

Fire in Peshtigo

By Julia Pferdehirt

A Readers Theater script to accompany chapter 3 (Calling Papa Home) of the historical fiction book [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#).

Author Julia Pferdehirt wrote this Readers Theater script as a way to introduce chapter 3 of the [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#) book and give students an opportunity to read aloud with classmates. Students take turns reading at each asterisk (*) within the script.

Fire in Peshtigo

* Forest fires are nature's way of "house cleaning." Without fire, dead leaves and branches pile up on the ground. New plants and young trees can't grow. This isn't healthy for a forest.

* When rain doesn't fall, forests get dry. A strike of lightning or a tiny spark can start fire. These quick fires burn dead leaves and branches, but not trees. Afterward, the ground is clear and clean.

* Before the big logging companies came to Wisconsin, most forest fires started naturally and burned out quickly. But when logging companies cut down every tree in a forest, the land wasn't clear and clean. Loggers left behind an awful mess of branches and dead trees on the land.

* Fires on this land sometimes burned out of control. No one could stop them. Fires didn't just start because of lightning. People started fires to burn stumps or clear land for farming. Campfires or wood stoves sent sparks into the air. Metal train wheels or steam engines made sparks, too. More people meant more fires. Soon, forest fires became a big problem.

* In the year 1871, very little rain fell around Wisconsin. By September, everything was dry. The ground was so dry that people spread sawdust on city streets to keep the dust down. Everyone hoped for rain.

* But rain didn't come. Everyone was worried. In northern Wisconsin, many small fires started in forests and swamps. Along the shore of Lake Michigan, the smoke was so thick that sailors sounded their fog horns day and night.

* Here is the story of the great Peshtigo fire told by people who were there. The real words of those people are shown by quotation marks.

* Listen to the words of Mary Keith. She was in Peshtigo when it burned to the ground. She told her story in the *Peshtigo Times* newspaper.

“It had been a very dry season...for about two weeks, the sun was [hidden by smoke]. The clothes on the line looked so gray...a feeling that something was going to happen hung over the city.....The fire came so suddenly...it was like the heavens opened up and it rained fire!”

* Father Peter Perrin was a priest from Peshtigo. Here's what he saw from the seat of his horse-drawn buggy:

“I was driving home...little fires [were] gleaming here and there....

The smoke...filled the road....

For several days the fires had been raging in the timber all around – north, south, east and west. Fire burned to the tops of the tallest trees...winding about them like a huge serpent (snake)....Thousands of birds...flew about...calling loudly for their mates. We prayed for rain.”

* “The air was...filled with the burning coals and cinders....A cloud of hot, blinding smoke blew in our faces...The fires to the west of town were approaching rapidly ... nothing short of a miracle could save it!”

* On October 8th, the afternoon was hot and still. Smoke was thick in the air. Outside of town, the sky over the Sugar Bush glowed red. Suddenly, the people in Peshtigo heard a sound.

* Fr. Perrin said the sound was like “locomotives...or the rumbling of thunder...”

Father Perrin's neighbors were afraid. “But if a fire breaks out, Father, what are we to do?” they asked.

“In that case, Madam, seek the river at once.” Fr. Perrin said.

* People saw and heard the fire coming. Here's what Martha Coon said:

“It was truly a night of horror. It rained fire; the air was on fire...A tornado of fire...”

* The noise was terrifying. Father Perrin said, “The wind rose...to a hurricane... a thousand...deafening noises rose on the air together. The neighing of horses, falling of chimneys, crashing of uprooted trees, roaring and whistling of the wind, crackling of fire as it ran...from house to house.

* Balls of fire were in the sky. People could hardly breathe. The only safe place was the river. Father Perrin ran to the water.

“The banks of the river as far as the eye could see were covered with people standing there, motionless as statues...I pushed the persons standing on each side of me into the water.”

* “Once in water up to our necks, I thought we would, at least, be safe from fire. But it was not so. The flames darted over the river...the air was full of them...the air itself was on fire.”

* “Our heads were in...danger. It was only by throwing water constantly over [our heads] and faces that we kept the flames at bay.....The river was as bright as day...”

* Father Perrin and the people in the river watched as their whole town burned.

Father Perrin said, “I saw nothing but flames. Houses, trees, and the air itself were on fire. Above my head...I saw nothing but...flames.”

* Some people couldn't swim. What could they do?

Father Perrin remembered one woman.

“Not far from me a woman was supporting herself in the water by means of a log. After a time a cow swam past...[The cow] overturned the log...the woman...disappeared into the water. I thought [she was] lost! But soon, I saw her holding on with one hand to the horns of the cow and throwing water on her head with the other.”

* People stayed in the river for more than 5 hours. About 3:00 in the morning they could finally leave the water. Small fires still burned everywhere. People were shivering from the cold water. Their throats were swollen and their eyes burned.

* “My eyes were causing me...pain,” Father Perrin said. “I was now perfectly blind. Someone led me...to a little valley near the river's edge...I couldn't uncloze my ...eyes, could scarcely speak, and felt so exhausted and depressed myself that it was difficult to [encourage] others.”

* Just think! Everyone needed help. But who could give help? On both sides of the river, every building was burned to the ground. There was no food. No blankets. Horses and wagons and even the steam engine trains were destroyed.

* *Don't lose hope*, Father Perrin told people. As people began to clean up, they saw just how hot and fierce the fire was. Father Perrin saw some amazing things:

“Flames [burned] the roots of trees...to the last inch....Hogsheads (barrels) of nails were found entirely melted!...Fish of all sizes died...and the river was covered with them.”

* In one factory, a box of axes was burned. The iron axe heads were melted into one big block. Out in the sugar bush, farms were burned. The fire was so hot that nothing was left but shovel blades, belt buckles and iron cooking pots.

* People needed help. The clean-up job was big. Too many people were hurt. But how could the news reach the outside world? All the telegraph lines were burned. The train tracks were destroyed. People in Madison and Milwaukee might help. But there was no way to reach them.

* It took two days to reach help. One lumberman sent a ship north to Green Bay. From Green Bay, telegrams were sent to Milwaukee and to the governor's office in Madison. *Terrible fire!* the telegram said. *Hundreds dead. No medicine, food or clothes.* He begged for help.

* People all over Wisconsin were shocked by news of the fire in Peshtigo. But, they were shocked twice! On that same day, October 8th, a huge fire had burned in Chicago, too. People in Wisconsin heard first about the Chicago fire. Then they got the doubly-bad news about the fire in Peshtigo. Two fires on the same day!

* News of the Chicago fire went out right away on October 8th. Caring people in Wisconsin wanted to help. They sent food and blankets to Chicago. Our governor, Lucius Fairchild, took carloads of supplies down to Chicago himself!

* Then, the terrible news came to the governor's office in Madison. Fire in Peshtigo! The newspaper headlines read:

“Telegraphic! Worst Reports True! Burned bodies recovered and many more yet to be found. Food and clothing must be sent.”

* But Governor Fairchild was gone. Food and clothing had already been sent to Chicago. Who could help the victims in Peshtigo?

* Twenty-three year old Frances Fairchild took charge. She was the governor's wife. She found a whole train car loaded with food, clothes and medicine for Chicago. She ordered the railroad to clear the tracks and send that boxcar to Peshtigo right away.

* Someone told Mrs. Fairchild there were no blankets in the boxcar. Those people in Peshtigo would be freezing at night! Mrs. Fairchild took charge again. She called the women of Madison. And they came to help. In one day the women filled a second boxcar and rushed it to Peshtigo with blankets, money, clothing and food.

* Up in Peshtigo, people were working. Hurt people needed care. Bodies had to be buried. People needed food. Father Perrin told about this work:

“For...three days our only habitation was the tent...It covered us during our meals...and during the night [for] those who could sleep, a thing I found impossible. Our beds were made of the river sand...and a single blanket.

During this period I first learned about the fate of the city of Chicago.”

* Help came soon from other towns and cities. Businesses, schools and homes were rebuilt. It took a number of years, but people began to rebuild their lives, too.

* In the end, more than 1,200 people died in the great Peshtigo fire. More people died in Peshtigo than in the Chicago fire. More than an million acres of land was burned.

* Today, the Chicago fire is more famous. But many people remember the Peshtigo fire. They remember the people that died and those that survived. They remember the courage of Father Perrin and Mrs. Fairchild. They remember the many people who came to help.

* The Peshtigo fire was a sad and terrible day in Wisconsin history.