

# from fire science

## The Deadliest Fire in History

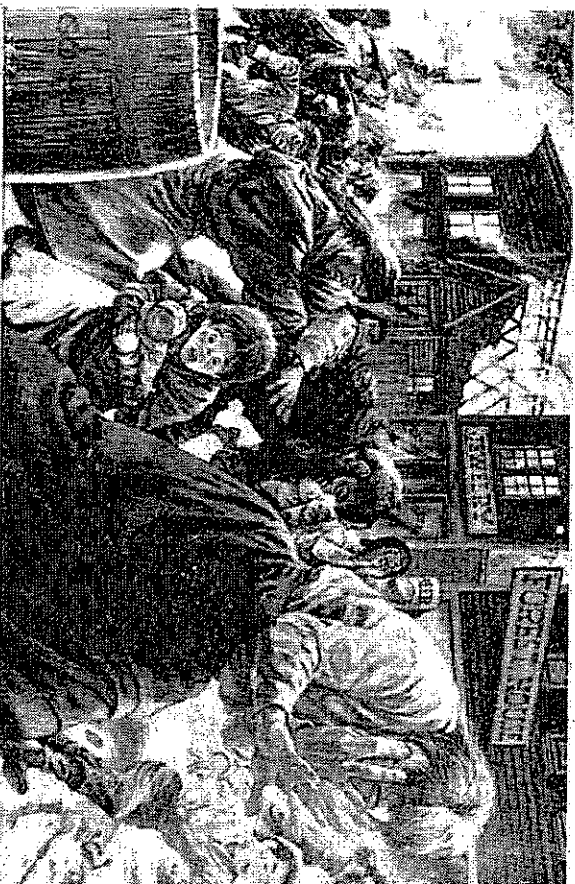
by Rob Caplan

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 is a constant reminder of the loss of life and property that brought tragedy throughout the western hemisphere. It was reported in media throughout the world. However, at the same time, another fire was raging roughly 240 miles to the north that claimed nearly 5 times the people and consumed more land than the Great Chicago Fire almost 2,000 times over. The Peshtigo Fire in Wisconsin will forever be known as the deadliest fire in United States history. It's dramatic fire behavior and consumption still perplexes experts today. These two fires help us to focus on fire safety during Fire Prevention Month.

The fire began on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1871, roughly, the same time as the Great Chicago Fire. It had been an unusually dry season and the weather had been hot and windy several days prior to the fire. The cause of the fire was never discovered but a spark ignited which spread to the nearby forest. Originally, the fire was driven by strong winds that caused the fire to 'spot'. (Spotting indicates that the main portion of the fire has blown hot embers outward and started a new fire downwind.) These spot fires rapidly accelerated creating larger fires in multiple areas, consuming everything in its path. Soon the fire became so large that there was nothing that could be done to stop it. It continued to rage uninhibited, burning a hole in the

countryside. By the time the flames would be extinguished, 1.2 million acres of forest had been razed (in terms of area that is twice the size of Rhode Island). The city of Peshtigo was destroyed in one hour. Twelve communities were destroyed, and 1,200 to 2,500 people had lost their lives. The actual death toll has never been calculated because many of the population records were destroyed in the fire as well. Countless bodies were charred so badly that they were never identified; they were just buried in a mass grave known as the Peshtigo cemetery.

At one point, the fire was so intense that it jumped several miles over the waters of Green Bay and continued to



Artist Ned Bissner's conception of the terrified populace fleeing from Peshtigo. As smoke poured, the vibrations of the street.

Society's response to the destruction.

rage into the landscape. Witnesses who survived the natural disaster stated that the firestorm created a tornado of fire also known as a 'fire whirl', which threw rail cars and houses into the air. Many of the survivors claimed they stayed alive by immersing themselves in the Peshtigo River, wells, or

other bodies of water. However, some drowned, or died of hypothermia while trying to seek refuge in the cold October water. The fire was eventually extinguished with the help of a change in weather and temperature. Rain, cool temperatures, and diminished winds helped ease the harsh flames until they could burn no longer but the damage had been done.

National Fire Prevention Month was originally created to honor the lives of the people who perished in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which was ironically dverted by the forgotten memories of the Peshtigo Fire. *Firestorm at Peshtigo: A Town, Its People, and the Deadliest Fire in American History* is a recent publication by Denise Gees, and William Lutz, which gives a horrific quote of the event. Lutz states, "A firestorm is called nature's nuclear explosion. Here's a wall of flame, a mile high, 5 miles wide, traveling 90-100 miles per hour, hotter than a crematorium, turning sand into glass." The sight of a literal wall of flame sent survivors into a state of shock that many of them never fully recovered from.

As we continue with Fire Prevention Month, we remember the Peshtigo Fire and the damage it caused. Many people never heard of this fire or of its destructiveness but we must pay tribute to the lives lost in Peshtigo, Wisconsin as we do with the lives lost from the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. At SMCC we remember Peshtigo as the deadliest fire in American society. In conjunction with Fire Prevention month and overall safety we are also reminded of Halloween safety and ways to protect our children, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, cousins, and friends who may be trick-or-treating this Halloween.

### HERE ARE SOME HELPFUL HALLOWEEN SAFETY TIPS

- Know the route your kids will be taking if you aren't going with them. Let them know that they are to check in with you

# adventures from away

every hour, by phone or by stopping back at home. Make sure that they know not to deviate from the planned route so that you always know where they will be.

- Costumes should be made of flame retardant material. If they are homemade, make sure and use either a fire retardant spray or fabric that has been treated with fire retardant.

- Help your young child pick out or make a costume that will be safe. Make sure that it's fire proof or treated with fire retardant. If they are wearing a mask of any kind, make sure that the eye holes are large enough for good peripheral vision.

- Serve your kids a filling meal before trick or treating and they won't be as tempted to eat any candy before they bring it home for you to check. Check your local grocery store or craft store for Halloween cook books full of tasty treats on a horror theme for both kids and adults.

- Be sure to show your children how to cross a street properly. They should always look both ways before crossing the street and should only cross at corners or crosswalks. Make sure that if you have more than one child, they know to take the hand of the younger child when they cross a street.

- Teach your kids about getting into strangers' cars or talking to strangers, no matter what the person says to them. Explain to them as simply as you can that some adults are bad and want to hurt children, that they should never go into a house that they don't know, get into a car or go anywhere with a stranger. Also, tell them what to do should this happen, to scream as loud as they can to draw attention and to run away as fast as they can to someplace safe.

- Make sure to work into your child's costume reflector strips, a flash light or light stick to make them more visible at night. This will assure that they are seen by drivers and that you can keep an eye on them as well if they get ahead of you while trick or treating.

For more information on Halloween Safety please visit [halloween-safety.com/halloween\\_safety\\_costumes.html](http://halloween-safety.com/halloween_safety_costumes.html).

Stay Safe out there and have a great Halloween!

## A Day in the Life of a Fire Science Live-in Student

by Tony Brown

Have you ever wondered what life would be like as a firefighter? What about life as a college student? Have you ever wondered what it would be like as both? That is exactly what Southern Maine Community College Fire Science Students do;

they live the lives of both a firefighter and a college student. All the good parts and all the bad parts of both. But even with the bad parts most of them do just fine and they get a lot from the experience.

The life of a live-in is similar in some ways to the life of a regular Southern Maine Community College student: the typical go to class, do your homework and make friends. But the difference between the two is very drastic. A live-in student has to do a lot more than just the typical fun college stuff. They train with the fire department, respond to emergency calls, drive the trucks, be the first fire fighter on scene (sometimes), make the first actions and decisions at a fire scene and finally, are expected to give station tours and keep the station clean and presentable.

Live-in students have the responsibilities of a firefighter; to help whatever and whatever the problem may be. They are responsible for being the first firefighters on

fire calls when necessary as this carries the responsibility of making preliminary decisions. In an emergency situation if you make a good decision you can do a lot of good, but if you make a bad decision you can make things a lot worse. So it is up to the live-in students to make the first decisions in most cases. This is not as hard as it may seem, because we train constantly to become proficient and to keep us proficient.

Along with the duties at emergency situations, live-in students have responsibilities at their respective stations, which may include cleaning, upkeep, equipment checks and apparatus checks. Maintaining the cleanliness of a fire station is a must because it's a public building and the town's people pay for the station with municipal and county taxes. Keeping the station house properly maintained is key in order for a successful tour.

Finally, in most towns where there are live-in student residents it is their responsibility to make sure that the fire trucks are ready to work and when any problem arises, it is their responsibility to report it.

This is a huge responsibility for the live-in fire science resident considering that the full time firefighters' lives depend upon the maintenance and upkeep of all the fire fighting equipment.

The responsibilities that are placed on the live-in student's shoulders carry a significant weight. Some participants have to leave the program, but for the type of student who really loves the job, it seems easy. The purpose of this article is not meant to turn people away from the live-in program rather, it is to let people know what they are getting

into. The live-in program is a great experience and really sets students up for future careers... for those willing to put in a lot of work. *Illustration provided by Emma Stone*

