

THE PESHIGO FIRE

Hello Boys and Girls:

What boy or girl doesn't like to cook a meal around a fire, outdoors, in the open; then after the meal is over to sit around the fire and sing or tell stories; and then, if it be night, to watch the play of the light from the camp fire on the surrounding trees! That's fun, glorious fun. A camp fire of that kind is a great friend. But let that same fire creep into the surrounding dry forest and it may become a red enemy.

Bells clang and sirens shriek as a fire truck sweeps through the street. Something is burning. There is excitement as the engines dash by. It is hard for you to get back to your studies after the fire apparatus goes clanging by the school. For you know the fire that warmed some home or turned the wheels in some factory, has escaped and has become a red enemy. But the average city fire is nothing compared to the roaring sweep of the flames through a forest dried out by the hot sun.

Three years ago one of my sons was travelling with me in northern Wisconsin. "I'd like to see a forest fire", he remarked, "and help put it out."

"That's the hardest work I know of," I ventured.

In a short time he had his wish fulfilled. We noticed smoke in the distance, and soon came upon a truck where some men and boys were filling fire fighting cans with water. Up the road a ways, men were fighting desperately to keep the fire from crossing the road. My son was given one of these cans, which is held on the back by means of straps, and told to put out every fire that started in the area assigned to him. Sparks, even flaming pieces of bark, were blown across the road, starting many fires. The intense smoke filled his eyes and nostrils; he was grimy with smoke and wet with perspiration. When he was released from his post, he was convinced that fighting a forest fire is hard work. A boy who has had an experience of fighting a forest fire has learned in an unforgettable way that one should be careful with fire while in the woods.

Well, the fire jumped the road in spite of all the desperate attempts of the fighters to prevent it. Loggers years before left the branches and limbs of the trees they cut down, and these created so intense a fire and created so strong a wind, that it was impossible to stop the march of the fire, and acres and acres were destroyed. Yes, the greatest curse of the forest is fire. More than axes and saws, probably more than insects and disease, fire has been the enemy of the forest and has put an end to more forest life.

Let's see what damage a forest fire does: First of all, it causes the death of large trees. If the fire does not kill the trees outright, they are weakened and scarred and fungus and insects enter the fire wounds, bringing disease and decay. Most trees have a long, hard struggle to survive anyway, and a fire, even a slight fire, may cause the tree to lose the fight for its life. Even if it does survive, its strength is weakened and it will never grow as fast thereafter. I know of some farmers who burn their woodlots every year. The first ground fire may just scar the tree a little at the butt. But the next fire burns with a hotter flame because it is fed by the resinous gum nature uses to protect the first scar. So as fire follows fire, the tree becomes weakened and finally crashes to the ground. After many fires, no matter how slight, the land becomes a barren waste, unfit for anything except to remind the destroyer of his stupidity.

Vegetation is not the only thing that suffers from fire. The very soil itself becomes poorer and poorer, for fires consume the leaf litter, the humus, and even the beneficial microscopic life in the soil. This so changes the condition of the soil that trees live with difficulty and often give up the struggle. So each fire, however small, leaves the country a little poorer, a little less livable than it was before. Farmers who burn their hillsides thinking they get a better catch of grass, make a sad mistake. After repeated burnings the vegetation is burned down to the mineral soil, little is left to hold the soil, gullies appear on the slope, and soon the corner of the land is faced with the problem of erosion. In this way fires cause erosion. (Later trip afield). In parts of the Adirondacks fires have burned the trees, leaf litter and soil down to the barren rock, and forests are no longer possible in such areas. Where fires have removed vegetation from hillsides rainfall runs off readily causing floods, carrying soil and stones to choke up the water courses or to cover fertile fields.

An even less pleasant story can be told about the death and disease that come to wild life because of fire. Let me tell the story of our fire and its result on wildlife. In 1930 a fire started in Wood county, Wisconsin, which burned more than 120,000 acres of fine game territory. After the fire, more than a score of deer were found, and this was, no doubt, a small percentage of all destroyed. Live deer were captured and most of them had burned feet. For several months after the fire freshly dead deer were found, all having died from disease due to weakened condition. During the winter more deer died from starvation because the fire had destroyed the vegetation upon which they fed. One deer was found walking upon its knees, and when it was put out of its misery, it was found that both of the front legs had been burned and stiffened in a bent condition.

The fire warmed the water in the river and its tributaries and the ash poisoned the water so that fish, frogs and crayfish died in large numbers. Rabbits found refuge in their burrows, but their food and cover were destroyed, and because they had no protective hiding places, hawks and owls preyed upon them. Fires always do more harm to game than it does to their enemies. Beavers were able to escape by the water routes, but their food was entirely destroyed, and no one knows how many died of starvation.

This is the story of one fire. About most every fire a similar story could be told. The effect of fires upon wild life varies with the season in which it burns. Early spring fires prevent birds from mating and building their homes, and so prevent reproduction. Late spring fires destroy nesting birds and their young and young animals. Fall fires destroy the food and cover necessary to survive the winter.

I have told you of the many ways forest fires are very destructive. You have read stories about the boy who killed the goose that lay the golden egg. Well, forest fires do just that. But I want to mention just one more thing forest fires destroy, and that is beauty. The influence of forests bring health to the body and inspiration to the spirits of man. A fire swept landscape is a most depressing sight. Fires make poor land, and poor land makes poor people.

But I must hurry on and tell you how fire and destruction rode into Peshtigo on the back of a wind, wind equal to a hurricane, a wind created by the burning of 2,000,000,000 pine trees, so strong that it flung large burning branches high into the air and carried them for long distances to set new fires and to trap and burn all lives between. The Peshtigo fire did not cover as wide a territory as some other fires that have visited our country but it was the most destructive of human lives of any fire. A fire in Maine and New Brunswick in 1825 cover the largest territory of any fire ever recorded. It burned over 3,000,000 acres. In 1894 a fire at Phillips, Wisconsin, burned 100,000 acres, but cost the lives of 418 people. The same year the historic fire at Hinckley, Minnesota, laid waste millions of acres, 12 towns, and cost the lives of 300 people. You see we have had always our cycles of dry and wet years thruout all history. In those early days when it was dry, and there were no means of fighting fires, and timber was abundant, our country had its most destructive fires.

And so it was at Peshtigo in the year of 1871. The village of Peshtigo lay baked and sultry in an autumn heat such as no man could recall. The sun rose red-eyed over the Wisconsin woods the morning of that fateful day - October 8. So red-eyed, that a man could look it fair in the face without squinting. An old scaler who had worked in the woods for 50 years remarked, "I have never seen such a summer or fall, no time. If we get to snow-fly time without no bad trouble, it will be a wonder." That was the prophecy of this old timer. By noon the sun disappeared entirely, and a strange yellow half-light made ghastly the appearance of men and things. When night closed down over the village, they could see a sullen red over the treetops. The smoke got thicker. About nine o'clock a whirling slab of fire that seemed to come from no where, dropped into the sawdust street. In a flash it seemed, the splintered sidewalks of the village were blazing. The top of a house leaped into sudden flame. There came a crashing and deep booming from the surrounding forest, accompanied by a dreadful roar that was greater than a hurricane. It swept so rapidly that soon the village was a seething searing furnace. Crowds fled into the big boarding house, where they were burned to cinders,

every one of them. Others fled to the river, where many were drowned. That is what the old scaler did. From the river he saw horses and cattle, men and women, stagger over the smoking sawdust streets, then go down to be burned to complete ash. He saw Helga Rockstad run down a blazing sidewalk, her blond hair streaming, then her hair bursting into flame that stopped her in her tracks. The next morning he found two tarnished nickle garter buckles and a little mound of white-gray ash.

That's what the heat of 2,000,000,000 pine trees will do. From Peshtigo the fire travelled eastward at an unbelievable speed. The trees were dense and the fire travelled thru the tops, creating its own intense wind that carried embers for miles to set new fires. This is called a crown fire. In between these fires people and wild life were trapped with no chance of escape. That is the danger of setting a backfire. A backfire is a fire set by a firewarden or someone authorized to do it, set along a road, or fire lane or a stream, on the side from which the forest fire is coming, and so against the wind, to burn away the material so that when the fire itself reaches the line it will die out. Soon the religious settlers in the small town of Brussels saw the strange yellow light, and they shouted that Judgment Day had arrived. This village burst in flames almost without warning. Three people jumped into a water tank and were boiled to death. The fireswept on and 75 were burned to death at Little Sturgeon. Weeks later, when the fatalities were determined, the list mounted to 1,500 deaths, the most costly fire in human lives the world has known.

At that same October 8th, 68 years ago, yesterday, at half-past nine in the evening, a cow kicked over a lantern in a stable in Chicago, and a half hour later most of the city South of the river was in flames. 200 lost their lives in the Chicago fire, but it went down in history and even in the movies, but Peshtigo's flaming furnace, in which 1500 gave their lives, remains little known to this day. So you can see why this week, 68 years after these great fires, is selected as Fire Prevention Week.

The forest fire problem is getting pretty well whipped in our state. Fire protection districts are set up, covering most of the forested area, with towers and fire fighting apparatus so that fires can be quickly detected and put out before

they get well started. Besides people have learned that forest fire just do not pay, that when a forest burns everybody suffers. Education - that's the solution, just as it is to most of our problems. Most of our fires are caused by man's carelessness; carelessness with matches, with the stubs of cigarettes; thoughtlessness in not thoroughly extinguishing campfires, or in burning brush when there is danger of the fire getting away.

Education, as much as fire towers or fire fighting men and apparatus is fast reducing the number and extent of forest fires. And I hope that not one of Ranger Mac's Trailhitters will have cause to say that his country is poorer because he was careless with fire when out in the open.

Good Luck.

May the Great Spirit
Put Sunshine in your Heart,
Today and forevermore;
Heap Much!