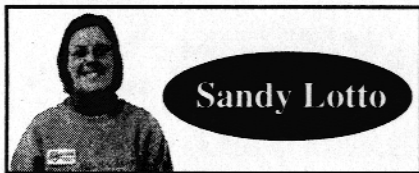


# Other Forest Fires Still Don't Hold a Candle to the Peshtigo Fire of 1871



Thanks to the media, everyone in America was made very aware of the destructive forces of the wildfires in southern California this fall. And for good reason... those fires leveled 3500 homes, killed 20 people and blackened about 750,000 acres. It was nationwide and worldwide news, but the California fires still don't hold a candle to Wisconsin's Great Peshtigo Fire of October 8, 1871, which got very little press.

To this day the Peshtigo Fire is considered to be the worst natural disaster in American history, yet few people have ever heard of it. The Peshtigo Fire leveled the whole town of Peshtigo in under an hour, severely damaged 16 other communities in northeast Wisconsin, killed at least 1200 people (some bodies were so completely burned to ash they could not be accounted for), and destroyed 1.28 million acres of forest land.

Sunday, October 8, 1871 was a very fiery day. The Peshtigo Fire happened to occur on the exact same night as the Great Chicago Fire. You know...the one supposedly started by Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicking over a lantern. The Chicago Fire was big news. It burned 2000 acres, leveled 18,000 buildings, and left 100,000 people homeless. Luckily, only 200-300 people died...a surprisingly low

number of fatalities for such a big fire in the middle of the "Windy City."

Everybody knows about the Chicago Fire. Chicago had the ability to send telegraphs around the world. In fact, the Chicago Fire was the first worldwide media event in recorded history. Meanwhile, a much more fatal conflagration was happening several hundred miles north of Chicago in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, and people in the nearby city of Green Bay were not even aware of it.

You see, the telegraph lines around Peshtigo burned down along with the sawmill, bank, saloons, homes, and every other building in town. Collectively called the Peshtigo Fire, it was actually several fires that spread for miles on both shores of the Bay of Green Bay. Peshtigo, on the west shore of Green Bay, was the community hit hardest, but 16 other small towns were at least partially burned as well.

How did the fires start? People settling that area were clearing land for farming and establishing logging camps to feed the local saw mills. Both activities were leaving "slash," tree tops and branches, lying in the woods. It was a terribly dry year. According to Robert T. Wells in his book, Fire at Peshtigo, "The swamps had dried up. A man could drive his mare across places that were ordinarily under water, and she wouldn't sink an inch. It hadn't rained since July 8, except for a hopeful sprinkle on September 5 that disappeared into the parched ground and left the countryside as dry as before."

It didn't take long for brush fires to spread and pick up speed as they burned through tinder dry pines. On the fateful night of October 8, 1871 the fires traveled so fast, survivors of the event described it as a "fiery tornado."

Whether they survived or not, everyone who experienced the Peshtigo Fire was a victim. Those who lived to tell about it were deeply scarred, some externally, but mainly internally. The survivors lost their families and friends to those flames. In the small town of Peshtigo alone, 800 lives were lost...half of the entire community, in under an hour. Anything that forceful captures people's attention...whether it ever gets worldwide media coverage or not.

To learn more about the Peshtigo Fire you can read Fire at Peshtigo by Robert T. Wells or check out these web sites: [www.peshtigofire.info](http://www.peshtigofire.info), [www.rootsweb.com/~wioconto/Fire.htm](http://www.rootsweb.com/~wioconto/Fire.htm), [www.crh.noaa.gov/grb/PeshtigoFire.html](http://www.crh.noaa.gov/grb/PeshtigoFire.html)

There is a Peshtigo Fire Museum located on the corner of Oconto Street and Ellis Avenue in Peshtigo. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily in summer. Admission is free.

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*Northbound* – Winter 2004

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Trees for Tomorrow  
Natural Resource Education Center  
May, 2004