar swamps took fire south of town."

Travelers told of these scenes and of families burying their belongings and indeed they did. Clothing, furniture, shoes and grain were moved into open preferably burned-over fields, for protection. Even some of these were lost. One Kewaunee farmer moved his grain to his father-in-laws farm for safety only to lose it to the fire there.

In the **HISTORY OF TWO CREEKS** written by Joseph J. Wojta it states: "Some communities kept vigil day and night. Others assisted in carrying and pouring water on roofs and buildings to extinguish fires started through intense heat. It was so hot the manure piles or rubbish heaps in farmers yards caught fire. Their furniture and other belongings were buried at the bottom of dried streams, creeks or mud puddles to save them from burning."

Farmers in Two Creeks and Kewaunee County hauled water from Lake Michigan because wells and ponds dried up. Mills had a hard time generating power as water to propel the wheels was so low. And so the woods and fields, swamps and marshes, the rail fences, the stacks of cordwood and bark continued to burn. Often a school, church, farmstead was taken, too.

Word of the devastation and the enormous losses in this part of Wisconsin had been received in Madison and on Oct. 6, 1871 it was suggested that a special session of the legislature be called to provide relief to the residents in these northeastern counties. Little did the legislators know what the following two days would bring: the horrendous account of fire in Peshtigo and Chicago and the

tragic loss of lives and property.

With the exhausting task of fighting that unpredictable incendiary giant which was creeping and crawling and flying and exploding in our Wisconsin counties, our 1871 farmers and villagers could not give much note to the Chicago and Peshtigo fires which climaxed that awful period. Word would come in later.

Books have been written about that holocaust which wiped out a good part of Chicago and the Peshtigo area and will not be detailed here. It is not known whether on that fateful Oct. 7 weather conditions made the fire burn more fiercely in Manitowoc County. The fire which spread west from the Lakeshore may have been slowed substantially by prevailing westerly winds. It is not known how the fires travelled, although it is known it could cut a crazy path depending on winds and flammability of objects in its path.

It is reasonable to assume that the climax of the fires were indeed on Oct. 7-8 as local fire reports subsided after those dates. There was a good two hour shower on the 9th which slowed the flames.

But the information about the disasters in Peshtigo and Chicago finally came. A typical report in the **Manitowoc Pilot** was again based on reports from steamer passengers. The report grossly understated what really happened:

"Fort Howard, Oct. 9 — Passengers by the steamer **ESCANABA** report that the Village of Peshtigo is entirely destroyed, together with sixty or seventy people. The scenes are described as awful in the extreme. Those who were saved rushed into the river up to their necks and dashed water over their heads. Loss \$100,000. Among those reported burned are J.E. Beebe, bookkeeper, wife and children; W.T. Thompson, clerk, wife and mother.

"Large loss of life is reported at Negaunee.

"A special dispatch to the **Milwaukee Evening Wisconsin** dated Green Bay, Oct. 10 states that five hundred persons perished at Peshtigo. Newspaper reports do not exaggerate. Down the east shore the mortality is fully as great. Everything is needed. The town is full of refugees. The above particulars are furnished by H.O. Crane."

## FIRES ELSEWHERE

The drought of that summer of 1871 spawned fires throughout the midwest and west.

Burning woods ignited Holland, Michigan and save for Hope College, 30 homes and a few buildings "near the bridge," the entire city was lost.

A great prairie fire was raging in southeastern Minnesota with high winds driving it at great speed. Barns,



horses, hay, wheat, livestock were consumed; small towns and solitary farm houses were taken by the flames. The big woods around Mankato and New Ulm were burning. A fire of immense proportions.

A timely rain saved Topeka, Kansas from being demolished by a huge prairie fire. And many other reports.

A thoroughly desiccated town or village was an easy target for a warped and troubled mind who would turn to arson. Five men set fire to a livery stable in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. One of the group said they were all pledged to burn that city and LaCrosse as well. Retribution (one could not call it 'justice' without a trial) was swift. "The men were hung until they were dead." The story in the **LaCrosse Democrat** concluded ominously, "our citizens will do well to have an extra guard in the streets, for if LaCrosse is to be burned we must do some hanging here, if Prairie du Chien does not do it all."

### THE FIRES SUBSIDE

After a change in winds and rain entered the picture the fires subsided. Or perhaps in many areas the voracious appetite had been satisfied and the fires simply burned themselves out. The fires, it can be reasoned, continued to smolder in swamps and sloughs for a long time. One survivor of the fires again mentioned the problems after the rains came. The damp smoke and cinders hanging in the now quiet atmosphere were a worse hazard then before.

Manitowoc County people had emerged with their lives and families in tact. It is not recorded how many buildings were lost in Township of Two Creeks, but they must have been numerous, recognizing how much devastation was done just across the county line.

A 1976 Bicentennial committee map charted the extent of the "Penetration of the Peshtigo Fires" from the Lakeshore south to 45th Street and Route VV from Two Rivers to Shoto, Northwest through the Towns of Cooperstown, Mishicot and Gibson and covering all of Kewaunee County. A major portion of Manitowoc County could have been included in that map. Fires, if not contiguous, were scattered all over the county.

Wojta stated further: "About one half of the timber was burnt out in the town which had influenced the clearing of land by the farmers for cultivation more easily." It is hard for us to envision anyone welcoming the loss of a pristine forest, but one must consider that in those days the big dream was to clear out the forest and get as much land under cultivation as soon as possible. The farmer had, after all, to support his family, pay his taxes and mortgage installments. Removal of stumps and roots and huge rocks

was exhausting work and often dangerous as dynamite was used to blast out the tough ones. So the fire had one advantage at least in the eyes of the expanding farmer.

But this slight advantage was offset by the loss of income from forest products. Two Creeks was a thriving community on the shore of Lake Michigan. It had good port to accommodate lake shipping. A sawmill, planing mill and tannery there created many jobs and a market for farmers' hemlock bark, logs, ties and cordwood. It is said that the sale of hemlock bark was lucrative.

The loss of the area's good timber in the fire ultimately led to the closing of Pfister-Vogel Leather Company. Now it was more important than ever for the farmer to devote much more time to farming as lumber and bark market was sharply reduced.

There were several tanneries in the Two Rivers area, the largest was one and a half miles north of Two Rivers near the river. It employed 300 men. Because of lack of hemlock bark, it closed in 1875. Hence, the fires of 1871 affected the lives of many people who were not in its path as it blazed through those hemlock groves.

### RELIEF FOR SURVIVORS.

That pier at Two Creeks now was the site of relief boats docking with provisions to help these settlers who were in desperate need of aid. Relief ships also docked at Kewaunee, Ahnepee and Clay Banks.

A final tally of destruction for Kewaunee County listed in the **Kewaunee Enterprise**: "damages of \$800,000, two mills, one church, three stores, 150 dwellings, six schools, two saloons, 148 barns. The particular column listing those statistics also gave names of farmers who lost buildings and crops, their value and the amount of insurance, if any. Usually the insurance amount was small and perhaps half of the farmers had no insurance at all.

Aid was sent to Kewaunee from Milwaukee, Racine, Sheboygan, Manitowoc and Green Bay residents.

Ships brought relief supplies to ports in the area. At Two Creeks the ANDY JOHNSON from Milwaukee dropped off the following: 11 boxes of girl's clothing, two boxes for women, two for men, and two of boys clothing, one box of shoes and a box of quilts. Two relief centers were set up to take care of those families, one in Green Bay and the other in Milwaukee. Manitowoc County was included in the latter area as were towns of Kewaunee, Ahnepee, Montpelier, Pierce, Lincoln, Forestville, Clay Banks, Sturgeon Bay and Menominee, Michigan. The Milwaukee district served 377 destitute families or 1,509 persons. Green Bay brought relief to 5,678 people! These

figures are staggering when one considers the sparse populations of that time and because many, through pride or being uninformed, would not seek aid.

To aggravate already drastic conditions, winter came early. Mid-October days and nights must have been cold in temporary shelters. The most immediate necessity was for food, shelter, medicine and clothing and then lumber for temporary buildings, nails, glass, tools and fodder for cattle and other livestock.

The public was generous and Manitowoc residents were no exception. Aid was going south to Chicago and to Green Bay and the Lakeshore. Building materials were desperately needed in Chicago as the frenzy of rebuilding went on. It was stated that not a brick was left in Manitowoc County having all been shipped to Chicago.

Disregarding the effects of the fire itself we must consider the effects of the drought with reduced harvests and low or dry wells. Potatoes, turnips and rutabagas and other root crops were important crops to feed family and derive income. These, if they were in the path of the fire, were lost. Hay was in extremely short supply.

The City of Manitowoc, its residents, churches, organizations were liberal in their giving, unfortunately, some Manitowoc residents were ready to take advantage of a situation and showed little pity for the disadvantaged. A news report: "Captain Langworthy will go to Manitowoc to visit some men who swindled the committee over several hundred dollars worth of supplies. He will request these men to disgorge their plunder. He goes armed to arrest them and have them punished if they do not." We do not know if he was successful.

Distributing aid was not easy. As usual, it was difficult to gauge validity of applicant's claim. The tone of the reports indicated that aid recipients had to prove real need. The administrator would complain that people had "lost a fence and wanted a farm." If the farmer had insurance, aid was reduced substantially. Coverage by insurance seemed pitifully small.

Some aid applicants reported that they had lost clothing, shoes, furniture and grain as they stored this in open fields and still lost them to the fire.

The general agent of the Milwaukee Relief Committee, at one point, flatly stated: "All are taken care of." So much for further complaints.

Even Frank Tilton who has been a source of such good information in his book **Sketches of Great Fires in Wisconsin** says, "Their wants were mostly met by the generosity of the public, *and by the middle of the winter sufferers were rendered tolerably comfortable*. However, other reports truly show that



neighbors and relatives often had to share a single dwelling, such overcrowding led to disease loading down the poor settler with yet another problem and perhaps death of a child. Some farmers even had to share hastily built shelter with livestock.

It was a difficult winter for many as a shortage of water was still a major problem. A farmer told how he and his neighbors were hauling water two to five miles. He said because the winter closed in so early, the wells were still dry. There would be no hope until spring.

But the hard-working, strong farm families carried on, confident that their dreams in this new frontier would be fulfilled in spite of this horror of fire which enveloped their farms in their first years in Wisconsin.

Some, however, may have left the area and did not rebuild. Certainly it is possible that when the settler could barely make his mortgage payment, the fire could have been the final blow.

Wojta states, "The fiery ordeal was followed by the development of larger farms in the area."

A few of the scars remain today. Eugene Kreycarek and Ivon Greene, who were instrumental in establishing the Rahr Forest where innumerable school children have learned about nature, say that all the upland areas of the School Forest have bracken fern which is evidence of fires having visited the area.

As stated previously, forest burns opened up land for farming. In this case "opening up that sandy soil for farming was a mistake," said Mr. Kreycarek. "The 15 to 20 feet deep sand dunes on the west side of Lakeshore Road which runs through the Rahr Forest were caused by plowing up this area. Strong west winds carried the soil to the dunes on the east side of the area where blow holes exist today. And, of course, the charred stumps continue to stand as blackened monuments to that frightening year.

For our settlers in Manitowoc County's northern townships of Cooperstown, Gibson, Mishicot, Two Rivers and, particularly, Two Creeks 1871 was a brutal year.

One can almost feel the exhaustion and fear created by days and nights of watching as the fires burned in the forest and fields around one's buildings. And there was the sadness and despair of seeing a good part of one's life work demolished as the fires literally exploded homes, barns and crops.

It's not hard to imagine how the heat and drought of the summer must have literally crackled in the air as one pictures the ever present pall of smoke which hung over the area.

It is fortunate that Manitowoc County escaped as well as it did. It is most *unfortunate* that so little is known about those fires in our county and about the people who survived them.

## MANITOWOC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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