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"Novelist Denise Gess and historian William Lutz brilliantly restore the event to its rightful place in the forefront of American historical imagination." —*Chicago Sun-Times*

On October 8, 1871—the same night as the Great Chicago Fire—the lumber town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin, was struck with a five-mile-wide wall of flames, borne on tornado-force winds of one hundred miles per hour that tore across more than 2,400 square miles of land, obliterating the town in less than one hour and killing more than two thousand people.

At the center of the blowout were politically driven newsmen Luther Noyes and Franklin Tilton, money-seeking lumber baron Isaac Stephenson, parish priest Father Peter Pernin, and meteorologist Increase Lapham. In *Firestorm at Peshtigo*, Denise Gess and William Lutz vividly re-create the personal and political battles leading to this monumental natural disaster, and deliver it from the lost annals of American history.

Firestorm at Peshtigo: A Town, Its People, and the Deadliest Fire in American History Details

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From Reader Review Firestorm at Peshtigo: A Town, Its People, and the Deadliest Fire in American History for online ebook

Yael says

On October 8, 1871, a wildfire of appalling proportions erupted in the region surrounding Peshtigo, Wisconsin, which was located a few miles west of the Green Bay portion of Lake Michigan. Far larger and more destructive than the great Chicago Fire which erupted the same day -- later, it was determined that a ferocious weather-system holding the entire region in its relentless grip was responsible for both fires as well as other fires that erupted nearby -- the firestorm that incinerated Peshtigo and surrounding towns accounted for an official body-count of 2,400 souls, and unofficially, for far more, including the trappers, tramps, homeless people, explorers, fishermen, Indians, and wild animals that must have died in the fire. Strangely, though fires had been burning for weeks in surrounding towns, mountains of pine slash and sawdust from local lumber mills lay everywhere, and the weather had been arid and hotter than normal all summer, most of the citizens of Peshtigo did not take alarm at these conditions and flee to safer areas. They had been told by scientists who supposedly knew what they were talking about that "fires generate rain" (an illusion created by the fact that the heat from wildfires push up already existing mammatus clouds and keep them from dropping their burden of rain until the fire is out) and similar soothing platitudes, and as leaving would entail hardship and, probably loss of income, they told themselves that the rains would come soon and any fire danger would be over. Unfortunately, the rains didn't come. Instead, that hellish inversion socked in over Wisconsin, Michigan, northern Illinois, and Minnesota, driving temperatures up and up and up, robbing even more moisture from already dangerously dehydrated vegetation and the mill detritus, and setting the stage for a disaster whose like had never before been experienced. The result was a firestorm of epic proportions, "natural" in that it was not set by human hands, but nevertheless the product of human ignorance, stupidity, and greed. But while the great Chicago fire is remembered in song and story, the firestorm at Peshtigo was very nearly forgotten by everyone but those who had been injured and lost loved ones and all they owned there for decades. Finally historians are beginning to memorialize the Peshtigo disaster as it deserves to be remembered and analyzed. FIRESTORM AT PESHTIGO is a great start at that task.

Rebecca Huston says

This was one chiller of a story, and yes, it really happened. Everyone knows about the great fire in Chicago in October 1871. But did you know that on that same day a town in northern Wisconsin was burned to the ground, with a loss of life that is estimated to be between 1,500 and 2,500 people. Well written with plenty of maps, photographs and drawings and advertising from the time. Recommended for anyone interested in the American frontier. Four stars overall.

For the longer review, please go here:
<http://www.epinions.com/review/Denise...>

Dave Gaston says

A slow build, but worth the wait for the firestorm. A simple book and a wild, wild story! Fantastic visual

descriptions of the incredible calamity that quite literally engulfed seven entire towns in a monster curtain of fire. Poignant eyewitness tales abound. I read this book 3 years ago and can still recall some horrific scenes and some visual lessons in how fire moves and morphs. I've read a dozen books on firestorms, this one ranks at the top. A little gem worth discovering.

Becca says

This story is incredible and tragic, which makes sense considering that it chronicles the deadliest fire in U. S. history.

My feelings are hard to really express. This is not a peaceful book, and there are no happy endings. At the same time it's beautiful--yet extremely tragic--and definitely gory.

The skilled writing adds a lot. The book is co-authored by a historian and a novelist, so while it's well-researched nonfiction, it has some of the qualities of a novel. That makes for a quick, enjoyable read.

How can I say I enjoyed reading about the horrendous deaths of 1,200+ people?!

The best thing about this book is that it's been on a bookshelf at home for the past 11 years, and I just discovered it's excellence!

Lesli says

You probably know The Great Chicago Fire. Only, did you know that "The Fire" was really the 31st and 32nd fires of that month? Did you know that 250 people died in that fire? The firestorm that swept the Peshtigo area killed between 1,000 and 2,500 people. Entire families died by burns, suffocation, or starvation because of the firestorm. While both are tragedies, I can't help but wonder why the Chicago Fire is one that everyone remembers.

Well written. Entertaining as well as horrifying.

Jan Druetzler-katz says

Incredibly informative book about an American tragedy that is overshadowed by the Chicago fire. The authors did a wonderful job of presenting life in Northern WI in the late 1800s around the logging industry. A reminder for our own times that the striving for money can result in a destruction of nature that can have catastrophic and long-lasting consequences.

Jennifer Fetterly says

Great historical novel on small-town Wisconsin tragedy. Interesting information on how the Peshtigo Times covered the event and helped the community recover.

Jennifer W says

Totally fascinating story about a much larger and deadlier fire that took place on the same date as the infamous Chicago Fire of October 8 1871. This one also may have had an F5 tornado during its outburst, but no one can confirm that. Likely over 2000 people died in the Peshtigo blaze, compared to about 300 people in Chicago.

So while weather and history are fun subjects for me, the writing in the book dropped this one down to a 3 star read (in better hands, I'm sure I could have given this 5 stars). I can't tell if it's because there's not as much recorded detail about this fire, if too many of the witnesses died, or if the writer's a hack, but this story should have been much more gripping than it was. For example, towards the end of the book, the author speaks of an early meteorologist who claimed that there were flammable gases in the air around Peshtigo. The author shows that another scientist disagreed. The author then states that the meteorologist was right, but doesn't say what gases were present, how they got there, how the meteorologist came to suspect they were there, or how the author now knows that they were actually present.

Still, I'm glad I read it, I just hope someday someone with better talent or better research comes along and writes a better version.

Pamela Barrett says

I had never heard of Peshtigo, Wisconsin before reading this book, and now I will never forget it or its people. A friend lent me this book as we struggled to come to grips with the 3rd huge fire in less than 2 years to ravage California; and two of those fires had burned homes of my extended family.

In 1871 the Peshtigo fire destroyed the town, farms, forests, and parts of Chicago, even burning towns into Canada. But what most people remember is only the Chicago Fire. The loss of life was immeasurable; some accounts were over 2500 men, women and children perished. The survivors not only dealt with recovering from horrific burns, they also had nothing to come back to having lost members of their families and their homes. The town of Peshtigo was built around a farming community whose main industry was lumber, and the forests were plentiful—huge trees, by lakes, rivers to move the logs. Railroads being built, telegraph lines, new roads being cleared; but the push for rapid expansion left waste like sawdust, and timber piles in a town where everything was made out of wood, even the sidewalks. This created hazards, which were helped by a long drought and extreme weather conditions that ignited a devastating firestorm. So many things contributed to the fire, but only a few saw the danger, and those few had only small pieces of the bigger picture. It is good that we have their accounts, because a lot of what we know now about fires, weather, and fire science came from those few people. Unfortunately we are still making mistakes when it comes to helping people recover after these types of disasters. The authors did a magnificent job telling this part of America's history, it is well researched and the writing isn't boring or cumbersome: I was pulled in and touched emotionally, so I'm strongly recommending it with a little caution because there are some graphic accounts about the people and animals in the fire. 4 stars

Mike Prochot says

A haunting detail of the fire in Peshtigo, Wisconsin that happened on the same day and was overshadowed by "The Great Chicago Fire". More lives were lost in Peshtigo than Chicago however, and it remains to this day the deadliest wildfire in American history.

Fascinating look at the rise of the many small towns that you can pass through today on your way north from Green Bay. There was wealth and prosperity in the forest lumber and the towns grew while the forests were decimated to meet demand for the wood. The towns today are mere shadows of what they had been on that day - or aspired to be.

With warning signs all around, the threat of a growing menace underfoot and in the air, the lumber mills continued churning and the lumberjacks kept at work.

This book almost reads as a science fiction thriller, the end result unfortunately for some two thousand souls was too horribly real.

If you live in the midwest or Wisconsin proper, I highly recommend you read this book to get a sense of the history around you.

Jeanette says

Very horrific in detail. Happening in 1871 on the same day as the Chicago fire, this WI tale relates the scientific and the historic events surrounding the massive firestorm which birthed "gustados" of approximately 2000 degrees F. Up to 2500 in 17 towns incinerated to calcified ash in hours. As opposed to about 300 deaths in Chicago, the reasons of science and of marketing obscures this reality in comparison, IMHO.

And to the "faults" this is five star for meteorology and physics of under ground ignition and fire wall movements. To the participants 4 star, especially for input and outcomes re Ogden. But for cohesion to writing style, it is three. And it is so realistically grizzly that I cannot round it up.

I am glad I read it. There was so much complete malarkey in my early life about the 1871 fires. Closer to reality are facts which have very little to do with humans at all. And it could happen in the North American continent again. Montana had one since. It turns sand to glass and even earth burns away.

Colleen Parkinson says

Excellent, EXCELLENT, account of the deadly wildfire that became a firestorm that hit Wisconsin 1871. Very detailed, and in-depth portrayal of the people affected by this horror. Drawn from numerous historical archives, newspaper accounts, eye-witness accounts and scientific findings, FIRESTORM AT PESHTIGO is riveting and almost impossible to put down once you begin reading. This book has my highest recommendation, not only to readers of history, but to readers who love a page-turning drama (only this one is non-fiction, which makes it more compelling). WARNING: Not for the weak of stomach!

Mosunflower says

Wow! This is a very interesting nonfiction book. The Peshtigo firestorm took place in 1871 in the same night as the great Chicago fire. Because Peshtigo was a small town and because the telegraph lines were burned news of the Chicago fire took precedence even though the Peshtigo fire killed many more people.

The details of the time period, the logging and railroad industries, and the stories of many of the individuals involved makes this a good read. The book also talks about the beginning of weather observation services that would eventually help forecast factors that contribute to such tragedies.

This is not a fun read, but historically fascinating.

Phoebe says

The Peshtigo fire in northeastern Wisconsin has been overshadowed in history by the Chicago fire, which started on the same night, October 8, 1871, despite being the first documented firestorm in US history, claiming what is now estimated to be 2500 lives and destroying seventeen towns. Gess and Lutz methodically set the scene for us, describing the town's origins, economy, its movers and shakers, and the astonishing combination of weather, drought, unbelievably dense forest with 4 to 6-story tall trees, and wooden structures everywhere. The descriptions of the disaster (and the first large-scale relief movement that came afterwards) are plainly told and horrific, and it is no wonder that there is little first-person testimony of events on that terrible day, as so many of the survivors wanted to forget. This book is among the few written about the disaster, which has become known as the Peshtigo Paradigm and has been studied for decades, as the first of its kind to provide evidence that fire and weather are linked, in an attempt to understand its cause. This is an important book about an important fire.

Amanda says

While the buildup to the section about the fire was rather long and dense, the portions describing the fire and the aftermath were very interesting. I remember my 4th grade teacher having a section of our history class on the fire, and one high school teacher mentioning it, otherwise it was overlooked in my education. I was always interested in it, and why it was never discussed as much as the Chicago fire the same night, which is why I searched out this book. Some of the science presented by the authors seemed to contradict other things they authors wrote earlier, which left me wondering which was the accurate answer and I walked away still unsure about some of the specifics since I was not sure which statement was the one to believe so I chose to just follow the stories of the people in the towns. I would still recommend that others read this book at some point just to learn more about the town and the people that survived such a massive tragedy.
