

PESHTIGO

BY

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For Susan and Lisa

Also by George Bauer:

The Seasoned Traveler: A Guide for Baby Boomers and Beyond
(companion book to Public Television travel program)

The End of Paradise
(Novel)

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Among them:

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Reverend Peter Pernin, **“The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account”** (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1999);

Stephen J. Pyne, **“Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire”** (Princeton University Press, 1982);

Alfred L. Sewell, **“The Great Calamity”** (Alfred L. Sewell, 1872);

William F. Steuber, Jr. **“The Landlooker”** (Bobbs-Merrill, 1957);

Franklin Tilton, **“Sketch of the Great Fires in Wisconsin at Peshtigo”** (Robinson Kustermann Publishers, 1871);

Robert W. Wells, **“Fire at Peshtigo”** (Prentice-Hall, 1968);

The National Interagency Fire Center, Boise, Idaho.

Foreword

The enduring drought that engulfed the Western regions of North America brought tinder-dry conditions, arid fields and farmlands, withered crops, and other related misery. Only heavy rain and snow in early 2017 ameliorated conditions.

But as 2017 dragged on, drought conditions returned to California and the American West. Hot weather and a lack of rainfall again dried fields and forests. By early October, 2017, the Golden State became a tinder-box once more. A series of wildfires broke out, fanned by ferocious winds that pushed the blazes across acre-after-acre of real estate, destroying thousands of homes and businesses in the process.

The inferno killed more than 40 people and California officials said it was the largest loss of life to wildfires in the state's history.

In early May of 2016, a massive wildfire, stoked by high winds, laid waste to a forested area near Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada. It forced some 88,000 people to flee for their lives and damaged or destroyed 2,400 structures in the heart of Canada's oil sands region. Local officials said strong winds, high temperatures, and low humidity created the explosive conditions that led to the blazes.

It was merely the latest chapter in a seemingly-unending series of brushfires that have taken a toll on real estate in Canada and the United States.

The U.S. Forest Service noted that the 2015 wildfire season set a record, charring more than ten million acres of land across the country. More than half the acreage was burned in fires across Alaska, which suffered from historically low mountain snowpack and dry conditions that were fueled by a freak lightning storm. Washington, Oregon, California and other Western states also bore the brunt of blazes.

The wildfire danger plagued the West for years. Perhaps the most searing and tragic event in the 2013 fire season was the death of 19 firefighters on a ridge engulfed in flames near Yarnell, Arizona. The Granite Mountain Hotshot team was based in nearby Prescott and died in the Yarnell Hill firestorm on June 30.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, it was the largest loss of firefighters in a brushfire in 80 years, surpassed only by the 1933 Griffith Park blaze in California in which 29 firefighters perished and the deadly 1910 Devil's Broom fire in Idaho which killed 86 firemen.

The Yarnell tragedy represented the most fire crewmembers killed in the U.S. in a single event since September 11, 2001. On that fateful day, 341 firefighters and two paramedics were killed when New York's World Trade Center towers were struck by airliners and later collapsed.

Massive, blow-torch-like fires are part of American history. In 1910, a firestorm of Biblical proportions raged across the states of Washington, Idaho, and Montana, which included those firefighter deaths in Devil's Broom, Idaho. The Big Blowup burned for just two days, August twentieth and twenty-first, 1910, but it consumed three million acres in the Bitterroot Mountains (an area also devastated during the 2000 fire season). Entire towns were reduced to ashes. Thick smoke drifted in massive clouds, darkening the sky in northern states. In Watertown, New York, street lights remained on all day because of the murky darkness. The Big Blowup so frightened the entire nation that Congress decided for the first time in U.S. history to spend federal tax dollars fighting forest fires. The government ordered that all reported blazes must be extinguished by the next morning. Experts say such actions were ironic and may have contributed to the firestorms of later years. By combating blazes aggressively, the government prevented wildfires from performing a vital natural function: reducing vegetation that can fuel bigger blazes during protracted dry spells.

But two of the worst fires in U.S. history occurred the same day.

On October 8, 1871, a blaze broke out on the South Side of Chicago.

Tradition has it that a cow kicked over a kerosene lamp in a barn on South Dekoven Street, which ignited the straw-filled stable. The fire spread quickly through the city, fanned by high velocity winds.

The resulting blaze, dubbed by Chicago newspapers "The Great Calamity", burned for four and a half miles, consuming 18,000 buildings, three railroad depots, and seven bridges, for a total of \$200 million in property damage, quite significant in those times.

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Three hundred Chicagoans were killed. The Great Chicago Fire has become a significant event in United States history, understood by most school children.

As that blaze was destroying 2,400 acres in Chicago, a lesser-known conflagration 256 miles north of the Windy City charred 3,780,000 acres of tinder-dry timberland in Northern Wisconsin and the adjacent Upper Peninsula of Michigan. As many as 1,800 people died on both sides of the Green Bay in Wisconsin and 200 more perished in Michigan, seven times the toll in Chicago. Although several towns were affected, this series of blazes became known as the Peshtigo fire, the largest town in the region at the time.

One historian called the Peshtigo inferno “the worst tragedy of its kind ever recorded in North America”.

The Peshtigo inferno was followed a decade later by a one-million-acre wildfire in September, 1881, in Michigan, which claimed one hundred, sixty-nine lives. Three Septembers later, Wisconsin was struck again by fires that charred millions of acres. That same month a blaze in Hinckley, Minnesota, destroyed a million acres of land and killed more than four hundred people. Major forest fires have broken out on a regular basis from then until now. Americans have learned to fear hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods. But wildfires have also been a devastating, and deadly, component of life in rural America.

What follows is the story of the drought of 1871 which created and spawned both the fire in Chicago and the cataclysm in Peshtigo.

It focuses on Northern Wisconsin, which was an area of several small towns and several more small farms in the surrounding countryside. Populating both were families, often large by today’s standards. It was not uncommon for married couples to have four, six, even eight children. It often meant more hands to help with the hard work that went with backwoods living.

This book is based on actual accounts of the fires but it is an historical novel. The names of communities are authentic, as are the family names of many residents. *Peshtigo* profiles about a dozen families who lived during the time. The region’s residents were largely private people, so their daily activities and even their children’s names are uncertain or unknown. In this case, the author

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has taken literary license in naming them and describing their daily routine.

Some of these families survived the flames on October 8th, while others encountered horrible deaths.

As the story of the actual fire unfolds, countless others will be mentioned. They were among the thousands who suffered on that infamous day. While the people are important, it is the fires that are of foremost importance in this book, which is written to help readers understand the events that led to the deadliest fire in our country's history. It is also a tribute to the men, women, children, and animals who lived and died during the firestorm.

More Americans should know about the Great Peshtigo Fire, for it has burnished its place in the nation's history.



Prologue

Near the source of the Oconto River, perhaps fifty miles northwest of Green Bay, Wisconsin, the heat became intense, unusual for early autumn. It drifted upward from the parched pine-forested land, similar to a mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb blast many decades later, and then collided with the upper-level air, producing lightning.

Massive bolts of electricity darted across the crystal-clear late-September sky.

This happened not once but scores of times. There were no accompanying claps of thunder following the lightning shower. And there was no moisture in the heavens for hundreds of miles, so there were not the slightest hints of rain clouds gathering. It was just a dangerous nighttime fireworks display deep in the forests of the Upper Midwest.

Given the frequency and ferocity of these celestial fire-rods, some lightning bolts inevitably reached from deep into the night sky all the way down to the desiccated earth below.

The power of the strikes caused violent explosions as the electrical shocks blew trees apart sending bark, limbs, and leaves hurtling through the tepid air. Sparks flew hundreds of feet, falling on drought-dried trees, withered leaves, and dead underbrush, igniting them.

As trees toppled and other lightning strikes fomented further explosions, the flames, heat, and haze terrorized forest creatures on and under the ground, those who lived in trees, and the birds which normally flew above it all.

Animals great and small screeched and cried and ran for safety, not really knowing where to run or hide. Several were killed as the lightning toppled trees. Birds were killed as they attempted to escape the burning forest, only to fly into flames and smoke, which asphyxiated them. Other animals were trapped and burned to death.

The death and destruction were muted, however, because these outbreaks of fire in the first days of autumn, 1871, were far from civilization. No humans were aware of the catastrophe.

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But with the expanding dry conditions, the inferno spread, unheralded and unchecked by rain, streams, or human intervention. Vast clouds of smoke and ash billowed aloft, carried eastward by the prevailing winds that blew steadily that season.

Those winds sent the smoke and fire ever closer to the small but growing communities of Northern Wisconsin, the prosperous lumber towns of this once-green section of the state.

And what the residents of the region did not know was that larger and more devastating fires were not far away.

Chapter 1

September 22, 1871.

A loud shriek pierced the stillness and darkness surrounding the young girl's bed. The outburst gave way to crying, which awakened her brothers and sisters sleeping nearby, but they did not move. The girl's mother came running from another room.

"There, there, my child. What is it?" she inquired.

"Mama, the fire had come," the girl replied. "The house was on fire. I was trapped and couldn't get out!" She whimpered into her mother's bosom as the woman cradled and hugged her frightened daughter.

"It's all right, baby. We will not let the fire hurt us. God will protect us all."

Young Colleen Towsley's nocturnal outburst may not have been unique in Northern Wisconsin. For thousands of people in many small towns, the threat of fire was omnipresent.

A smoky smell permeated the autumn air after a long, dry summer. Indeed, Wisconsin had been suffering through a drought for the entire year. The last heavy rain had fallen on the eighth of July but the ground was already so parched, it drank in the water like a human dying of thirst. There had been a sprinkle or two in early September but it had no effect on the widespread drought that had Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in its unending grip. Even swamps had dried up.

The unusual and unwelcome weather had begun months earlier and had been a constant source of discussion in the half-dozen counties that clung to Wisconsin's Green Bay. Winter snowfall from 1870 and early 1871 had been negligible, a rarity in a region renowned for harsh winters of low temperatures and heaping snow. But rather than providing a cause for celebration, the mild winter became a cause of serious concern among the residents and business-leaders in the tinder-dry region.

Northern Wisconsin and adjacent Michigan were areas of abundance, brimming with millions of acres of timber, ripe and ready for harvesting. "A limitless sea of pine" was the description

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of one local businessman for this vast stretch of virgin forest, although other tree varieties were also plentiful.

And with the youthful nation growing and expanding, the demand for wood and wood products was increasing. Forestry had become a leading industry in Wisconsin as it celebrated its twenty-third year of statehood, the thirtieth admitted to the Union.

All across the normally-green, tree-laden area, near towns called Peshtigo and Oconto and Sugar Bush and Williamsonville, workers sawed trees deep in the woods. Horses and oxen dragged the logs to mills in nearby communities, where they were reduced to wood planks or boards, or refined further into useful products. Most of these products were then sent by ship to other parts of the country while some wood would be transported by railroad from Northern Wisconsin, south to Milwaukee and Chicago.

But the dry winter, spring, and summer had interfered with the normal wood-harvesting routine. The absence of winter snow and spring rain meant the sea of pines was more like a dry bed and a fire hazard. The drought had been so long and so deep that by late summer fires began breaking out in the woods.

Colleen Towsley lived on a farm in Oconto, the youngest of four Towsley children. Her blue eyes, honey-brown hair, and dimples led her father to call her “my adorable daughter”. C.R. Towsley grew corn on twenty acres of flat, stone-studded but nutrient-rich Wisconsin crop land. The family farm also raised sheep for wool, kept two large horses to help plow the fields and pull the family wagon, and had a pair of cows which provided enough milk for the family’s dairy needs.

C.R. Towsley was an ox of a man, tall and beefy with a shock of auburn hair atop his large head and across his face in the form of a full beard. His wife Annabelle had borne him an equal number of male and female offspring. While she appeared small and frail Annabelle was strong-willed and strong of spirit. She wore her dark hair pulled tightly into a bun at the back of her small head. She worked as hard as her husband doing farm chores, then cleaning the house, cooking the meals, and caring for the children. She once told her husband that while he worked hard from sunrise to dark, her work never ended.

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Jonathan was the eldest Towsley child and, at sixteen, was his father's right-hand man, both in running the farm and milking the cows each day. Tall and thin, he was considered handsome by the local girls his age but he had little time for socializing. Mayme, at fourteen, was her mother's right-hand woman, helping with the cooking, baking, butter-churning, and putting up preserves and pickles. Her father often said Mayme's fair-skinned beauty and flowing brown hair worried him because of the crazed young suitors who might swarm the farm seeking her attention and her affection.

Eleven-year-old Bradford Towsley took after his father in many ways, the most prominent of which was his full head of red hair. His responsibilities included tending the horses, cows, and sheep as well as the family dogs. And when his father or big brother required assistance, Brad was called upon to help. Brad had a secret passion: he loved to read and spent as much spare time as he could with his face buried in a book.

Because Colleen was just eight, her tasks were lighter and included setting the table for meals and cleaning up afterwards. She also tended the vegetable garden each summer with her mother.

It was a hard life but the Towsley family were considered successful and comfortable. The corn crop generally paid the bills. The sale of wool covered luxuries. The abundant woodlands provided ample fuel to heat the house during the long winters. The Towsleys said their prosperity was a measure of God's goodness. The family members were devout Roman Catholics who attended Sunday Mass at the still-unfinished church in Peshtigo. In fact, C.R. was one of the parishioners volunteering his labor to complete the construction. He was giving back for all he'd received. The Towsleys had many friends in the community and were respected by many others.

But the family's comfort and well-being had been hindered lately by the protracted drought conditions. The corn fields wilted, stalks were stunted and C.R. Towsley worried he would have no corn to sell in 1871 and would be forced to dip into the family's savings to get through the year. Annabelle had another concern. The lack of rain meant the well water was depleting, slowly but steadily. She also fretted about the health of both the children and the animals,

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subjected to ever-more-frequent clouds of smoke as more wildfires broke out off in the woods.

On some days the air was thick with choking smoke. Mrs. Towsley told her husband it was not good for the children to be inhaling such foul air. He agreed but they both knew there was nothing that could be done to alleviate the condition until steady rains doused the area.

The Towsleys lived west of the Green Bay near the town of Oconto, seat of Oconto County, located along the Oconto River, which drained into the Bay. Oconto was ten miles north of the city of Green Bay, the largest community in Northern Wisconsin, and seven miles southwest of Peshtigo, the most prominent town in the region. By 1871, Oconto County boasted fourteen thousand residents, most of whom made their living by farming or forestry.

Now, deep into this October night as Colleen Towsley's mother comforted her and tried to diminish the fire danger, she was unaware of some wind-whipped fires that had increased in size between Oconto and Green Bay, one of which came within a few miles of the larger city. Only minor casualties were reported. But another fire was more deadly. An Indian man and team of horses burned to death when a wildfire broke out north of Oconto surrounding the man's barn and reducing it to ash before either the man or his beasts could escape. The fire might have been far worse but the wind died down abruptly and the fire burned itself out before reaching the end of the victim's property.

When C.R. Towsley read his local newspaper the night before, he came upon an account of a smoky siege in the western woods:

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

Disaster seemed imminent, unless the unexpected occurred miraculously. The region needed rain and a calming of the winds.

The morning after Colleen's outburst, C.R. Towsley entered the house following a frustrating tour of his corn fields. He kissed his wife on the cheek.

"The crop does not look good," he announced in a low voice, unwilling to provoke additional anxiety among the children. "I

tasted an ear of corn and it has a thick, smoky taste. I cannot imagine anyone buying it and I doubt cattle or hogs would eat it either.” He went to the kitchen sink and scooped some well-water from a bucket. He took one long drink, then a second.

“My throat is parched and sore from breathing the smoke,” C.R. said. “My God, I wish it would rain.”

Towsley turned to his wife of two decades, the woman he loved and cherished, who had borne his children, endured the bad years on the farm, and celebrated the good seasons along with him.

“I am worried, Annie,” he said. “The ground is so dry that any spark will ignite a fire and it will move so quickly we may not be able to react.”

He waited just a few seconds.

“And there is one more thing. I talked with Joshua Clements today at his farm. His wife said the elders of the Menominee Tribe believe it has never been so dry at this time of year. The tribe blames the lumbermen and mill owners for all this, saying they are destroying the natural forests, so they are being punished for their actions.”

* * *

Joshua Clements sat on the front porch of his small wooden cabin, just a few miles from the Towsley farm. As he awaited his supper, Clements was aware of two distinctive smells—the rabbit stew simmering in the kitchen fireplace, and the omnipresent odor of burning grass, leaves, and trees.

J.G. Clements, the name he used on official documents, had lived in Oconto just five years. He was twenty-eight years of age but seemed older and wiser. Clements had decided to leave his family in Milwaukee back in 1866 to strike out on his own and perhaps to strike it rich in forestry or agriculture.

With the money he had saved over the years and with some financial aid from his parents, he moved to Northern Wisconsin, bought five acres of land, built a tiny house and an even smaller barn.

He was tall and thin, with dark hair and eyes to match, not overly attractive, and very shy. But the decision to face his future on

his own had raised his level of self-confidence. Times were tough at first and Joshua engaged in subsistence farming, planting vegetables in a garden plot and keeping two chickens, a cow, and four sheep. His limited income came from the lambs' wool and the trees he allowed area lumbermen to chop in the wooded corner of his small spread.

Then Joshua had met a charming young girl, a member of the Menominee Indian Tribe. Her name was Felice and she often came to the village of Oconto to sell leather goods. She was six years younger than he. When the young woman journeyed into town, on the second Saturday of each month, Joshua always managed to be there too and he never failed to engage her in conversation, sometimes even purchasing some of her leather wares. He was mesmerized by her, her olive-skinned good looks, coy shyness, her captivating smile. He was also intrigued by her background as a member of a Native American tribe.

After several months, he knew he was in love with the petite young woman with the flowing black hair. On one of her visits to town, in a moment of spontaneous exuberance, J.G. Clements asked Felice to marry him. She was, at first, shocked by his overture. Her family was troubled with the idea of the proposed union, wishing to maintain Menominee lineage unfettered by the genes of a Caucasian from Southern Wisconsin.

Yet, even though her father and mother protested the arrangement, Felice found herself feeling more deeply for Joshua and arguing that she should be allowed to marry the man she loved, Menominee or white. After some time, her family consented reluctantly to the marriage but required that two ceremonies be held, a tribal marriage in Menominee territory and a ceremony of Joshua's choosing.

When Felice became Mrs. J.G. Clements, she appeared to blossom, away from the confines and strictures of her Indian family and she brought order to the chaos of Joshua's life and home. Felice plotted and planted a large and expansive garden, then put up fruits and vegetables for winter consumption. She assisted her husband in minding the animals. And she was the perfect wife, companion, friend, and lover. Joshua was often stunned by the poise and maturity she demonstrated for a woman so young.

Joshua Clements allowed local lumber barons to harvest just a handful of trees per year in the most heavily-forested sector of his acreage but the income was helpful to the newlyweds. Each year when the lumberjacks, who were called shanty boys, vacated the Clements property after their cutting, they left behind cold hard cash and warm piles of wood chips and sawdust. In most years, this was a neutral remnant. The wood fragments would be disbursed by the wind and moistened by rain and snow. But as the drought of 1871 worsened, the desiccated wood bits on the parched earth increased the risk that fires might spread quickly through the Clements land, perhaps endangering the home and barn.

Despite the added income, Felice did not like the lumberjacks or their wealthy employers. This distrust was inculcated by her family and other members of the tribe, who rued the steady influx of people into the area around the Green Bay. The Indians resented the taking of the land by the whites, the construction of new towns and the railroad, not to mention the denuding of the rich forests. The tribe blamed the whites for the current meteorological setback. The logging practices, they said, had angered the Great Spirit who was now punishing them for destroying nature. And they predicted there would be an even more severe penalty to pay.

So Felice and Joshua prepared for the worst and took steps to protect their property from ruin. They dug a perimeter-ditch around the cabin and barn to prevent fire from storming across the fields and the garden--incinerating the buildings and the wood fencing used to corral the animals. Joshua purchased half a dozen barrels from the local wood factory. He placed them strategically around the house and filled them with water, to douse fires that might pose a threat. They turned over great swathes of land, exposing the dirt, to slow or stop any fire that might rush from their wooded land toward the house. And they invoked the Great Spirit to protect them from whatever flames and smoke might come their way.

While Joshua remained on edge, ever-worried that fire would eventually strike, Felice maintained a silent, stoic optimism. She felt certain she and her husband could survive any blazes. The power of the Great Spirit gave her comfort and confidence.

