CHAPTER II

THE PESHTIGO FIRE

by
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The Well Site -on highway 57 (on the road to Sturgeon Bay)

Photo taken by nephew Carl Burkart of
Green Bay, Wisconsin.

THE PESHTIGO FIRE

That spring the boys did the plowing and disking with uncles Valtin and Stephan 's help. Later on, while the sail was still moist Matt, wanting to help, would hoist himself onto the iron seat of the seeder that dropped corn and wheat into the ground.

On a clear day we could hear his gid-e-yap or whoa, whoa to the horses. Or, an occasional 'gol fishhook! ' that had all the strength of the strongest explectives imaginable when the horses would make a wrong step or turn. He rarely cursed, for he was a member of the Holy Name Society and lived up to its tenets to the letter.

Late spring and summer had brought healing and enthusiasm once again into his life. While his injured leg ached and throbbed (especially during the night), whenever we mentioned it after hearing him moan he would say, "Ah that was almost nothing." A small thing compared to others...

He walked slowly down the lane, limping as he went along, looking occasionally to the fields on the right and left. Aparently he wasn't looking at anything in particular, but was taking in the whole-the growing fields-meadow with his small Holstein and Guernsey herd grazing, and pasture land he was resting for the year.

The sun beat gently on his large, slightly stooped figure that years of moving with and against the elements had hardened and bent. As he came close to the east forty he stopped. Took off his old battered straw hat, wiped his forehead with his work-roughened hand and looked across the fields. It was Sunday. Time to just stand and look. He'd been to early mass, had his noon meal and the rest of the day was his. His, until evening chores when he would help the boys a little.

His friendly blue eyes filled with satisfaction as they took in the acres of wheat spread like a golden blanket before him. He stooped over, picked a few grains, and on opening than, noted how full and round they were. Gold indeed - gold that would pay something on that hospital bill, and the interest on the mortgage held by millionaire Dennis in nearby Bay Settlement. Dennis, who was quick to foreclose if the interest wasn't paid promptly. And with this good crop he could buy the kids shoes for the opening of school in fall.

As he stood, engrossed in his thoughts, forgetful of the many hours of sweat, fatigue and aching body, he thanked God for the sun and rain that gave him this abundant crop. Thanked him silently, wordlessly. Not as one in church, but as a man alone.
His eyes took in too, the approximately acre of stump land remaining to be cleared as he walked leisurely back to the house. Maybe he could get the rest of those stumps out in fall and ready the land for next spring's planning. He would do the dynamiting himself and Conrad could operate the stump puller.

Dynamiting those big stumps with their deep tendril-like roots was dangerous business but he'd make sure we kids were in the house or in school when he did it. His face broke into an eye-crinkling smile at the thought of finishing the job and the fun we kids would have after the blasting. We would run to the field after all the pieces and debris had settled and look into the big hole the uprooted stump had left. We would search for arrow heads and treasures that could be the remnants of Indian days, or, of the Lamb sawmill that had stood on our land before the Peshtigo fire.

“I think I'll take me a little rest”, Matt said, taking off his hat as he came into the house and walked toward the bedroom door. He'd no more than gotten settled when we decided we wanted our ice cream and said as much.

"Yes kids, but you gotta pull me off the bed else we can't go," he said playfully. We tugged and tugged and pulled, begged and complained, while he feigned great resistance and finally, laughing, let us succeed.

After he hitched red Dan to the buggy we drove the mile-and-a-half to the lower village. To Jandrain's, (the local butcher shop that also carried ice) where he bought us our usual five-cent vanilla ice cream cone. Generally we went there immediately following mass on our way home, but for some reason not this Sunday, and we weren’t about to let him forget it.

He delighted in fabricating tales about the Indians about whom he really knew very little. To him every little mound-like hill was a burial grave and irregular piece of sharp stone was an arrow head. But, when it came to discussing the ‘big fire’ as he referred to the Peshtigo fire his information was more complete and authentic.

One early fall evening, soon after supper we kids found two hardened, blackened wooden knots, obviously charred by fire. We'd found them in the leaves we raked for a game of ‘jumping into bed' - the bed being the huge mound of brilliantly colored, drying foliage. We carried the knots into the house and asked, "What are these?" as we held them up for our father's inspection. "We found them this way - they been burned – but we didn't do it!"

He turned toward us. He'd just put a piece of wood into the kitchen stove to take the chill off the evening air and heat water for dish washing. He sat down painfully before answering. He was tired, and his leg had stiffened during supper. "Yeah kids I know. They're from the big fire," his indulgent voice and eyes promised a story.

We seated ourselves on the floor beside his chair, and looked expectantly into his face as he put his foot on the faded tapestry-covered footstool and settled back. "Well—I was just a baby then, that's more 'n fifty years ago. And I wasn't living here yet. You know where your aunt Annie and uncle Pete Liebergen live ‘bout a mile-and-a-half up the road, just west from here?"
Yes we sure knew, and were waiting impatiently.
"Well, anyways, I was born there, and lived there until I married your mama. And the wedding was there too, " a nostalgic note crept into his voice, "Understand?"
"Yes for sure – but the fire?" we understood, but really wanted to know about the big fire.
"Late on, but listen," he answered patiently," but first you gotta understand most everything I know about the big fire came from my father, your grandpa Melchior- and he's gone since before youse was born." Anxious for him to get on with the story, I implied agreement with "sure, sure", while Clarence nodded assent.

"Well, it was on the 8th of October in 1871, an’ they say there wasn't much snow the winter before and not much rain in spring. And the summer was real hot and dry. Anyways, they were cutting and burning lotsa brush for that railroad they was a putting in - and the swamps around that logging town of Peshtigo kept burning most all the time. Golly sakes, they say the air was so thick with that smoke from them there fires that was burning just west of New Franken you could cut it with a knife!"

"Oooh, Ooohl", the fear and awe in our voices intruded on the story as we clung to his every word.
"Yes -but anyways, 'til that awful day than early settlers could save most their buildings, and cows, and horses and crops. But lotsa their wood fences and bridges and corduroy roads was burned down to nothing. Then - ", he paused, pondering whether the telling was too much for us to hear. Restless, and anxious to know what followed we begged, "what then, what else?"

He shifted his position, and ignoring our interruption said, "Girlie, you go get my corncob that's on the sitting room table, 'n you Clarence, get my Plow Boy from the pantry shelf. Get a couple matches too."
Eager for him to go on, we obeyed instantly. when we came back he stoked his pipe and struck a long sulptur-tipped kitchen match on the taut part of his thigh-covered overalls.

With the acrid smell of sulphur and Plow Boy tobacco I felt we were right there with those burning bridges and fences as Matt, drawing in and puffing out on his pipe, went on with the story.

"Then, on that awful October day there was a big wind. They called it a tornado, and it spread than little fires that was apoppin' up all over, and made great big rolling flames out of them. Onr farm was close, but not right where that fire went, so we didn't lose nothing".

"Ooh, that's good!" Clarence exclaimed, obviously relieved. "Yes, but your grandpa and grandma Ripp's log house burned right down to nothing. It used to stand right where Tante Ket's house is. Yes - they had to load what they could in their ox cart and go away real fast. The two of them and your uncle Tony. He was just a baby then. "Anyways, lotsa folks and neighbors lost everything. So my father and mother took tem in their house and gave them something to eat and a place to sleep. Gosh, they say some of them came running with nothing except the clothes on their backs!

"Our relations always helped out them people that needed it." Digressing from the story to give us a lesson in social responsibility, he added, "And that's what you always gotta do too. Understand?" "Yes for sure " we said impatiently, "what else happened?"

Drawing in the smoke more deeply, pausing between sentences, as he became more deeply involved in the story, Matt went on, "That there fire burned that Peshtigo loggin' town right down to ashes. And seventeen other towns and villages was burned out! More than fifteen hundred people was killed 'n lotsa ones was hurt. They say there was a patch sixty miles long and six to seventeen miles wide that was all burned out! My father said it was like a judgment day was here."

Like judgment day! Our eyes grew wide with apprehension as Clarence and I looked at each other. We knew about judgment day. We'd heard about it in church. And we also knew we'd better be good or something awful could happen to us.-.

"It's enough" he said suddenly, noting our involvement. It was enough. He would tell us more another time. With that he got up from his chair, stretched his legs, bent over and rubbed his left one as if to restore circulation.

Frightened, yet fascinated, we begged for more the following night. It had rained (a typical fall drizzle). We'd come inside early and waited impatiently through the supper hour until he had once again settled down for his evening rest. Clarence had gotten him his footstool and I his corncob.

Conrad had cleared the table from the supper he had prepared and was washing dishes, while Wendel and Ben were in the barn bedding down the animals with straw, and filling their water troughs. We sat down on the braided rug and looked up expectantly,"Jetzt?".

"Ok now," Matt smiled indulgently, and picked up from where he'd left off the previous evening. "This whole east of New Franken was all burned out. And right here, here on our farm that Watson and Lamb sawmill stood. It was like a little town all by itself. There was a general store-—youse know, like Greiling's and Basten's. And a post office. Besides there was about thirty little houses - that's where them people that worked for them mill owners lived."

"Here on our land?" Clarence interrupted, the wonder in his voice reflected in his clear blue eyes—-so much like his father's. "Yup," he reached down and patted Clarence on his blond head, "right here on OUR land. And it all burned down...ja, and there used to be a little brick school on the north end - maybe Conrad remembers it - of course it was empty -and he was just a little fella. That school was just a little way from where that fire went. Your uncle Tony says he went to that school when he was a little schaeffer.

"There was a big well too, with a log platform at one time, and the fire burned them logs so they fell in that well...the pump and iron fixings. The whole works. That well was purty dangerous, so Conrad and Wendel and me filled it in. That's where the wheat field is now."

He paused a few seconds, drew more heavily on his pipe while we waited and I wished silently that the little brick school house was still there. It would be so much fun to play around in it. But I was glad that open well was gone.

"Why wasn't it all rebuilt? Clarence asked - wondering.
"Well - I guess the milling company thought it was just too much to do to clean it all up. Least that's what I heard. Youse gotta think how much melted iron, and glass, and pieces of stumps was pulled out by that big wind and half burned. And lotsa other stuff. - Ach, Gott in Himmel - that sawdust that was part burned was a couple feet deep some places! ‘Hey just let it all lay. And in the end - ", he stopped abruptly, rubbed his chin thoughtfully and then went on, "Now I'm gonna tell you how WE got it."

We sat up straighter, expectantly, "Yes how?" "Now youse just listen real good and I'll tell you how. Your great grandfather, that was Nickolas Ripp that came from far away - way across the big water, from Deutschland ach, youse are too young to understand that - anyways he bought it for a dollar an acre. And he let it lay too. He didn't do nothing with it. Then when he died your mama's father, Grandpa Ripp, got it. And he didn't do nothing with it. But five years after your mane--my Lizzie—an' me was married I bought me them seventy acres from him. She wanted to live closer to her folks, youse know we used to live where your uncle Faltin's house is now about two miles from here. That must have been about 1904 -we just had Conrad and Wendel then. Youse two and Benny was born here."

He paused, and the faraway look in his eyes reinforced in my child mind that what he was remembering was both happy and sad. I'd heard enough about Lizzie before to sense SHE was not a 'Kleinigkeit" in his life.

“Oh yes “ he sighed, and went on to talk about the land, "that was some mess to clean up! Lotsa brush growed over and lotsa stuff just still laying there. But we had help. Our

neighbors, the Vandenhovens across the road, your uncle Tony and Valtin and Stephan and my brother-in laws Jake and Martin Heim - they all helped. And' the women brought the lunch and coffee.

"When we cleared enough I built me this house and barn, and later on the blacksmith shed an' the chicken coop-——ja, I must say I had some help there too. They all come when they could, and especially for the roof-raising. We had a real good time then ——a keg of beer, lotsa eating, pie and cake your mama baked, and singing..."

"Oh yes," he sighed, tapping the ashes from his corn cob into the palm of his hand before continuing.

"Youse know what that 1911 up close to the top of the silo means?"
"No, what does it mean?" I asked.

"Well, that's when we built it. An' that's when Wendel got the cement in his eye - and when we put the year and the two horse shoes in the cement before it was dry-——for good luck," he smiled ironically at the "good luck'.

At this point my attention was beginning to wander. I wasn't particularly interested in what had happened in the family before I was even born. I wanted to know more about exciting things, and implied as much , "But is there anything else concerning the fire?"

"Yes kids. There's something else, I heard it from the Jake Ripp family in Sturgeon Bay." "Und was war das?" I asked eagerly while he stoked his pipe. "Well - let's see once - there's a place they call Tornado Park on the road to Sturgeon Bay - just on this side. Everything' was burned out around there. Houses, barns, cattle, horses,' everything! Lots and lotsa people died, or was hurt.
Anyways, there's a kinda marker on the place where there was a well. They say seven people crawled in that well to get away from them flames that was a roaring - most on their backs! The last one of them seven seen it was afire already - the wood part - so he quick ripped away the wood from the opening and after he crawled in, he took that wet blanket he put around his shoulders when he was running to get ahead of them flames, and put it over the opening."
We held our breaths, spell bound, 'What then?"
"Well, five of them seven that got in that well lived. The two kids was too far gone before they got there, I heard tell-…

Saddened by the fate of the children, we could only mumble under our breaths, "These poor children!" We were completely fascinated by the magnitude of the fire - its terror and tragedy and found many other occasions to induce Matt to carry on the tale, or even repeat some of the shocking details.

The fire, with its almost unprecedented death toll brought the name of New Franken to newspaper readers around the world at the time. In a related story, Matt liked especially to tell how St Kilian church and the bell were saved. When the fire burned close that Sunday evening of October 8, the parish priest ran to the church and rang the tower bell in a loud alarm signal, which brought all available men, women and children running to see what they could do to help.

They had grabbed up pitch forks, shovels, milk cans for water - anything they could quickly lay their hands on. They knew instantly the emergency had to do with the big fire. They could hear its roar and smell the smoke from their homes...

By forming a bucket brigade, and working hand in hand, they managed to save the building, its statuary and other artifacts.

Ironically, on Monday, October 9, the much-prayed-for rain fell. The first in many months. Rain, that soaked deeply into the smoldering earth and ashes. Paradoxically, it was the beginning of fifteen years of the most bountiful rainfall in the history of Wisconsin.

Matt wasn't our only informant, of course, and as the years passed we heard about the fire in many ways. And the significance of it and the bell, in New Franken and surrounding towns. According to _The History of Brown - county, the largest settlements in the line of fire on the east side of Green Bay (besides New Franken), were Walhain, Humbolt and Robinsonville, to name sane in our immediate vicinity, Property loss in these communities was estimated to be at least $2,000,000. (A great deal of money in 1871.)
Sufferers from far and near flocked into Green Bay, which the fire had bypassed, and virtually every home became an asylum for women and children. The city of Green Bay also was the center for the mournful news that poured in from the devastated areas.
While money, clothing, and provisions came in by train from all parts of the United States, it was impossible to totally alleviate the suffering caused by the loss of over fifteen hundred lives.

A loss, that far exceeded that of The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 wherein 250 lives were lost, and parallels the Peshtigo to the day. While many people managed to save themselves by fleeing to the lake and standing for hours in its waters the property damage of the devastating Chicago fire (over $98,000,000) far exceeded, and eclipsed , that of the Peshtigo - both of which were caused by some of the same factors: drought, wooden buildings and a strong south—west wind.

Many stories relating to these fires abound, one of which is the history and significance of the bell that was instrumental in saving the church, which stood in the path of the Peshtigo fire.

Matt's father, Melchior, had often told him about the importance of the church's bell in the lives of the early settlers. It seems, Melchior's uncle Michael Burkard, teacher and leader of the first group of immigrants to come to the New Franken wilderness in l845, had told him the story behind the bell.

When Michael, his wife Antonia, and five children (along with about a dozen other families) left Dettelbach, Germany they brought with them their deep-seated religious beliefs, besides their more tangible possessions. The bell, given to than by well-wishing friends and relatives symbolized those beliefs. A gift for their new church they would most certainly build soon as possible. And name after the Wurzburg-Dettelbach patron saint Kilian.

When the bell was in transit the sailing vessel Venice, a three-masted schooner which had embarked at Harve, encountered a violent storm. In order to give the ship more buoyancy the captain ordered all heavy freight cast overboard. Except the bell, which he ordered battened down. Consequently, before the crew could comply with the captain's first order, the battened-down bell rang. A nearby vessel responded to the presumed distress call and saved the cargo and precious bell.

In the years that followed this sane bell signaled the tine for Sunday, holiday, wedding and funeral masses. Called the settlers to prayer for the noon and early evening Angelus. Tolled their dead. Saved their church in the 1871 fire.. .

What the settlers and early descendants never knew was that many years later, on September l5, 1948, their church was finally destroyed by fire despite the presence of bells. The ropes had burned away before the priest could get to them. Them? Yes, for in 1889 on the occasion of the twelfth centennial of the martyrdom of the New Franken parish's patron saint, Kilian, the parishioners had purchased four new bells. They traded in the original one from Germany as part payment on the new ones.

Value received: Forty two dollars and thirty seven cents.