

Rising From the Ashes: A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. John in Peshtigo, WI

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Church History

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If you were to go to Peshtigo, WI, a small, quiet town 40 miles north of Green Bay, it would look like many other Wisconsin cities located in farming communities. With a population of around 3,000, it boasts three gas stations, one stop light and more than enough bars to keep the town's people satisfied – your typical small northern village. But driving north on Highway 41 as you pass through town, something would strike you as out of the ordinary. Painted on the side of the Peshtigo Pharmacy is a mural of a city on fire, with people and animals struggling for their lives as they seek shelter from the flames in the waters of the Peshtigo River. Written in bold letters above the mural are the words, "Peshtigo: The city reborn from the ashes of America's worst forest fire."

On October 8, 1871, the same day as the Chicago Fire, the Great Peshtigo Fire ravaged the town and its people, destroying everything in sight and causing unheard of losses of life. To this day, this event has continued to shape the history, people, and also the churches of the city. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. John's is one of these churches. Founded in 1870, its members have passed through the flames of one of America's worst natural disasters. It is a church ripe with history, but one cannot begin to understand St. John's without understanding the history of its location and people.

It is difficult to establish when the city of Peshtigo was founded. It is generally believed that Louis Chappieu, a French trader settled in the area in 1796 and began trading with the Indians. Other rumors claim that a black man was the first non-Native American to venture into the area and begin trading furs with the Indians. Isaiah Powell is credited with building the first home in present-day Peshtigo in 1835. He constructed the first saw mill, which would come to be an important part of the economy of Peshtigo.¹

An area rich with large, mature forests, Peshtigo soon evolved into a booming lumber town. In 1868, the Peshtigo Lumbering and Manufacturing Company had dominated the city and constructed the largest woodenware factory of its type in the United States. The population had grown to over 2,000, but many more lived in the city that had not been included in the recent census. A railroad and harbor several miles down the river that led into the waters of Green Bay served to transport the city's products to Milwaukee and Chicago.²

Many of the early settlers were German Lutherans seeking to escape religious persecution and wars of their homeland. They arrived in Peshtigo where property could be found for cheap, and they cleared the forested land and built their log cabins so that they could work the soil and live as farmers. Many worked also in the factories and lumber yards to supplement their incomes.

In the early days of the town, there were no Lutheran pastors to serve the people living there. Eventually, sometime in the 1860s, traveling preachers (*Reisen Prediger*) sent out by either the LCMS or WELS church bodies came through the town and invited

¹ "Peshtigo's Point of Beginning". Peshtigo Times. 7 October 1998: C5+.

² "Peshtigo's Point of Beginning". Peshtigo Times. 7 October 1998: C5+.

the German-speaking Lutherans to gather for worship. They preached in the homes of the settlers, administering the Sacraments and preaching God's Word before moving on to the next settlement. No clear records of who these preachers were exist.

In 1869, Rev. Carl Huebner was sent out by the Wisconsin Synod to serve the people of Marinette County.

He preached in the homes of Lutherans in Upper, Middle and Lower Sugar Bush (Grover) as well as in Peshtigo Village and Peshtigo Harbor. He organized these people into a congregation called: "German Lutheran Congregation of Peshtigo and Surrounding Territory". The Constitution was signed on September 11, 1870. The following members were elected as officers: F.C. Bartels, Ed. Kittner, John Smith, Charles [Karl] Lemke, and August Scheelke.³

A small parsonage was built for Pastor Huebner two miles north of the church's present location, near Luigi's restaurant by Highway 41.⁴ Pastor Huebner also started Zion Lutheran Church in Peshtigo to serve the Lutherans there, so they wouldn't have to make the journey to Grover (a "suburb" located southwest of Peshtigo, sometimes referred to as "Sugar Bush") on Sundays.

Because it was a town filled with lumberjacks and rough-necked factory workers, Peshtigo had many of the problems one might expect. Prostitution and drinking were a common occurrence, and the preachers of the village did much to warn against the dangers of such a sinful lifestyle. But still, the town prospered and enjoyed the success that the townspeople worked hard to achieve.

But the fall of 1871 would change everything. As a drought swept the whole Midwest in the months before the fire, the countryside dried up. Following a particularly

³ Meyer, Arnold, with help from Ed Zahn. "Church History [of St. John's]". Centennial Directory 1874-1974.

⁴ Lemke, Leonard "Bud". Telephone interview. 6 December 2008.

dry summer, Peshtigo went 8 weeks without rain, except for a few minutes of drizzle which evaporated as soon as it touched the ground. The landscape was ripe for a disaster and for weeks the air was filled with dust, ashes and smoke from small forest fires surrounding Peshtigo. The townspeople, including the preachers, felt that something terrible was about to happen and fear was in the air.

On Sunday morning, in both Peshtigo and Marinette, every pew in every church was filled. The atmosphere outside was sickly, the smoke tinted a hue no one could name. The sawdust was piled in parched heaps. In Peshtigo, beneath the mill boardwalks, seventeen barrels of benzene were stored out of the ways. The people still believed that a friendly rain would fall, that their faith and prayers would not go unheard much longer... In the Lutheran church at the ten a.m. services Reverend Charles [Carl] Huebner was telling his parishioners much the same thing [as other preachers who were threatening destruction]. Perhaps the fires were just punishment for those weekly Saturday nights of drinking and lust. Perhaps the congregation had expected too much, perhaps they had been greedy or negligent. Shunned a neighbor. Treated a child cruelly.⁵

On the morning of October 8, 1871, Pastor Huebner held services in Lower Sugar Bush, and then made the journey that evening to conduct a service at Zion in Peshtigo. It is thought that he met that evening with Synod officials to make Zion and the German Lutheran Church (St. John) officially WELS churches.⁶ After escorting the Synod representatives back to their boat at the Peshtigo Harbor, Pastor Huebner returned to a city about to meet an unimaginable catastrophe.

Adding to the danger of the lack of moisture and threatening fires outside of town was the weather patterns. Fierce, dry winds were making their way towards Peshtigo, creating the perfect storm for disaster. Sometime between 8:30-9pm, the town and the outlying areas were hit by what can only be described as a firestorm.

⁵ Gess, Denise and William Lutz. *Firestorm at Peshtigo*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002. p. 57-58.

⁶ Learman, Rev. Charles. Personal interview. 28 November 2008.

The Peshtigo Fire was the ultimate mixed metaphor: flame-thrower, a monster, a giant, fiend, a tempest arriving on the waves, wings, columns, and plumes and always more beautiful, faster than, fiercer than, hotter than the mind can fathom. A firestorm. Nothing compares to the extreme violence of a firestorm, and no other fire exhibits more unpredictable and outrageous behavior during which superheated flames of at least 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit (the temperature of a crematorium) advance on winds of 100 miles per hour or stronger. The diameter of such a fire ranges from one thousand to ten thousand feet – three to thirty-three football fields wide. When a firestorm erupts in a forest, it is a blowup, nature's nuclear explosion, generating the same heat and devastating power as an atomic bomb. The only precedent for a fire of such magnitude, the only frame of reference for a firestorm, was the Great Fire of London in 1666.⁷

Nothing could have saved the townspeople from the extreme heat and destructive power of such a fire. Many suffocated before the actual flames even reached town from the suction of the storm eating all the available oxygen. Those who chose to run burst into fire, and the only remotely safe refuge was found in wells and the waters of the Peshtigo River. Even there, victims struggled to breathe as the air was tainted with smoke and because of low oxygen content.

Karl Lemke, a founding member of the congregation who lived in Sugar Bush had loaded his family into a wagon and rushed towards town to escape the fire. When one of the horses pulling the wagon became entangled in the harness and fell over, he jumped out of the wagon to free it. As he ran, a hole was burned into his side, but he hardly noticed. When he returned to the wagon, his family was gone, burned to ashes and not even recognizable. After only a few moments, the only thing that remained was the partially melted metal parts of the wagon. Terrified, he took refuge in a nearby creek bed and managed to survive the fire.⁸

⁷ Gess and Lutz, p. 101.

⁸ Lemke, Bud. Telephone interview.

Back in town, the situation was no better. One father, after seeing his wife burst into flames in front of him, slit the throats of his children and then killed himself, rather than burn to death. Dead men, women, children and babies lay smoldering on the ground. After the fire had burned itself out several hours later, the town truly looked like the pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic bombs were dropped. The only things standing were portions of new homes built with wood that was still green. Railroad cars had been completely destroyed, leaving only melted wheels and axels behind.⁹ Of the 2,000 residents of Peshtigo and the surrounding areas, as many as 1,800 were killed.¹⁰

Help began pouring into the area the next morning from Marinette, the town to the north, but it would be several days before word reached Milwaukee and Madison because the telegraph lines had been burned through. When aid finally arrived, it was evidence of the whole of Wisconsin coming together to offer help in this great tragedy. Resources were even sent from Chicago, which had suffered the famous fire that very same day.

Though nearly all the members of German Lutheran Congregation had been killed in the fire (Karl Lemke and a handful of others made it through) and its facilities and parsonage destroyed, a substantial number of Zion members had survived. As the town began to recover, its members desired to begin worshipping again, but they had no pastor

⁹ Gess and Lutz, p. 167.

¹⁰ Reports on death tolls are hard to determine. Many of the bodies were reduced to ashes and were impossible to identify. Hundreds were buried in mass graves. Scores of people who had survived but lost family members and their homes decided to leave without telling anybody, because they had no reason to stay. Therefore, some survivors were counted among the dead. Rough estimates are always between 1,100 and 1,800 killed in the fire.

because Rev. Huebner had disappeared.¹¹ The WELS stepped in and offered great financial support to build a new church in Peshtigo. For a time, Zion was served by pastors from Oconto to the south.¹²

The congregation outside of town (soon to be St. John) took much longer to recover. The soil had been so badly damaged by the fire that they were unable to grow crops, so no one bothered to live on the land. But by 1873, the land had recovered and settlers moved back into the area. Wanting to restart the church, they asked WELS for the same treatment and financial support that Zion had received a few years earlier after the fire. However, monetary problems in the WELS prevented them from being able to assist the members of the new church – a decision that was not taken well by the people of the Grover church. Resentment over this supposed mistreatment would last for decades, and even until today.¹³

Nevertheless, the people moved on. The new church was formally organized on January 1, 1874, according to church minutes. Officers were Fritz Karls, president; August Scheelk, Secretary; Fritz Sterzing, Treasurer; Heinrich Mathes, Carl Wieting and Heinrich Ehlers, Trustees. A new constitution was written and the church was given the name “Ev. Luth. St. Johannes Gemeinde”.¹⁴ It was decided that a small church would be built, “40’ long, 26’ wide, and 16’ high on three acres of land donated by Fred Warnecke in town 30, range 22 in the (then) Town of Peshtigo.”¹⁵ Pastors from Oconto served the congregation at this time: Rev. Leib (Dec. 1874-Aug. 1875), Rev, Buering (Oct. 1875-

¹¹ For many years, it was thought that Pastor Huebner had perished in the fire. But according to an interview with Pastor Charles Learman, several decades ago records were discovered of him serving in Manitowoc, years after the fire. Apparently he believed that all his members had been killed and he had no reason to remain in Peshtigo, so he simply left without informing anyone in town.

¹² Learman, Charles. Interview.

¹³ Learman/Lemke. Interviews.

¹⁴ The church was predominantly German speaking until around the 1930s.

¹⁵ “Church History [of St. John’s]”.

1879), and Rev. Albrecht (1879-1881). The new church was completed in 1876, and services were held once every three weeks.

Membership at this time grew steadily, and in June of 1881 a new parsonage was constructed. They decided that it was time to have a full-time pastor. However, at this time, a controversy began. Several of the members were still bitter about the WELS' lack of funding and aid years before, and wanted to call a "free-lance" pastor, one that wasn't part of an official synod.

Finally, in the meeting of April 18, 1881, it was decided to call a minister as soon as possible from the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin since it was through the missionary work of this Synod that the Gospel was first brought to Grover and it was Wisconsin Synod pastors who had served and advised the congregation during its early struggles.¹⁶

The first pastor to be called was Anton Pieper, a fresh seminary graduate and brother of Professor August Pieper. Being unmarried, he lived in the parsonage with his mother and faithfully served St. John and also the congregation in Beaver Creek for seven years before moving on to another call. Pastor Voss served as vacancy pastor until Pastor Christian Gevers accepted the call in 1889.

On October 31, 1890 it was decided that the congregation needed a larger, modern church of brick and stone. \$5,000 was budgeted to pay for the new building, and each member contributed \$30, one cord of stone and two loads of sand. Land at a separate site, two miles south of the original location was donated. Much of the work was done by the people of the congregation, and the new building was dedicated in November, 1892. The church is still in use today, a testament to the hard and quality work of the members.

¹⁶ "Church History [of St. John's]".

When the old parsonage burned down, a new and larger one was built next to the church. Pastor Gevers accepted a call to Elkhorn, WI, so the new pastor, Rev. Martin Kionka was the first to live in the new home. Beginning in 1898, he served St. John and Beaver Creek, and did outreach work all around Marinette County. He began churches in Coleman and Crivitz, and also served families scattered around to the south. These congregations still exist today.

In 1904, the church established its own cemetery. Many of the gravestones bear the dates of 1912-1918, years when a flu epidemic swept the nation. There is even a gravestone in the shape of an arm. Apparently, a member lost his arm in a farming accident and felt the need to give it a proper burial.

Pastor Kionka accepted a call to Milwaukee in 1907 ^{and} ~~as~~ was replaced by Rev. C.G. Kleinlein. Membership continued to grow during his ministry in Grover. He served until 1918, when he resigned because of poor health and retired to Lark, North Dakota.¹⁷

Rev. Carl Henning was the next to serve as pastor. He was the first to serve primarily St. John, because by this time the other churches in the area had received their own ministers. Because state regulations at this time were not strict, he also served as a teacher four days a week. However, by 1928, the laws had changed and a religious teacher was hired to take over those duties. Pastor Henning put great emphasis on each member being well educated and able to spread the Gospel with their words and actions.

In April of 1920, the church held their first English services. From then on, they would hold one English service per month. This reflected the growing makeup of the area and the assimilating of its people into the American way of life.

¹⁷ "Church History [of St. John's]".

Pastor Henning retired on October 28, 1934 after 16 years of service, and Rev. ^{Gervais?} Gervais Fischer was called as his replacement. Fischer immediately began stirring things up. He restructured the educational system and established requirements for confirmation. He put great emphasis on Sunday School and Bible Class and worked to begin a Christian Day School. He also encouraged the congregation to support missions by emphasizing good stewardship. Also at this time, the congregation translated its constitution into English, and began regular services in that language.

In January of 1936, a newer and larger parsonage was built next to the church building. However, it seems that the tragedy of fire is something that St. John was unable to avoid throughout its history. According to stories, two years after moving into the parsonage, Pastor Fischer noticed that he had an infestation of bees in the attic. Though extremely book smart, it seems that he was short on common sense. He had heard that bees hate smoke, so he decided it would be good idea to light a small fire in the attic and “smoke” the bees out. He was successful in evicting the bees, but also burned down the parsonage in the process. This story continues to be a joke among the members of St. John’s, though it was undoubtedly not so funny at the time. The congregation decided to build another house according to the same design on the exact same spot, and this four bedroom house is still in use today (although with many upgrades and additions).¹⁸

In 1941, Pastor Fischer received a call to St. Jacobi in Milwaukee, which he accepted (not because he was ashamed of burning the house down). Rev. Norman Schlavensky accepted the call to St. John’s and began serving in November of 1941.

In preparations for celebrating the 50th anniversary of their church dedication, the building went under extensive repairs and remodeling. New furniture and chancel

¹⁸ Learman, Charles. Interview.

accessories were purchased, a communion rail was constructed and the basement was refurbished. In 1947, an addition was added on to the front of the church to extend the entrance, which also included a mother's room and bathrooms.

On September 26, 1951, Pastor Schlavensky received a call to Ephrata in Milwaukee and Rev. A.A. Hellmann was installed as the new pastor on Dec 2, 1951.

The year of 1952 brought more changes to the church with the removal of the church barn and chicken coop, with a new garage taking its place. In 1954 further improvements were made with the addition of a microphone and speaker system for the church, as well as new flooring.

In 1960, the occasional German services were brought to an end, apparently because of the lack of demand for such a service. Since then, English has been the only language preached and taught at St. John's.

In late 1961, Pastor Hellmann took a call to Slades Corner, and after a short vacancy served by the pastor of Coleman, in August, Rev. Joel Sauer was installed as pastor.

Several significant steps were taken during the ministry of Pastor Sauer. At this time, the church was still not officially a member of the WELS, even though all of its pastors had come from that church body. It appears that there was still a bit of resentment over the WELS treatment of the church during their early founding years. However, under the advice and guidance of Pastor Sauer, the congregation finally voted to join the Synod on January 20, 1963. After rewriting their constitution and making the

necessary changes, Wisconsin Synod formally accepted St. John's as a charter member of the WELS.¹⁹

Also at this time, Lutheran pastors in the area began doing daily devotions on a local radio station, WOCO in Oconto. This is a practice that continues to this day, and has become a beneficial and uplifting service to the community.

In May of 1963, discussions began about building a school building. Conditions were becoming crowded for Sunday School classes, and the children of the members had been attending either public school or Trinity Lutheran Grade School in Marinette, and it was decided that there was enough demand within in the church to begin their own education. A building fund was established in the spring of 1964, and research was done to inquire of the costs. On June 7 of that year, it was voted to begin construction on a school building. Funds were raised and architects were hired which took longer than expected. Finally, ground was broken on May 1, 1966, and the school was completed and dedicated on April 16, 1967.

School classes began the following fall, with Miss Sally Schuelke (now Sally Zittlow) being called on an emergency basis. Twenty-one students in grades 1-8 attended the first year. Miss Schuelke had to return to school the next year, so Miss Myrna Schauble (now Myrna Luehmann) was called to replace her. She served for one year before she resigned to be married.

Mr. Mark Hinds was called on a permanent basis to serve as teacher and principal, and by 1974, the enrollment had grown to 37 students. He served faithfully for the next decade.

¹⁹ Learman, Charles. Interview.

In April of 1970, Pastor Sauer received a call to serve as the dean of students at Michigan Lutheran Seminary. He accepted the call after much deliberation and left for Michigan on June 7. In August of 1970, Rev. Robert Oswald became the new pastor. However, after only a few short months of serving, Pastor Oswald was forced to resign temporarily due to health problems. Three local pastors helped serve the vacancy and the education of the members and children continued in the absence of a full-time minister.

In May 1971, Pastor Arnold Meyer, a veteran minister, was called and installed that month. He oversaw the expansion of the parsonage garage, and numerous additions and improvements for the church's 100th anniversary celebration. New pews were purchased with the old one donated to Resurrection Lutheran in Aurora, Illinois, a mission congregation at the time. Driveways were blacktopped and a basketball court was added behind the school. Pastor Sauer returned to preach for the centennial service.

Tragically, in December of 1977, Pastor ^{Meyer}Arnold was called from service to the congregation and from earthly life through a sudden heart attack. He was buried in the cemetery behind the church, and remains the only pastor who served at St. John to be buried there.

Another long vacancy in the pastoral office followed his death. There are many reasons why those who were called return the calls, but among the reasons was the salary that was offered. A problem that has remained at St. John throughout its history is that it has not compensated its workers at the level recommended by the synod. It is also possibly one factor for many of the called workers leaving to accept another call after only a few years. In its 134 year history, only one pastor has served as much as sixteen years at St. John (Pastor Henning). Many of the called workers who previously served

St. John and are still serving the Lord in other locations have stated privately that they could not afford to stay and support the needs of their family. The wife of one pastor stated, "We often did not know where our next meal would come from."²⁰ Such were the circumstances for those who served at St. John, and to an extent these problems continue to this day, although progress has been made.

In 1979, Pastor Kenneth Wenzel accepted the call to serve the congregation. During his years of service, the congregation experience some of its most significant growth in it elementary school. It was during this time that Miss Linda Nowack (Mrs. Linda Hoffmann) was called to serve as a teacher in the lower grades. She served from 1980-1992, and again from 2002 until the end of the 20007-2008 school year. In 1986, Pastor Wenzel accepted a call to serve as one of the chaplains in the Wisconsin Institutional Ministry program.

A vacancy of several months ended when Pastor Beck Goldbeck, who had been serving El Paso, Texas, accepted the call to become the congregation's thirteenth resident pastor, and was installed that year (1986). Pastor Goldbeck faced several difficult situations that had a pronounced affect upon the enrollment in the congregation's school. A principal who practiced what many considered to be unreasonable and excess discipline of certain students was asked to leave the school after serving for four years. The school had reached an enrollment of almost 60 students, but declined to 28 students during these years. Many parents removed their children from the school at this time, and the recovery has been slow and difficult.

During Pastor Goldbeck's service, the congregation celebrated ^{its} 100th anniversary in its current house of worship. They were also preparing to celebrate the

²⁰ Learman, Charles. Interview.

congregation's 125th anniversary when he accepted a call to serve at Manitowoc Lutheran High School. In preparation for that anniversary, the congregation undertook an extensive redecorating of the worship facility, making repairs to the ceiling and walls that had deteriorated over the years. Additions and remodeling were also done in the parsonage.

Pastor Goldbeck and his family moved from St. John's in July of 1998. In mid-August, the congregation extended a call to Rev. Charles Learman who was serving in Texas at Lord of Life Ev. Lutheran in Friendswood. He accepted the call and was installed in the congregation on September 17, 1998. He continues to serve as pastor there today.

In 1999, the congregation celebrated its 125th anniversary. The anniversary Sundays were marked by sons of the congregation who had gone on to become pastors being asked to return and lead the congregation in worship. They included Rev. Larry Zahn, Rev. Stephen Sauer, and Rev. David Zahn.

The faithful service of the teachers who served the congregation during recent years has helped to restore the confidence of the members. During the services of Principals Scott Loeburger and Jason Rupnow, the enrollment has increased and as the opportunity for a pre-school program was approved by the congregation, a decision was made to construct an addition to the school building. Plans for a gym were hoped for, but were not realized when the congregation thought the costs would be too great. Two offices, handicapped restrooms facilities, and a large storage and all purpose room were added. The debt on the \$200,000 project was eliminated in less than a year following the

dedication service. Now, another project is in the early stages of planning to add a spacious gym and fellowship facility.²¹

The congregation's attitude toward compensation for its called workers has also found reflection in its support of the synod's work. It has been a challenge to keep this before the congregation throughout its history. A number of people believe this attitude still dates back to the earliest years of the congregation when the synod was not able to assist the congregation financially in building its first church following the days of the Great Peshtigo Fire. Hard feelings have seemingly been passed down from one generation to the next.

In spite of the many problems and tragedies that have plagued the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. John in the Town of Grover, the congregation has remained strong. It has contributed a number of pastors and teachers to the Lord's work from the member families of the congregation. In addition, another eleven pastors and teachers have come from those who served the congregation in its ministry.

The congregation has remained strong in its membership. While the population of the area is decreasing due to young people moving to cities and small farms being consolidated into larger farms, St. John's has not seen a decrease in membership. Strong family ties and families that have remained in the area have all contributed to this. The congregation remains as one of the largest rural congregation in the WELS.²²

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. John is truly a church that has risen from the ashes and continues to be a stronghold for the preaching of the Gospel. On the

²¹ Learman, Charles. Interview.

²² Lemke, Bud. Telephone interview.

occasion of the congregation's 125th anniversary, a hymn that was written and dedicated to the congregation stated it well:

For years of blessing, Lord, we say Our songs of praise to you this day.
From out of fire's gloomy night You raised your church, a holy sight.
Lord, hear our prayers we raise to you For all your blessings great and true.

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Notes

Much of the knowledge and research has been done over a long period of time and comes from a general knowledge of having lived in Peshtigo for ten years. I am not able to specifically reference much of the data, because it comes from years of listening to stories of members and people who have lived there, as well as previous research done on a paper about the Peshtigo Fire. Special thanks are due to Leonard "Bud" Lemke, Jr., a lifelong member of St. John and great-grandson of Karl Lemke, a founding member and survivor of the fire. Also, more thanks that can be offered are due to my father, Pastor Charles Learman for the assembly of the research materials and extensive interviews and advice while writing the paper.

²³ This is a special edition newspaper issued in 1998. It was a compilation of old newspapers stories from before and after the Great Peshtigo Fire. This resource was used to a great extent to research the first hand experiences of the fire.