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Door County History: 1871 blaze wiped out community of Williamsonville

By Bob Johnson - Door County Advocate

First of four parts.

On the Tornado Park memorial along Door County DK, a brass plaque reads, “Here was the village of Williamsonville, with a population of 77 persons on Oct. 8, 1871. The village was blotted out by a tornado of fire. Sixty persons sought refuge in an open field surrounding this spot and were burned to death.”

The mark sits quietly in the wayside along a once-busy road now bypassed by progress. Millions of vehicles have rushed past, giving little or no thought to the wayside. Those who have taken notice of the old wooden sign have little comprehension of the events that transpired 135 years ago – a night in October that would mark a change of life for settlers in Door County, a night filled with fear, horror and death.

In 1871 Door County was a land on the verge of prosperity. The county was certainly beautiful in the late 19th century, but it was the thick woods and rich land that brought settlers to the peninsula. The United States, still young and recovering from the devastation of the Civil War, demanded large amounts of lumber to feed its growth. At that time everything was made of wood and an enterprising man could make a good living off the timber that was thick on the land. Lumber was king in this part of the country, and Door County was no exception.

To the poor immigrants looking for a foothold in this land of opportunity, this was too good to pass up.

Door County was filling up with small pockets of isolated families struggling to create a life in this new and foreign land, a land also full in the promise of rich farmland. Many of the pioneers were Belgian and Bohemians in small clusters that had names like La Sucrerie, La Rivere Rouge, Rosiere, Brussels and Thiry Daems. Pockets of French, Irish, Danes and Norwegians also found their way to the county.

Remote farms and settlements tied together with primitive, rough roads required lumber to build houses and barns. Sawmills were built to respond to the needs of both the locals and the nation at large. After much back-breaking work the land was beginning to pay off, and the families were starting to believe the promise of a future rewarding their hard efforts.

It was this very success that would add to the tragedy to come. Trees were taken with little regard to fire prevention. When trees were cut down, the limbs and bark would be cut from the logs and left to carpet the forest floor.

Sawdust from the cuttings and sawmills, thick and dry, covered the ground as raw wood was altered into usable lumber. Pioneers began to develop the plots of land to farm and establish their homes, using the age-old practice of clearing the land with fire.

Roads were little more than rough pathways, and in the low swampland the roads had been corduroyed by using logs and covering them with dirt.

Much of the wood intended for commercial use was wasted due to the poor handling and even poorer transportation.

Woodsmen left campfires unattended. Hunters and fishermen would abandoned fires, leaving them to smolder. Homesteads used bonfires for warmth, to burn garbage, and to clear away stumps and branches. Sparks from passing trains also started small fires in the dry tinder along the tracks.

Little heed was paid to fire management, and the success of putting out smaller fires had emboldened the residents to believe that although a fire might get a little out of hand, they would certainly be able to handle it. Fires, while a constant threat, were a minor concern when faced with the day-to-day demands of existence. Daily life demanded more attention.

The summer of 1871 had been very dry, with not a drop of rain from July to mid-October. It was so dry that swamps and creeks had dried up, leaving behind thick dry foliage.

Trees had dropped their fall leaves to carpet the already powder-dry ground with the perfect combustible material. Wells were drying up, and water was becoming scarce. Everything was dry, including the wooden buildings.

The winds produced a drying effect on everything. The past winter had been usually dry, with a cold harsh wind. With the lack of rain, the drying summer winds had compounded the bone-dry conditions, sapping any available moisture out of everything. Dust was everywhere.

The Sept. 21, 1871, issue of the Door County Advocate noted, "Dry weather has been a staple all summer long. Fires have been running through the woods. We have heard of no specific damage."

That would soon change.

Additional Facts

The world knows of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, and most Wisconsinites are familiar with the Peshtigo Fire that happened at the same time. Not as well known is the fire that destroyed the southern Door County town of Williamsonville, where Tornado Park is now located. Bob Johnson, who compiles our regular Traveling Back journey through the Door County Advocate files, researched the fire and its aftermath for this story, which will run for the next four Saturdays.

Door County History: Conditions for 1871 disaster were in place

Second of four parts.

Two of the three items needed for the coming disaster were in place. The Door Peninsula was as dry as it had ever been, and fires were burning everywhere.

Since mid-August the constant glow of unattended fires had created a general unease among the settlers.

Records from that time note that even the birds and animals were acting strange. The air was filled with a thick, choking, almost suffocating smoke.

The smoke was thick enough to obscure vision, and the settlers watched their world shrink to what they could

see through the haze of smoke, with their tear-filled eyes. The sun shone down through the smoke creating an angry, hateful red glare. All around, the threat of fire illuminated the heavens to the point that it seemed the very sky was on fire.

It seem to be everywhere. The smoke was so thick that horses feared it and would lose their way along the primitive roads. In distant Green Bay the ominous red glow of the northeastern sky had become a commonplace sight to the Green Bay residents.

On Oct. 2, a circus caravan heading from Green Bay to Manitowoc narrowly escaped a fire that burned the bridges around them and toppled trees with a sound that reminded the Civil War veterans in the group of artillery. Before the circus caravan could escape the inferno, three wagons were destroyed. A crew sent to rebuild the bridge was turned back by the heat and the smoke.

By Oct. 4, the smoke was so thick on the waters of Green Bay that steamers that piloted the water had to blow their horns and were forced to navigate by compass.

The woods on both sides of the bay were on fire, and the sky was filled with wind carried ash.

The settlers huddled down, isolated, unsure of what to do, and fearful that events were taking shape that were beyond them.

Many of these settlers were not only isolated by the thick woods but also by their inability to communicate. They spoke their native languages but had not yet mastered the common language of English. Many families stayed in place, continuing to scratch out their existence, hoping for the best.

They had nowhere else to go, so they covered their faces with cloth against the smoke and moved about in their world, hopeful that at any time it would rain and the fires would no longer be a threat. But rain never came.

And then the wind

Now the third item necessary for disaster arrived: A low-pressure system hovering in Minnesota, coupled with a slow-moving high-pressure system sweeping up from the Mid-Atlantic states, created a dangerous flow that moved up into the Midwest.

Winds rushed up from the south into the neck of the peninsula to feed the waiting fire monster.

In a fire the speed and force of the flames are driven by the release of heat during combustion, which is the absence of moisture. A large fire is actually two systems: the fire and the wind it creates that feeds the fire. It becomes a vicious circle: the bigger the fire, the more wind. The bigger the wind, the more it feeds the fire.

A large fire can even create its own weather system. The fire and the wind feed on each other creating an even larger fire. Combustible material — and at this time in Door County there was a lot of it — fed the fire and created an intense and unpredictable atmosphere instability. Swirling winds became a vortex of fire creating fire tornadoes that swept across the ground.

Fire tornadoes, like true tornadoes, can grow to 1,000 feet in diameter and rotate at up to 90 mph. Nothing can compare with the violence of such a firestorm. Superheated flames can heat up to 2,000 degrees . The huge convection updrafts, in turn, feed the fire monster, intensifying it.

Long darts of fire jump from treetop to treetop and can be pushed out ahead of the fire. Elongated tongues of flame can shoot out from the fire creating fire explosions and fireballs.

A village gone

Today, it is difficult to accurately pinpoint the southernmost point where the firestorm began on Oct. 7, but there is no doubt that New Franken was caught up in it.

New Franken was a small but thriving village established in 1845 by a group of Bavarians. Residents would later describe a roaring sound, a rushing, as the fire monster carried by the strong wind consumed everything before it.

Tree sap exploded within the trees, and the trees collapsed before the onrushing wind, exploding with a noise so loud that not even yelling allowed communication. As the fire swept over New Franken, the inhabitants rushed to escape the fire.

Few things are more frightening than an onrushing firestorm and the threat of being burned alive. All reason and rational thought are lost in the one thought of escape. There was no time to save possessions. Those who stopped to load them up lost their lives. Escape was the only hope to survive.

When survivors returned to New Franken later, they discovered that the fire had so thoroughly destroyed everything that it appeared the village had never existed. The ground was bare of homes and buildings that had been there just the day before.

Up the Door

The fire moved up into the peninsula, spreading out and widening until a swath 20 miles wide and 50 miles long was consumed. Casco was threatened by the fire but a crew of workmen at a mill owned by a man named Decker worked hard and succeeded in fighting off the rushing fiery monster.

The fire, pushed forward by its very nature and feeding on itself, roared toward an unsuspecting populace. Telegraph lines burned and toppled, removing even the remote possibility of a warning. Trees, burned from the roots, fell across roads and bridges blocking escape.

The isolated farms and villages had no warning until the superheated wind touched them and the overpowering roaring monster was upon them. The ground shook with the power of the firestorm as it moved across the earth.

In the town of Brussels, 22 people were burned to death, eight at the mill of Scofield & Leathem and 14 others in other parts of the town. Fifty-six houses, barns and their contents were consumed.

The fire continued on, sweeping through the towns of Union, Gardner, Nasewaupee and the west side of Forestville. One witness would later claim, "Great volumes of fire would rise up, 50 feet from the tops of the trees, leap 30 acres of clearing in an instant, and flame up in the forest beyond." The fire was moving faster than a human could run.

Many victims were trapped and burned alive before they even realized what was upon them. Clothing was so dry, and the heat from the flames so hot, that the clothing on the people burst into flames before the fire could even touch it. Panic was complete.

FYI

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Door County history: A night of horror

In this section, a deadly fire has moved up the Door peninsula on the night of Oct. 7, 1871.

In Rosiere, storekeeper Charles Rubin threw bolts of cloth into a nearby stone lined well and ordered his six children into the pit. The wind was howling, and the heat from the onrushing fire was already upon them. As Rubin helped his children into the well, he had second thoughts and ordered them into a nearby clearing. Before he could get the last child out of the well, his shirt was already on fire, the heat blistering his skin.

Ripping the burning clothing off, he followed the children into the cleared field and buried their faces into the dirt.

The woods around them were on fire, the store was ablaze — the fury and sound almost unbearable for the small children. After what seemed an eternity, the fire moved on, leaving a smoke and fire blinded Rubin to be led by his children back to the burned-out store. All of the cloth in the well had burned. Had they stayed in the well, all of them would have been consumed by the fire.

In unexplainable ways, some people who sought refuge in wells were trapped to be burned alive while others found the wells to be a perfect refuge.

Some found open fields were zones of safety, while others in similar open fields were killed by the fires. No place was perfectly safe.

In a Belgian community just south of Williamsonville, 15 families saw and heard the firestorm coming and took the time to bury their possessions, including sides of bacon, in a nearby open field. Their rough bone-dry wooden homes were quickly reduced to ashes in moments.

Belgians died in the inferno, but it would later be remembered that the community had been able to save its bacon.

There was no checking the fiery onslaught. The feeble human efforts to stop the all consuming fire were ineffective.

Fleeing was the only possibility of survival. The roads and settlements in Southern Door were engulfed in sheets of fire. As the out-of-control fire moved up through Door County, the small sawmill community of Williamsonville, nine miles south of Sturgeon Bay, was unaware of the onrushing danger.

Williamsonville was a small village named after its founders, Tom and John Williamson. The brothers had moved into the area in the late 1860s and set up shop in an undeveloped area of the county.

Taking title to 480 acres of timbered land, they wasted no time in building a barn, boarding house, store,

blacksmith shop, family house and bunkhouse for their employees. By 1871, their thriving shingle business supported 76 people, including 15 women and 16 children.

Early on that fateful day, the wind suddenly picked up with enough force to blow trees over. Thomas Williamson saw a wall of fire about a mile and a half away from the settlement. At the same time fire was closing in from other directions.

Trees crashed to the ground, the fire roared and smoke blinded the panicked residents. Williamson leaped from his porch and ordered the sleeping work crews to be awakened. Sparks were falling everywhere, and the tinder-dry buildings were already smoldering. Hoses were dragged out and roofs were watered down but to little avail. The wind whipped up the flames and soon the Williamsons' parents' home was threatened. John Williamson was not surprised.

"If we can save our lives, I'll be satisfied," he said over the roar of the onrushing inferno. Flames were leaping from pine to pine, racing toward the clearing. The very air was on fire.

Clearly no one could outrun the fire. Quickly they decided that the only safe place would be the two-acre clearing that had been a potato patch. There was little to burn in the field, and it afforded a place for the women and children to go.

The rushing sound was overpowering as the tongues of flames licked into the sky. The very heavens seem to be ablaze. Like others in the county had done, seven people climbed down into a well seeking a safe haven from the blaze. The last man to go into the well found the wood curbs of the well on fire. He pulled them off and threw them away before he descended into the well and covered himself with a wet blanket.

Williamsonville's McAdams, the blacksmith, and his wife wet down blankets, scooped up their children and fled into the clearing, beating out the flames on their clothing with their bare hands.

When asked what to do, John Williamson threw up his hands in despair "Mother, save yourself. I give up." With that, Mrs. Williamson, mother of Tom and John, decided to follow the blacksmith into the potato patch. The fire was all around and her dress caught on fire.

Others were running about, their hair and clothing ablaze, and scared beyond all reason. Cows, horses and pigs, all in mindless terror, bolted back and forth as they tried to escape the flames.

Barn boss Thomas Bush was on top of the barn and watched the people running to the potato patch as the monster approached, devouring the land as it roared toward them. A perfect cloud of flame waved over the trees. When the fall of flames reached the mill, it descended upon the group huddled together looking for safety. Bush only escaped by jumping down, grabbing a terrorized pony and galloping away.

As Mrs. Williamson raced past the boarding house, it went up in flames and the heat and fire lashed out at her. Numb from the heat and in shock, only her sense of self preservation kept her alive. She little noticed the screams, as some around her caught fire. Wrapped in wet blankets and blinded by the thick smoke, she scrambled on her hands and knees into the clearing. The soil was so hot it burned her hands.

Gusts of wind carried streamers of fire among them as the men fought to keep the fire off the women and children even as their own clothing caught fire. Acting as a weak firebreak against the onrushing flames, the men stood as long as humanly possible. Chunks of burning coals landed among the huddled group, blazing up wherever they landed. "Nelson, I'm on fire," a woman shrieked to her husband, and instantly she was on fire from head to foot.

Sometime before dawn, the horror around Williamsonville was all over.

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Door County History: Survivors of 1871 fire could never forget

Fourth of four parts.

Sometime before dawn on that October morning in 1871, the horror around Williamsonville was all over. Those who survived moved stiffly about in shock, little comprehending the horror around them. The heat of the fire had seared their lungs, and the smoke had all but blinded them. They were horribly thirsty and sought nonexistent water for their parched throats.

In the potato patch, a small hollow only 15 feet square (today, County DK runs right through this hollow), the bodies of 35 people were found. In the well where seven people had taken shelter, five survived.

Just minutes before it had been unbearably hot and overpoweringly loud. Then, it was silent except for the screams and moaning of the injured. Suddenly it was cold and their burned, abused bodies began to shiver uncontrollably. Survivors wandered among the dead looking for their loved ones, but identities were difficult to determine.

Thomas Williamson discovered his mother, still wrapped in the remnants of her blanket. At first he thought his mother was dead, but when he touched her she stirred. The blanket that had covered her was all but burned up. Her hair was scorched and parts of her body badly burned but she was alive.

Clearly in shock, she had no reaction when Thomas informed her that his brother John had died in the flames. At the time neither understood the scope of the tragedy.

Sixty people had died in the Williamsonville area, some to the actual flames but many to the hot noxious smoke that blanketed the ground. Among the dead were 16 children and 11 women.

The burned carcasses of animals laid everywhere. Nothing looked the same, everything had changed.

Further up the Peninsula people in Sawyer and Sturgeon Bay could see that an inferno was moving toward them. The sky glowed an evil red. Everyone who looked south could see that terrible things were happening. Were they next? Would the fire roll over their two towns, too?

Fear was rampant as they prepared to fight the coming fire. But, as it turned out, the towns were spared because of the layout of the county and the direction of the fickle wind. The wind was blowing north and slightly east, yet the two towns were situated just far enough east to escape. The fire moved north and stopped when it came to the waters of Green Bay.

Residents from Sawyer, Sturgeon Bay and even towns to the south rushed into the area to seek out survivors,

but fallen trees blocked the primitive roads. It took rescuers two days to get from Sturgeon Bay to Williamsonville, only nine miles away. Roads to Kewaunee, Two Rivers and smaller villages in the affected area were also buried under fallen trees.

“It was the sound of judgment,” one witness would later recall. It reminded others of the sound of hundreds of locomotives roaring overhead. Survivors would have to live with memories of the horror, with their disfiguring scars. They would long remember the swirling balloons of fire.

Because so few immigrants spoke or wrote English, few stories were left behind, but the lack of written experiences cannot overshadow the tragedy the night of Oct. 7, 1871.

It is difficult to place an actual number on how many lost their lives that night. Estimates of the number who died in northeastern Wisconsin vary from 1,200 to 1,500 people, but that number includes Peshtigo. It is also estimated that more than a million acres of land were devastated.

The Peninsula’s tragedy was quickly overshadowed by the fire in Peshtigo, which was almost completely destroyed. Then again, Peshtigo’s loss was also overshadowed by the Chicago fire because the fires occurred at the same time.

For years, many would believe that the fire had somehow jumped from Peshtigo across the bay to start up in Door County, but evidence proves otherwise.

The Southern Door area was different after the fire. Logging was no longer viable; farming replaced it as the driving industry.

At the suggestion of the Door County Historical Society in 1927, the site of the Williamsonville community was purchased by the county. In 1937 the county turned this quiet spot in Tornado Township into a memorial park for those of Williamsonville who had lost their lives in the tornado of fire. The well that had served as a shelter for some was also marked with a memorial placard.

The rolling green hills have recovered from the scars, and over the years the trees have returned. Except for the memorial sign in this quiet park, passed by time and progress, there is little to mark that a thriving community once existed there. But, if you stand in the park near the road and feel the wind on your face, just for the briefest moment you can almost smell the smoke.

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The Door County Advocate published its first edition March 22, 1862. Each Saturday during our 150th anniversary year, we are featuring highlights from a century and a half of Advocate and Door County history.

Reader Randall Tlachac of Minneapolis contacted writer Bob Johnson with a story of his family’s experience with the Great Fire of 1871. His great-grandfather settled in the area four miles east of what is today Rosiere on County J in 1862. Like so many others, he built his log cabin large enough to house his livestock in the

lower part of the home in the Bohemian manner. They homesteaded the land and cleared a portion of it while still surrounded by the dense woods of Door County. As the fire roared upon them, Randall's great-grandmother prepared to run ahead of the fire with the older children, but they knew that the littlest ones would not be able to keep ahead of the fast-moving fire. At the same time Tlachac's great-grandfather wanted to stay and try to save the haystacks by keeping them wet. They plowed a furrow in the open field and buried the smallest children, including Randall's grandfather John, in the earth covering them with dirt except for small air holes. The children, both those buried and those who ran away, all survived as did his great-grandfather and -mother.