

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
Reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

# THE BLOOD

## THE FORGOTTEN STORY OF THE GREAT PESHTIGO FIRE OF 1871

**BY LAUREN TARSHIS**

**B**y the end of the night, the town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin, would be burned to ashes. As many as 2,500 people would be dead. But on that Sunday morning of October 8, 1871, 7-year-old John Kramer could not have imagined that he was about to come face-to-face with the deadliest fire in American history.



**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

What sensory details does the author use?

# D-D-R-E-E-D

## NIGHT

It had been a difficult but exciting year for the Kramer family: John; his parents, Joseph and Katherine; and his 9-year-old brother, Mike. The Kramers had come to the United States from Germany in the 1860s, settling first in the rolling farmland of upstate New York and then, in 1870, heading west to the young state of Wisconsin. Thousands of new immigrants had made the same westward journey in the 1860s, lured by the promise of cheap farmland and the chance to carve

a brand-new life out of the fresh American wilderness.

And what a wilderness it was!

In the 1860s, an enormous forest stretched across Wisconsin and neighboring states—billions and billions of trees covering thousands of square miles of land. These were the forests of fairy tales, full of towering trees, howling wolves, and dagger-clawed bears. Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the *Little House* series, was born in a cabin in the northern woods of Wisconsin

just three years before the Kramers arrived in the area. Describing the land where her family lived, she wrote, “The great, dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around the house, and beyond them were other trees, and beyond them were more trees. As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods.”

Laura was not exaggerating.

The forest that stretched across northern Wisconsin was truly exceptional. For





centuries, those woods were mostly undisturbed by humans. The only sounds were those of nature—the chirps of birds, the growls of wild animals, and the soft whisper of leaves rustling in the wind.

By the time John and his family arrived, big changes were happening in Wisconsin's woods.

## Chop, Chop, Chop

In the late 19th century, American cities were booming—especially Chicago, 250 miles south of Peshtigo. Just 40 years earlier, Chicago had been little more than a small town on a mosquito-ridden marsh. By 1871, it was the fastest growing city in the world. Every day, it seemed new buildings rose up: mansions and shops, warehouses and department stores. For all this construction, Chicago builders needed a constant supply of wood; they found it in the great forests of northern Wisconsin.

In the 1860s, lumber companies began buying up huge chunks of the northern woods. They sent out armies of lumberjacks to chop down trees, which were then stripped of branches, dragged by oxcart across the forest, and dumped into the Peshtigo River. The river's rushing waters carried the giant logs downstream to Peshtigo's sawmill, where they were transformed into wood for building.

By 1870, the forest surrounding Peshtigo echoed with the curses and shouts of lumberjacks, the *chop, chop, chop* of axes, and the thunder of 150-foot-tall trees crashing to



The forest around Peshtigo was filled with centuries-old trees like the ones pictured above. This forest in northern Minnesota is one of the few places left on Earth that resembles the Wisconsin forest.

the ground. After an area of forest had been stripped of trees, lumber companies were happy to sell the land to farmers like John's parents.

The Kramers felt at home in Wisconsin, where they met many fellow German immigrants. Within a year of their arrival, they had finished building their house. The boys were thriving. Everything seemed hopeful.

Then came the fire.

## A Choking Fog

Soon after moving to Wisconsin, the Kramers had learned that fires were a fact of life in the northern woods. Though some fires were sparked by lightning, most were set intentionally. Lumberjacks lit fires to consume the branches they hacked off trees. Farmers used fire to clear their land of tree stumps and brush that lumberjacks had left behind. At times, there were so many fires burning that a choking fog of smoke hung over Peshtigo.

The early fall of 1871 had been a particularly bad time for fires. Little rain had fallen during the summer, and the entire Midwest was

parched. Creeks had dried up. Trees had withered. On September 24, a series of fires began to burn out of control in and around Peshtigo. The **blazes** burned hundreds of acres of forestland and **incinerated** homes and shops in nearby communities. When Peshtigo's biggest factory caught fire, hundreds of men rushed to fight the flames with buckets of water from the river. They managed to save the building, but dozens were injured in the exhausting fight.

That fire cast a spell of fear over Peshtigo. A few people were so rattled that they packed up and left the area for good, but most families lacked the money to start again someplace new. All they could do was try to prepare. A town priest, Father Peter Pernin, buried the church's precious bowls and goblets in the ground. Farmers kept wet blankets in their barns to protect



With thousands of logs being transported down a river, logjams like this one were common. Men risked their lives to untangle the logs and get them—and the river—moving again. Many lumberjacks were crushed and drowned.

They were determined to save their home, but they wanted their sons out of the fire's reach.

their animals from airborne sparks. The Kramers cleared their land of every speck of dried brush and wood. But in fact, there was no way to prepare for the horror to come.

## A Blood-Red Sky

October 8 dawned unnaturally hot. The sky glowed orange from the many small fires **smoldering** in the forest. John's parents could see flames lapping at the edge of the woods around their house; they sensed disaster was coming soon.

On their neighbor's farm was a 40-acre field, freshly plowed and free of **combustible** trees and brush. Mrs. Kramer gave the boys strict instructions to go to the middle of the field and wait there until she or their father fetched them. Doom must have filled John's heart as he and Mike headed to the field. Would they ever see their parents again?

As the day wore on, the smoke thickened and the sky turned blood-red. Strong winds swept into the region. Many hoped that a soaking

rainstorm was on the way and the risk of fire would pass.

But there would be no rain that night—only violent, swirling gusts of wind that whipped up the small fires in the forest. These fires grew bigger and bigger until finally they joined together into one monstrous **inferno**. Flames towered hundreds of feet into the sky. Trees exploded in the extreme heat. Flaming hunks of wood flew across the forest, setting more fires miles away.

Around 10 p.m., the people of Peshtigo heard an earsplitting roar, which Father Pernin compared to the sound of a speeding freight train. In fact, it was the sound of the fire—a blaze of extraordinary size, power, and heat—erupting out of the forest. The fire was now a firestorm, a rare type of fire that occurs when strong winds combine with large amounts of flammable material—like trees—to feed the flames. Firestorms burn far hotter than regular wildfires and create their own swirling winds and explosive gases.

For most people nearby, the sound of the fire blasting out of the forest was the last thing they would ever hear.

## Sheets of Flame

John's parents fled their home moments before the explosion. They knew their house would be destroyed. Now they just wanted to find the boys. They left with only one possession, a mattress stuffed with feathers, and started toward the plowed field.



They soon realized they would never make it. Flames were everywhere, closing in on the Kramers from all directions. It was as though the air itself was **ablaze**.

All seemed hopeless for John's parents, until they noticed a well. They shoved their mattress into the water, soaking it, then climbed into the well and pulled the mattress on top of themselves.

As the Kramers hid inside the well, clinging to each other in terror, they could not begin to imagine the scene of horror unfolding in Peshtigo. The heat and the flames killed hundreds of people instantly. Others died attempting to flee to the river. The Kramers could hear the fire roaring above them. They did not expect to survive the night.

Neither did John and Mike, who huddled together in the middle of the plowed field.

The fire raged for hours. It leveled Peshtigo and 16 other towns to the north. By morning, more than a billion trees were gone, and an area twice the size of Rhode Island was nothing more than a sea of **charred** trees and ash. Nobody knows how many people died, though many agree it was likely between 1,000 and 2,500.

Miraculously, the entire Kramer family survived.

John and Mike staggered out of the field. Joseph and Katherine

climbed out of the well, shivering but unharmed.

As John would say decades later, the joy of their reunion carried the family through the difficult months that followed. Their town was gone, as were most of their friends. The Kramers decided to stay and help rebuild. John was still living there

when he died at the age of 81, surrounded by his six children and four grandchildren.

History has largely forgotten the Great Peshtigo Fire. But John's grandchildren will always know that their lucky grandfather survived the most deadly fire in U.S. history. ●

## INFORMATIONAL TEXT

# The Great Chicago Fire

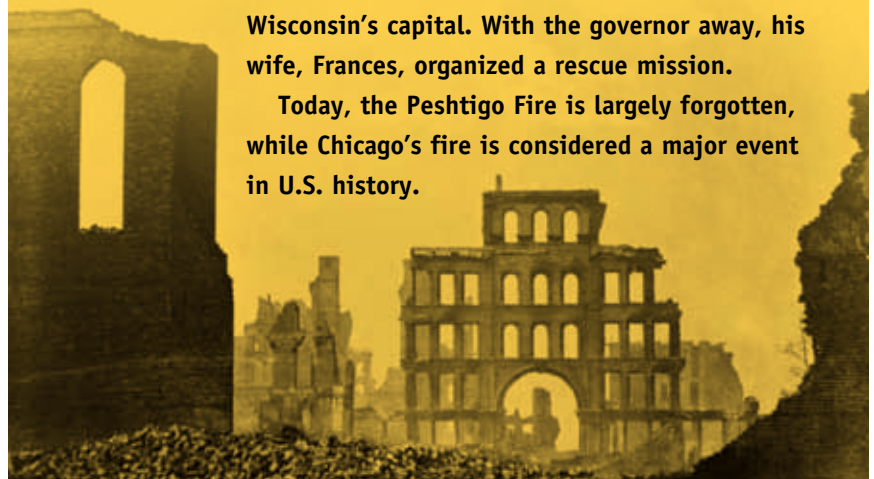
## Two historic fires in one horrible night

**R**emarkably, the Peshtigo Fire happened on the same night as the most famous fire in U.S. history: the Great Chicago Fire. The same winds and dry weather that fueled the blaze in Peshtigo caused roughly 3.5 square miles of Chicago to burn, destroying 18,000 buildings and killing approximately 300 people.

News of Chicago's fire spread quickly, and aid poured in from neighboring states. Even Wisconsin's governor, Lucius Fairchild, rushed to Chicago to assist in relief efforts. Meanwhile, Peshtigo's telegraph and railroads had been destroyed, cutting the city off from the outside world. Survivors, many with horrific injuries, suffered for days in their cold, desolate land before word

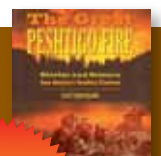
of the disaster reached officials in Madison, Wisconsin's capital. With the governor away, his wife, Frances, organized a rescue mission.

Today, the Peshtigo Fire is largely forgotten, while Chicago's fire is considered a major event in U.S. history.



## WRITING CONTEST

How does author Lauren Tarshis help the reader understand what it was like to live through the Peshtigo Fire? (Consider the literary devices she uses.) Send your answer to **FIRE CONTEST**. Use text evidence. Five winners will each get *The Great Peshtigo Fire* by Scott Knickelbine.



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