THE GREAT FIRE OF 1871

AFTER the Civil War a period of great business revival followed, accompanied by such high prices as had never before been heard of, nor have scarcely been equalled since. Moreover, building operations in a thousand new prospective cities of the West were resumed which called for vast quantities of lumber. As a result the woods that surrounded the Belgian settlers, which up to that time had only been a huge obstacle to their progress, assumed a considerable potential value. A number of mills were erected in different parts of the settlement, piers for shipping the forest products were built at many places on the shore of Green Bay, and the pioneers found that money could be made both winter and summer right at home on their farms.

Foremost among these mills was the Scofield Company's mill at Red River. A pier was built, 1100 feet long, and a mammoth shingle mill capable of sawing up to a million shingles a day. There was only one other mill on Lake Michigan capable of such large output. Hundreds of men, mostly Belgians and Indians, were employed in and around the mill, and a village containing three or four hundred inhabitants was built on the hill on the north side of the road leading down to the mill. On the flat below stood the mill and other buildings including a barn with stalls for a hundred horses. In the beginning it was customary for
the company to go down-state every fall and buy up several herds of cattle which were driven to Red River. The cows and calves were butchered to feed the hungry mill hands, and the bulls were used for skidding logs. Oxen were better for this work than horses, but they unusually lasted only one winter. Almost daily a schooner would take its load of unplanned pine planks and shingles and sail off to Milwaukee and Chicago.

The Scofield Company had a smaller mill on the west side of the waterfall about a mile southwest of Dyckesville. Here, too, most of the employees were Belgians. In 1872 or '73 a remarkable accident happened at this mill. The big boiler suddenly exploded, dividing itself in two. One part shot lengthwise through the mill killing nine persons and, flying through the woods, cut down the treetops like a huge cannonball.

The busiest of these mill centers was Little Sturgeon Bay in the north end of the settlement. Mr. Freeland Gardner came here a year or two before the Belgians and bought up thousands of acres of good timber land scattered all through the settlement. He started one enterprise after another, such as saw mill, gristmill, shipyard, lime kilns and ice houses, and gave employment to hundreds of men. The grist mill, built about at the beginning of the Civil War, was the first grist mill in the county and was a great boon to the pioneers. Sometimes fifty or sixty farmers would be there waiting their turn after having creaked all night over corduroy roads with their wagons pulled by oxen from Red River, Rosiere or Maplewood. There they met farmers from Liberty Grove and Washington Island who brought

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1 No vestige of this village now remains, but a part of the pier remains.
their grist in pound boats. To accommodate these men Mr. Gardner built a roomy house where they could sleep and cook while waiting for their grinding. He also built a three-story store building where merchandise of all kind was for sale. All manner of produce was taken in exchange.

Not the least important of this produce were the wild berries that grew abundantly in the slashings and open places in the woods. When not occupied with the harvest the women and children would go berry-picking. The next day, washed and dressed in clean frocks, the women would take a pail of blackberries in either hand and another on their heads and carry them five or six miles along the winding woodland trails to Little Sturgeon and come back loaded with groceries and necessaries for the children.

Mr. Gardner's most important enterprise was shipbuilding. At one time a hundred ship carpenters were employed, and the launching of a Gardner schooner was a frequent festival. Ten to twelve weeks was the usual time taken to build a ship from keel to truck, but sometimes that record was improved. In 1872 or '73 the freight rates were very high, and, when the keel of the J. W. Doan was laid, Mr. Gardner promised his foreman a bonus of one thousand dollars if the vessel was launched in sixty days. For two months there was a whirlwind of hustle infecting all from boss to waterboy. Finally came the triumphant climax on the fifty-ninth day, when the new schooner slipped down the skids all ready to be towed to Chicago to be equipped with rigging. She did not go empty, however, but took 700,000 feet of lumber on board, for which Mr. Gardner was paid $7.00 per thousand in freight charges, or a total of $4,900.00 for less than a week's use.

With these new markets for their forest products, it
was no longer a weary burden for the Belgians to clear new
land but a joy, for every acre of waste woods yielded money
that was invested in profit-making cows. Barns were built
and horses and cows were obtained. The industrious Bel-
gians who never tire of work began to ruminate on the pos-
sible time when they could assume just as pompous a pose
as the great landlords of the mother country, and they no
longer doubted that the bombastic letters which had lured
them across the sea after all contained the gospel truth.

But suddenly, in the midst of these happy visions, came
a tragedy so terrible that no pen is adequate to describe it.
In the recollection of the old people who still remain from
that time it lingers like a horrible, indescribable nightmare.
This was the great tornado of fire which overwhelmed this
region on Sunday October 8, 1871. Suddenly, in the great
darkness of the night, a vast torrent of fire descended upon
them, like the crash of judgment day, burning their farms to
barrenness and destroying their homes and woods and the
lives of their friends and relatives. The tornado covered
the entire Belgian settlement and a narrow fringe beyond,
being about ten miles wide and sixty miles long. Here
more than two hundred persons were burned to death, and
five thousand were made homeless and destitute. Simul-
taneously another tornado of fire passed up on the west side
of Green Bay, bringing death to more than seven hundred
people and destitution to a still larger number.

The summer of 1871 was excessively dry. Cultivated
lands dried up and cracked, and the swamps needed but a
match to blaze up. By the middle of September people be-
came alarmed. Forest fires were raging in different parts
all over the county which could not be put out. Several
swamps were on fire. Corduroy roads were burning, and
fences were reduced to ashes. From time to time a mill or a homestead was destroyed. No rain came and the fire serpent kept crawling underground, frequently blazing forth, destroying timber which had stood for centuries. The air all over the peninsula was oppressive to inhale. At night the sight was ominous. All around the horizon were seen intermittent flames, and the dark red, as seen through the smoky atmosphere, threatened a greater calamity soon to take place. The days dragged by, and the settlers fought the fire as best they could. Each day the people sighed and prayed for rain, but each day's cloudless skies and restless winds only increased the unceasing drouth.

Sunday (or "Saddy", as it was afterward called), October 8th, the morning dawned with no perceptible change. In the afternoon the wind was quite fresh but died down in the evening, and an unnatural stillness followed. Then, suddenly there came a fierce gust of wind, followed by a loud roaring. In the southwest dense clouds were noticeable. Then a flame shot up quickly followed by many leaping tongues of fire. Soon the flames were almost obliterated, however, by huge columns of smoke which now and then split apart, showing a furnace of fire behind. The terrific roaring of the wind together with the crash of falling trees caused the stoutest hearts to faint. The night was made more hideous by the startling cries of birds, flying frantically in every direction. Wild animals came bursting into the clearings, with whimpering voices seeking shelter among the bellowing cattle. People heard, saw and felt the terror of the lawless elements that had engulfed them, screamed with terror and fled in confusion along the highways and into the fields. Then suddenly a whirlwind of flame, in great clouds, from above the tops of the trees, fell
upon them enveloping everything. It was an atmosphere of fire. People inhaled it and fell down dead. Almost all, both the victims and the survivors, had but one thought—“it is the end of the world!”

While the fire destroyed almost all the buildings in the Belgian settlement in Brown and Kewaunee counties, and caused the loss of many lives there, the greatest destruction occurred in that part of the settlement which lies in Door County, particularly in the town of Brussels. Here about one hundred and thirty persons lost their lives. At Williamsonville (now known as Tornado Park, ten miles southwest of Sturgeon Bay), sixty persons were burned to death in the the middle of a three-acre field, where they had fled for safety. The terrible experience of that little village of people is beyond imagination, but we have a description by one of the survivors.\(^1\) In Section 26 of the Town of Union, the Scofield Company had put up a saw mill which was not yet completed. About thirty men were employed, but as this happened on a Sunday, most of the mill hands, who were young Belgians from the neighborhood, had gone to their homes. Thirteen men were in the boarding house. Suddenly they were aroused by an avalanche of fire that was sweeping toward them. They rushed out seeking shelter in a field of potatoes. Eleven of them were struck down by the rushing flames, but two turned aside and ran toward the mill. In the flume beneath was about two feet of water, and there they lay while the mill was burned down over their heads. The water in the flume became so hot that they were almost boiled to death. The eleven who perished

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\(^1\) For an account of this calamity, see Peninsula Historical Review, Vol. V: 41-55.
were unknown to all and were buried in a common grave in the churchyard in Dyckesville.

The following partial list of sufferers will show how general was the destruction in the Belgian settlement in Door County:

**BRUSSELS**

Boarding House, mill and other buildings of Scofield and Latham.

Toussaint Dachelet, barn, crops and furniture and clothing.

Francis Denis, house and contents, barn and crops and stock.

Eugene Renquin, house and contents, barn and contents.

Oliver Dedecker, house and contents, barn, crops and stock.

Chas. Piette, house and contents, barn, crops and stock.

Alexander Meunier, house and contents, barn, crops and part of stock.

Eli Simons, house and contents, barn and crops.

Frank Legreve, house and contents, barn and crops.

Louis Coisman, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and part of cattle.

Theodore Labotte, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.

Louis Gaspart, barn and crops.

Adrian Francois, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.

Joseph Francois, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.

Peter Francois, two barns, crops and farming tools.

J. B. Englebert, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.

Joseph Englebert, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.

Desire Englebert, house and contents, part of crops and farming tools.

J. F. Flemal, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Charles Mignon, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
N. Mignon, house and contents, barn, crops, farming utensils and cattle.
Antoine Mohemont, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Clement Bassine, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
J. B. Denamur, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Unknown, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
J. B. Dewitt, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Chas. Dewitt, barn, farming tools and part of crops.
Constant Flemal, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Leonard Leclou, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Eugene Delforge, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Francis Martin, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.
J. J. Lumage, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
C. Massart, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Dr. Antoine, house, contents and pharmacy.
Chas. Rouer, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Jos. Rouer, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Louis Mignon, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Leopold Lefebvre, house and contents, barns, crops, farming tools and cattle.
John B. Stroobans, house and contents, barn, crops farming tools and cattle.
P. J. Rinier, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Filiation Maccaux, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.
Joseph Piette, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Francis Gaspart, house, barn and crops.
J. J. Bero, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
E. Vangindertaelen, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.
A. Naniot, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Alex.-Pierre, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Prosper Naze, house and contents, blacksmith tools, barn, crops and farming tools.
John Fauville, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Isidore Tremble, house and contents, barn, crops, and farming tools.
Chas. Thiboune, house and contents, barn, crops, and farming tools.
Pascal Francois, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
J. G. Gilson, house and contents, barns, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Antoine Virlee, house and contents, barn, crops, and farming tools.
Francis Springlaire, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.
Eloi Meunier, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.
A Bohemian family lost house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.
Two school houses and one church.
Nine families in this town, the members of which were all burned to death, also had everything burned.

UNION

G. Fabry, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.
J. Johnson, house and contents, barn, crops, and farming tools.
Francois Delvaux, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.
William Laluzerne, house.
Wm. Gerondale, house and contents.  
Emil Befay, barn, crops and furniture.  
Gustav Pensis, house and contents.  
P. Jenquet, barn, crops and furniture.  
Frank Evrard, barn, crops and farming tools.  
Martin Couillard, barn and crops.  
Francis Counard, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
Caspard Duvy, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
Gullaine Lenais, household goods, barn, crops and farming tools.  
Charles Gulette, house and contents, barn, crops, farming tools and cattle.  
Jean Dejean, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools and part of cattle.  

GARDNER  

William Delsipee, barn and crops.  
D. Coffin, barn and crops.  
S. D. Welden, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
H. Gigot, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
J. B. Tricot, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
A. Corbisier, house and contents, barn, crops, cattle and farming tools.  
J. Henquinet, house and contents, barn, crops, and farming tools.  
J. Corbisier, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
P. Farley, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
J. Robin, house, farm and crops.  
G. Laviolette, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
J. Lalune, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
H. Neuville, house and contents, barn, crops and farming tools.  
L. Laluzerne, house and contents, barn, crops, and farming tools.  
J. Dalemont, barn and crops.
Wm. Claflin, house and crops.
J. Neuvile, house and crops.
Williamson's shingle mill and all buildings (12 to 15) connected with it.
Three school houses and two churches.

At Red River all the inhabitants of the village fled out on the long pier waiting to see the thundering flames devour their homes on the hill, but through some strange circumstance the rushing tornado here made a little detour and spared the village. This also happened in the northern part of Union and a part of Gardner which escaped destruction in this cataclysm. But elsewhere the settlement was laid in utter desolation. The homes, barns and granaries filled with the fruits of a summer's toil were destroyed; the cattle were burned to a crisp while fleeing through the woods. Even the green timber for township after township was totally destroyed. The plow handles were burned in the furrow, the logs in the corduroy roads were consumed, even the swamps were burning two and three feet deep.

What sustained these pioneers in their successive battles with a savage nature? In toil, self-denial and loneliness, beset by poverty, hunger and the irresistible ravages of nature, they struggled on dauntlessly. What were the forces that impelled them onward? It is not easy to plumb the reactions to circumstances so strange both to them and to us. Perhaps, first of all, it was the sturdy manhood characteristic of pioneers; then, probably, it was a sanguine hope of ultimate prosperity; finally the fatalism of their religion carried them onward:— What happened was foreordained by God, and His will they accepted submissively, but not dejectedly.