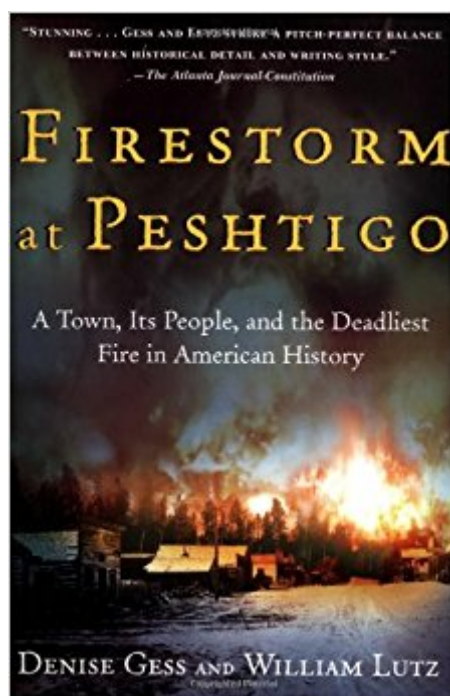


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# Firestorm At Peshtigo: A Town, Its People, And The Deadliest Fire In American History



## Synopsis

"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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In American history books, October 8, 1871, marks the massive fire that consumed Chicago. But as Gess (*Good Deeds*) and Lutz (*Doublespeak*) document in this thorough historical narrative, it was also the night a fledgling Wisconsin mining town endured a worse fate a story often overlooked in the annals of fire. Peshtigo, with a population of nearly 2,000, was obliterated in less than an hour that night by a freakish convergence of rampant forest fires and tornado-force winds. Gess and Lutz draw on a wealth of local sources, including diaries, interviews with survivors and newspaper accounts, to enliven their story and forge a cast of main characters. While the authors go into far too

much detail in describing the town's founding and its politics, they render a chilling, absorbing account of the hellish events of the night itself, perhaps due to Gess's background as a novelist: " 'Faster than it takes to write these words' is the phrase every survivor used. They used it to describe the speed of a fireball hitting a house and setting it into instant flames; they used it to describe the speed with which one house was lifted from its foundation, then thrown through the air 'a hundred feet' before it detonated midflight and sent strips of flaming wood flying like shrapnel.... They used it to describe the sight of a small boy, separated from his family, and how he knelt to the ground, crouching in prayer before fire lit his body." The images of the catastrophe are often as unpleasant as they are vivid, but readers will sense that they are necessary and that Gess and Lutz have done an overdue service to those who suffered. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The same day as the Great Chicago Fire, October 8, 1871, a huge conflagration swept through the lumber town of Peshtigo, WI, north of Green Bay on Lake Superior. A summer's drought, a windy day, and possibly a tornado combined to create a firestorm. The fire destroyed 2400 square miles of timber and farmland, demolishing several towns and killing some 2000 people. Peshtigo was remote, and earlier fires had destroyed telegraph lines, so although the scale of the disaster was considerably larger than Chicago's, the loss was relatively little known and quickly forgotten. Novelist Gess (*Red Whiskey Blues*) and Lutz (*English*, Rutgers Univ.; *Doublespeak*) gather information from letters, diaries, interviews, and local newspapers to tell the story of this disaster. In increasingly overheated language, they re-create the politics, the economic realities of a lumber town, and the special meteorological circumstances that combined to destroy an area larger than Rhode Island. Despite the somewhat turgid writing, this work is mildly recommended for libraries with subject collections in fire prevention, disaster recovery, and regional history. Edwin B. Burgess, U.S. Army Combined Arms Research Lib., Fort Leavenworth, KS Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I searched for this book for three years in bookstores and so was absolutely thrilled when I found it on .com. I ordered it immediately. Peshtigo is a small lumber town in Wisconsin between Green Bay and Escanaba, Michigan. The fire that struck destroyed 2,400 acres and killed 1,800 people. A real firestorm! It was the worst fire in U.S. history but did not gain much attention at all in the press because it struck the same day as the "Great Chicago Fire." The telegraph wires got knocked down by the storm before the fire hit the town so word got out through a boat captain who had to sail to

Green Bay thought the storm to make an appeal for help. The book is full of human actions which, in hindsight, led to the massive fire. This story is the history of a fire in the making as well as a human history of those people killed in the storm and those few who survived. This book is certainly worth reading, even if you have never been in Wisconsin or never hear of Peshtigo which you most likely have not

Well crafted book about a tragedy that was overshadowed by the simultaneous occurrence of the great Chicago Fire in 1871 - a good read!

If you have any interest in US history, especially the more obscure events of the past, this is the book for you. I had no idea, before reading this book, about Peshtigo at all. FAR worse in scope than the Great Chicago Fire, yet so little is known about it. The book is well written and gives you a window to the past that you might not have had. You get to learn more about the families and the survivors, and what they did to survive. This is a tragic chapter of American history, but it's also a lesson learned. I love reading books like this because I like to know what people did in the aftermath to prevent such tragedies from occurring again. I can't imagine what the residents of Peshtigo went through when this wildfire came through, but author Denise Gess paints a picture that will haunt you. One of my favorite books on US history to date.

A compelling and stirring narrative that examines all the factors that created the firestorm at Peshtigo. A combination of both human disregard and amazing meteorological phenomena created one of the most intense firestorms that humanity has ever seen. The authors have done a brilliant job putting it all together into a highly readable account. The saddest circumstance is that military minds studied the event to eventually reproduce such conditions in WW2 bombings.

While overshadowed by the great Chicago fire which took place on the same day, October 8, 1871, the firestorm that obliterated Peshtigo, Wisconsin was a tragedy of unprecedented proportion - one of those events evoking the reaction "why didn't I know about this"? Aside from the horror of the fire, which literally cannot be described in words (how can one adequately describe the impact of a 1,000 foot-high wall of fire moving at speeds exceeding 100 miles-per-hour), "Firestorm at Peshtigo" offers fascinating insight to life in the north-central timber forests of the mid-nineteenth century, as well as the infant science of meteorology and the physics of a true firestorm. Notwithstanding, the book's primary appeal lies in the almost ghoulish detail in which the incomprehensible devastation of

the firestorm is drawn. While the final loss of life will never be known, 2,200 deaths is an accepted estimate in a fire that raged over 2,400 square miles - a conflagration so intense that even the soil burned. Given the primitive state of medicine of the day, the limited communications and access to the relatively remote Green Bay area, and the total destruction of the land and infrastructure, one wonders if the survivors of the fire, scarred both physically and mentally by the fire and loss of family and community, weren't the true victims. In short, a brutally fascinating nugget of American history, proving again that fact is indeed stranger, and in this case, more lurid, than fiction.

Very interesting, and informative.

On October 8, 1871, the same day of the famous Chicago fire, a tornado was heading toward the lumber-mill town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin, 262 miles north of Chicago, near the coast of Lake Michigan. All summer, forest fires had been burning in the area out of control. As the tornado approached the fires, it drew upon them for energy, becoming a new engine of massive destruction five miles wide. Nothing like it had been seen since the Great Fire of London in 1666. Nothing like it would be seen again until the saturation bombing of German cities by the allies in the Second World War. People later described the approach of the fire tornado as that of a roaring earthquake that shook the ground. The 100-mile-per-hour winds tore great pines out by the roots, leaving craters 70 feet across. They tossed a locomotive like a twig. It ignited clouds of hydrogen that had been created by the forest fires and threw them to ground in great fireballs. The heat of the tornado reached 2,000 degrees, hotter than an atomic blast. It melted railroad lines and the wheels of railroad cars and whipped sand into melted glass. It exploded buildings and threw them into the air. It sucked the water from the earth, leaving all the wells dry. Survivors recalled seeing humans, horses, and other animals explode in flame. The tornado flattened 2,400 square miles of forest and killed 2,200 people. Most of those who survived hid in the water under the banks of rivers and streams. Prominent in the story is the experience of the local priest, Fr. Pernin. At the last minute, he decided to rescue the Blessed Sacrament and the chalice. He dropped his key and could not find it, so he picked up the wooden tabernacle and took it outside and put it on the wagon. He raced the horse and wagon to the river as everything around them exploded in fire. He and his horse survived though both were badly burned. The next morning, he realized that all the survivors had lost relatives and everything they owned. The survivors, most of them blind and burnt, wandered the blistering and smoldering landscape looking for the bodies of relatives and neighbors who had not been pulverized and blown away. Only slowly did news of what happened at Pestigo reach the rest

of the world. All the attention had been focused on the Chicago fire, where 300 had died. Most of the survivors who did not die of infections and disease faced a lifetime of mental withdrawal and trauma syndrome. Few of them could speak of what they had seen.

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