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## EC78-1744 Prairie Fires and the Nebraska Pioneer

Donald E. Westover

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## PRAIRIE FIRES AND THE NEBRASKA PIONEER



Extension work in "Agriculture, Home Economics and subjects relating thereto," The Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Cooperating with the Counties and the U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Leo E. Lucas, Director

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# Prairie Fires and the Nebraska Pioneer

Donald E. Westover  
Fire Management Coordinator

## Foreword

For thousands of years prairie fires were a common occurrence in the great plains region of North America. Along with wind, rain, snow, and sunshine, fire was a major ecological force. Long before the white man's influence became a factor Nebraska's prairie land had been shaped, even perpetuated by this ever present force.

Early prairie fires resulted mostly from lightning, although some were set by Indians for hunting purposes. Early settlers who homesteaded Nebraska's prairie found out very soon about the fury of fire.

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Wildlife, in an attempt to document Nebraska's major prairie fires, asked the people of the state to send in their first-hand accounts of the fires which swept across Nebraska years ago. The request was in the form of the following news release.

*LINCOLN—The University of Nebraska Department of Forestry is looking for first hand accounts from citizens of large prairie fires which swept across Nebraska years ago.*

*Don Westover, Extension fire control specialist, said many persons are still living who have experienced prairie fires, "and we would like to hear their accounts of these fires." While many stories have been written about specific prairie fires, it is unwritten but vivid accounts—still in the memories of older Nebraskans—that some day will be gone forever, he noted.*

*Westover said foresters would like to hear from anyone who may have saved a newspaper story or other type of account of rangeland fire, as well as those who haven't yet told their story. Persons who can supply information are asked to write it down or have it tape-recorded. Accounts should be sent to the UN-L Department of Forestry, Miller Hall, East Campus, Lincoln, NE. 68583.*



For a period of several weeks after the release, letters and phone calls came into the office concerning fires of the past. The fires occurred as long ago as 1873 and as recently as 1925. All of the fires were described as being very large. Rarely, however, were there any actual sizes recorded for the fires.

The following incidents are true life accounts of prairie fires as experienced by homesteaders and settlers around the turn of the century. No attempt has been made to change the grammar or the content of these stories. The words you read are those used by the contributors.

### Prairie Fire

Vera Williams  
Nebraska Sandhills  
Early 1900's

Our nearest neighbor came over one hot July day. He lived only eight miles away and that was practically the same as if our clotheslines were tangled together.

"We haven't had a fire close to here for a long time," he told papa. "But that doesn't mean we won't. You'd better finish that firebreak." But papa still didn't get to it.

Several weeks later the fires broke out. Ranchers stopped their work—harvesting, haying, rounding up stock—and left their homes to fight the flames.

The men were gone all day. They returned late at night, dog-tired, blistered and seared from the heat. They rolled into bed, slept until dawn and then were on their way.

"I have a cold spot in the pit of my stomach," mama confessed to papa one morning, "and every time you start out again, that cold spot travels all over me." Anxiety made mama's usually gentle voice ragged. "We won't have any protection if a fire heads this way."

Papa wheeled on her. We were frightened by how white his face was under the smoke and grime. His eyes were bloodshot and weary.

"There isn't a fire within twenty miles of this ranch! Men are dropping on the fire line because we don't have enough help! If you want it turned, you'll have to turn it yourself."

We had heard grim stories of families being roasted alive in their sod shacks. If the sod was fresh and new it would not burn as fire roared over it. But if it was several years old and grass and weeds grew on it, there was little chance of escape. Mama read a page in the Bible, closed her eyes and said, "God, please help us. And I'll help You because You don't want these children to burn, either."

She shut my sister and me in the house. She would not let us go into the outdoor heat or take a chance on our meeting a rattlesnake.

We watched through the window as she scraped the rust off the plow and oiled it. She called Lena, the high-spirited Hambletonian mare she had ridden in her school teaching days. Lena always came when mama called her, no matter how far away she was. Mama hitched her to the plow.

Besides Lena, we had another horse, named Charley. A big gray animal, Charley had served the ranch long and well. When cataracts formed over his eyes and he could no longer see, he was turned loose to graze. We saw him only occasionally, when he came to the big horse trough under the windmill in the corral for a drink. We children usually went out to pet him because we loved him. Little did we know how important a role he would play that day.

Determinedly, mama started to plow a big rectangle that took in the house, the barn, the corral. Never one to do things halfway, mama cut a 50-foot firebreak, the widest in the whole area. The rough, warped plow handle must have hurt her hands. The sun blistered down on her back and we saw her sag with weariness. But grimly she held Lena to the task, stopping only once in a while to wipe her face on the sleeve of her blouse and to drink long and deep from a jug of water.

While mama worked, the wind was shifting. Soon we caught the smell of smoke. The sky was growing darker, the sun scarcely more than an orange ball in the gathering smoke. My sister and I clung to each other. It got so dark the chickens went to bed.

The firebreak finished, mama put the plow in the tool shed. Then, smelling of smoke and sweat, she came back to the house. "Now you may go with me to the windmill."

We went along with her and tried to help her as she brought back buckets of water and poured them into her galvanized wash tubs on the kitchen floor. She ripped blankets off the beds so she could dip them into the water and fight the flames if the fire came too close.

"I have done what You wanted me to do, God," mama said. "Its up to You now."

Mama pushed the geraniums aside and lifted us both up beside her in the window seat. Our eyes searched past the yard for the first glimpse of our livestock. It's a funny thing how stock know about a firebreak. I'd never seen it happen but I'd heard stories about how if there was a fire anywhere near, the stock would run for the firebreak. Somehow they know they'll be reasonably safe inside the break.

And as we watched, the prairie fire came. It came an orange-red sheet of fire on the far horizon, sweeping toward the ranch. Soon we heard that peculiar, ominous roar, a sound like nothing else.

Suddenly mama pointed. "There's Charley!"

Ahead of the flames the ranch horses were running—led by blind, old Charley! Running like the veteran he was, sightless head high, tattered gray mane flying, he was bringing the other horses in to the safety of the firebreak.

The monster that was the prairie fire roared to the firebreak mama had labored over. It gasped, hesitated, then chagrined that it had been beaten, it slunk around us.

Mama put her arms around us. "Thank You, God," she said, and that was all.

But we had a can of tomatoes for supper, to celebrate. And Charley got an extra feeding of oats.



Mrs. Sylvester Eckel  
Buffalo County  
1904

March 2nd, 1904, was a still quiet day, in the forenoon, but awful cold. Josef and Barbara Kolar, and 2 of their small children took a team of horses and wagon and went to Ravenna, Nebr. On their way home, about 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon, the wind began to blow hard from the north, and it got dark. They could see smoke, so knew a prairie fire was coming. They put their children in the bottom of the wagon, covered them with a blanket so they wouldn't fall out, and Josef made the horses gallop as fast as they could go. They took the children, Joe, age 7 and Bessie, age 4, to the home of their neighbors, Mr. & Mrs. William Snyder, and left them. Josef plowed furrows around his buildings, haystacks, etc., and carried their surplus into the cave.

Their older children, Frank, Sophia, Mary and Anna were in school. The teacher kept them all in the sod school house (The VACKA School) because she knew it wouldn't burn. There were no weeds, or grass, near the school, because it had all been worn off, as the children played every day, so the fire didn't come close to the school house, and as the children watched from the windows, they could see the flames through the heavy smoke. All of the older children had to hold onto the door, to keep it from being sucked open by the strong wind.

After the fire had passed, all the children started home. They had to jump across, or go around, small patches of grass, or sod, that were still burning, until they met a neighbor coming after them with horses and wagon.

Josef had turned his livestock loose, and all of it escaped, except a blind horse, and it was destroyed in the fire. They had forgotten to turn some little calves out of a wooden barn, and the calves and barn burned, also the hog shed, but their sod house was left standing.

The fire had started in a haystack near Loup City, Nebr., and burned a strip 4 miles wide and 12 miles long before it was stopped. All the men were out, with horses and plows, plowing up sod, to stop it. Many of the men and horses had been burned by the blowing cow chips, and many of the men had frozen faces.



The following was taken from "The Ravenna News" files about the fire—

March, 1904. A prairie fire started in section 19 in southern Sherman County and ran a southerly course about 12 miles long and 4 miles wide. Hay and straw stacks were burned by the hundreds and many farm buildings and fences were destroyed. At times the crest of the waves of flames were 30 feet high.

### Prairie Fires

Rachel Ball  
Nemaha Co.  
1876

We saw the flames of fire and I said, "Oh! What will we do?"

Sister said we must go right in and tell Mrs. Sullivan which we did. How helpless she must have felt, lying there with a great fire sweeping toward her and she unable to do anything or get word to any one. I am sure it was a moment of prayer for her.

A man by the name of William Jewell lived directly west of her about two miles, who like her own husband, had gone to Nebraska City that morning. It was his young boys who, wanting to help their father to hasten his spring work, had gone out into the fields and tried to burn the stalks where corn had grown. The wind had whipped up the flames and sparks had caught in the tall dry grass around the field and there was no stopping it with their young hands. The high March winds swept it fast, taking all before it.

There was no well there, but there was a pail of water in the house. Mrs. Sullivan told us children to take hold of its bail, to lift it carefully down from the bench and try to carry it outdoors, cautioning us not to spill a drop. Then to come back into the house and she would tell us what to do, which we did. Then she told my sister to take a chair and climb up on it and try to reach the box of matches placed up there away from mice. She told me to take a calico apron from a nail on the wall and to run out again and wet the apron in the pail of water and with it, try to wet the grass on both the west and north sides of the house from where the wind was

driving down the fire. My sister helped me and when she thought we had the grass wet as far out as our water would go, she lighted her first match. The blaze was caught by the wind and the dry grass fell fast before it on two sides of the house until a great black space was burned about us so when the flames reached where we were they went around and the house was untouched. I never yet can understand it, but we all were saved. I'm sure Mrs. Sullivan lay there on her bed in prayer or little girls never could have done it.

The hill on whose side the Edminston house stood hid the on coming fire from their view or they would have surely been there to help us as there were a man, woman, and four young people there. Their home faced east and only one opening was on their west side and that a solid wooden door. When the flames swept over the hill top, it was too late; they could not have come through the fire to us. But all hands fought as best they could to save their own home and straw stable. There was also a small corn crib and a small hay stack. Smoke from a fire, rising up into the sky filled every heart with fear . . . and men in their fields would loose their team and spring upon a horse and swiftly ride and spread the news as they went. Thus word traveled fast and men came from everywhere to render all the help that they could give in fighting the fire which roared its way over the hills and down into the bottom land on the north side through the tangles of tall weeds and slough grass growing there until it reached the little stream of water just west of the present town of Brock. Fortunately there was no home between the Jewell home and the Nemaha River and Edminston's and Sullivan's home were the only ones between them and the creek we call the "houchen's branch", that now is the west border of Brock. Men that came to fight the fire found that they could do little in the face of the on-coming flames, but a messenger on horseback hurriedly carried word to the City where Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Jewell had gone. How the men in answer to the word, raced their horses back home as fast as they could drive! What joy there was when they arrived and found that we had all escaped unharmed. I remember so well the words of Mr. Sullivan as he spoke in praise of what the little girls had done. I can still today the tender hand he lay on my shoulder when he said good-bye to me and can hear again his words of praise and gratitude in parting.

It seems such a simple thing we children did, only minding what we were told, but I shall always believe it was "divine aid" that helped us in our task.

### The Prairie Fire

Eva Inez  
Custer Co.  
1886

Russell Seymour and Mary Amanda Calkins, with their two children Frank and Grace, lived that first Nebraska winter in a temporary dug-out house, 5½ miles southeast of Sargent, made three sides dug in the bank and the front side of sod, in the side of what they called "Rattlesnake" canyon, because they found so many rattlesnakes there.

The dugout house roof was made with poles laid across the top and hay piled on them stacked to make something like a thatched roof.

One night a prairie fire came through, and it was sure to catch the hay roof on fire, going some distance from the house, he was trying to "back fire" by burning a small spot and whipping it out with a wet sack, on the side toward the house before it got to going too much, thus making a burnt over space, by the time the head fire came along and it would have to stop. There fires could be seen for miles.

The grass was dry and tall and the wind was strong, he was not making very much headway, then the wind changed, and was bringing the fire directly toward him, making it an almost hopeless situation, he was doing all he could but fighting a head fire was much more difficult than a side fire (that wasn't going much yet) what was he to do? Then he began to pray for the protection of his wife Mary and children Frank and Grace.

The stars were shining, not a cloud in the sky, but he wished it would rain and put the fire out. He realized his own helplessness, he kept on working and praying. As the head fire came nearer and nearer, it all looked so hopeless.



Then it began to rain and the fire was put out.

He has thanked God many and many a time for answering his prayer that night and saved his family.

Bessie Ledger Jan  
Garfield Co.  
1916

"Mama! Mama! I see smoke, lots of smoke, come quick," said Cousin Bessie.

Her Dad had gone to the neighbors, Mother Eva gave a one long-long ring, that meant all come to the telephone.

Fire, Fire Fire to the southeast of us near Bebees, wind in South, headed for our hay land and stacks, its going north.

Mother Eva hung up the telephone receiver.

Children quick find all the gunny sacks, pails, tubs.

I'll harness the horses old strawberry and young Prince to the wagon. Have everything you can find for water.

Soon Mother Eva drove the team up to the pile of sacks, pails, tubs, and buckets.

"Mother, there's the empty big pig barrels. If we all push maybe we can get them into the wagon. I wish daddy was here", said Bessie.

He's probably already at the fire with neighbors, we've got to hurry. Push - push PUSH.

Up the steep hill to the windmill, Mama Eva filled everything with water and wet all sacks. She sent one of the children to the house to get tin cups.

Bessie kept helping her Mother Eva but there was such a good view of that awful fire from on that high hill.

Mother climbed part way up the ladder on the windmill. Its almost to our hay stacks. They are fighting it on this side so it won't come to our buildings.



Mother Eva drove down past the house, getup getup, she called to the horses. She stopped at the house gave one more FIRE - ALARM on the telephone line. We children all in the wagon. Mother Eva headed out across our big pasture toward the smoke.

Men ran to the wagon. Mother Eva gave out the tin cups and the men drank. Their faces were red and black from the smoke. They quenched their thirst, then grabbed some water and a sack and ran back to beating the fire with wet sacks.

People came from many, many miles.

Three miles north a lot of men with horses and plows, were making the ground bare and they set a fire after plowing the front and sides and let the main fire come up to this already burnt over. It had to stop. What we call back firing to stop a fire.

It is now 3:00 P.M. The fire is under control. It has gone down only one side of the post gradually crept along and when stopped it was one mile wide and had traveled three miles.

Cooperation of the community, saved lives and property. We need loyal friendships, people that will stick together at all times.

Newspaper account  
The Valentine Democrat, April 21, 1898  
Cherry Co.

The most destructive prairie fire that ever visited this section swept over a large portion of the county on Saturday and Sunday, causing destruction of property at almost every ranch and farm house in its path. The fire started on the reservation and was driven to the line by a terrific north wind. It swept south and southeast coming close to town in the afternoon. In the country several narrow escapes are reported. W. B. Eberhart was severely burned about the hands. Mrs. N. M. Jeffords was quite severely burned about the feet, her stockings being burned off.

Clarence Phillips  
Lincoln Co.  
1907

It was a beautiful spring morning on April 7, 1907. I was eleven (11) years old and was staying with my brother, Grant Phillips of Wallace, Nebraska, to help him with his chores. He had a herd of brood mares and was raising little mules also. The herd contained twenty-seven (27) head and seven (7) of them already had little mules. By the last of April we would have had twenty-seven little mules. The mares were of good stock, no pony stock either. Everthing was fine that morning until we saw the smoke rolling up in the northwest. Mae, my brother's wife, and I were alone because Grant had to go to North Platte on saddle horse to take care of some business. He took the only horse on the ranch.

It was about 2:00 p.m. and the wind came up, gusting up to 35-40 mph. The fire was now up to the ranch house and barn. There was an old Jack-Ass in the corral and an old milk cow that Mae's mother had given her. I took the Jack up to the windmill and tied him to one of the anchor posts. The tank was really full now, so we took the milk cow and tied her to the clothes line. We took buckets of water and threw on the ground around the Jack and milk cow so the fire couldn't get to them. Mae and I carried water to the house and the barn, but we lost the barn. The pig shed next to the barn contained two nice brood sows and fourteen little pigs, which burned up as we couldn't get them out.

It was awful to see the Jack rabbits coming down the hill on fire and they would head for the stacks of hay, running into them and then setting them on fire. I don't know how many there were, but the hills were covered with dead Jack rabbits.

The mares were all at the far fence, huddled in a pile, where they burned. Some of them were still standing, with their ears, tails and hooves burned off. They had their eyes burned out also. When Grant got home, he could not shoot them, so some of the neighbors shot them for him. He really cared for those mares and it took him several years to come out of the deal.

Grant didn't have all of his mares paid for, but the bank went along with him and he finally got them all paid for.

— — — — —

This is another experience about a neighbor in this same fire. He and his family came from Missouri and had never seen a fire like this one. If it hadn't been for a young man, Charley Kidwell, who lived in Wallace, this family whose name was Walter Tucker, would have been killed in this fire. The family was in the wagon going west over the hills to pick up some corn they had bought. Charley saw them and rode out to warn them, as they were heading straight into the line of the fire. He caught them, tied his horse to their team and wagon and drove them to safety. If it hadn't been for Charley, the family of Walter, his wife and daughter would have been burned up in the fire. The fire was then about three miles wide and had burned about twenty-five miles long. There was no stopping it as it jumped the fire guards that people had made to stop it.

The fire burned to the railroad and that stopped the head fire, so all that was left to fight was the side lines. It was a very black day, April 7, 1907, for many families lost almost everything they had to the fire.

Walter Tucker's daughter, lives in Sharon Springs, Kansas and she is going to give you her version of that fire. She and Charley got married in later years. She is now a widow and must be close to eighty (80) years young but she has a wonderful memory and can relate her personal experiences with the fire.

We were kids together when we all lived at Wallace and went to the same school and danced a little at the old dance hall. I will close for now, but this is what happened that April 7, 1907, I remembered it well and I will soon be 81 years young.

(See page 30.)



## Smoky Dawn

Grace Baldwin  
Wheeler Co.

"Hey, Hick! It's a-comin'!" The rider galloped on to arouse other Custer county settlers. It was an autumn night in 1890.

My grandfather and his family rose hurriedly and prepared to fight fire. Hastily grandfather hitched the team to the wagon, loaded a barrel of water and a plow and with his wife and my mother, then about 16, set out. They met the headfire about 3 miles away. It was not traveling fast for there was little wind. But it covered a wide strip of country. They had just begun to backfire when the wind raised suddenly to a gale.

Everyone piled into wagons and saddles and raced his horses to grandfather's homestead. It was in the direct path of the fire, but well fire-guarded. The race was too close for comfort. As the sweating, trembling horses stopped in grandfather's yard, the flames of the headfire were leaping to the crest of a ridge only 40 rods behind. Tall bluestem covered the sidehill and valley clear to the fireguard. The fire plunged through this like a nervous horse breasting a stream. The roar was deafening. Men rushed from place to place to put out small fires set by flying grassbrands. As the fire swept around on both sides, the smoke became suffocating. The firefighters buried their faces in wet sacks to protect their eyes and lungs from the stinging smoke.

Without warning a thunderous clap smote already ragged nerves. Horses plunged and snorted and required strong hands to bring them under control. A heavy boom followed, and a great column of smoke shot hundreds of feet into the air. The divided headfire had again united. A short time later the headfire disappeared in the gray, smoky dawn. Only sidefires trailed slowly behind with here and there a gleaming mound which had been a building or haystack. The men hurried off to put out the sidefires before the wind changed.

Mrs. Powers, a neighbor's wife, had been alone that night with her six children in their dugout home. Awakening, she saw the bright light through the front window of the dugout. She went to the door and stepped out, when like a flash a great sheet of flame swept over



her head. She slammed the door shut and raised trembling hands to her hair to find it literally burned off her head. Only a short, straggly mop remained.

## Great Fire

John Collins  
County unknown  
1864

On March 23, 1864, a small army of men with two, four and six-mule teams, headed by John S. Collins, left Omaha, traveling due west. Shortly after daylight on the morning of April 15, they sighted a dense smoke to the north. "If the wind changes," said the leader, "we may be goners."

They made camp between a marsh and a small lake. The wagons were chained together in a circle, the stock driven inside and the entrance closed. Each man took a bucket of water and a wet grain sack and began to drop lighted matches in the dry grass and then put the fire out before it got beyond control.

The wind changed just as the leader had predicted. Soon the blaze swept into sight, coming like a race horse. It was a mile long, a great flame leaping at times 50 feet into the air. Deer, rabbits and prairie dogs swept through the camp in great fright. The sight was grand and awful. The heat was terrific, almost stifling. When the flame reached the lake, the fire stopped because the men had backfired a quarter of a mile along its edge. The smoke was so blinding that the men had to throw themselves face-down on the ground. The frightened animals brayed and bellowed. When the fire had gone around, Collins called roll. Everyone was accounted for.

Eleanor C. Penny  
Loup Co.  
1903

The last big prairie fire in Northern Loup County was April 10, 1903. It was after an unusual snowy winter, that spring in all her glory of green grass, trees and the scent of blossoms were so welcome that on April 10th, 1903. The sky began to be smokey and people began to worry, as it got denser my father sent the two oldest sons

with a span of trusty mules and wagons with wet sacks and barrels of water also a jug of drinking water.

They found the fire and helped but the wind changed and the fire then changed to the Southward which was toward "Home".

They whipped the mules and got thru the fire and got to the home ranch to find the father and two more sons plowing fire guards open and back firing, they joined them and were welcome and helped to save the livestock buildings and home dwelling. It came to a half mile of them, there were nine (9) children in our family.

My father had all the fire fighters come to our house for lunch, as many men came to help, some nine of the neighbors had never seen before.

Mother and sister, cooked potatoes, fried pork, made gravy and as the bread was gone, made biscuits. We always had plenty of good butter, and it was past ten o'clock p.m. before the family was alone and sat down to pancakes and syrup.

Dallas W. Perry  
Kimball Co.  
1907

Thirty miles northwest of Dix, that day, a threshing crew in the Flowerfield area, were firing up their steam engine for the business at hand. Even that early in the morning, a good stiff breeze was stirring out of Wyoming. It must have caught sparks from the unscreened smoke stack, and smuggled at least one of them into a big, handy, nice, new straw pile. Before the crew realized it there was a huge hot spot in their neighborhood, and they weren't equipped for fire fighting. A blaze that size creates its own draft, and was out of control before the people could move against it.

During the morning recess, at the Dix school, some youngster pointed at a smoky looking cloud, almost hidden by the hills to the northwest. No one was concerned, not even the teacher. At noon, some boys who had gone home for dinner, came back with the news that there was "a big fire, up north". It was very evident without their say-so. While eating their lunches, the dinner-pail packers had watched large smoke clouds rolling in the wind, while half-way

expecting little fire tongues to come crawling into sight. They were much further away than it looked. The teacher still wasn't worried, but when a burnt-grass smell became noticeable, in the room, she sent one of the older boys to see and report. He came back and said that, now there was fire on the hills we had watched at noon. In a short time it started creeping down into the valley. We were told to get our "wraps" and dinner pails, and go outside. Looking back from here, it is guessed that she intended to "shoo" us south of the railroad, if there was a chance that the blaze might jump the Lodgepoles sandy bed.

Before two small irrigation dams were constructed, up the Creek, there had been a good flow of water over the now dry strip of sand. At that time the Clausens had obtained water rights for a small hay meadow, north of the stream. Even without irrigation there was still hay to harvest in years of good rainfall, and a large stack stood in the path of the flames. We saw a flickering red line creep into hiding, behind it. Then the line reappeared to run across the top, and back toward the ground. Suddenly the whole stack exploded into a huge ball of fire and smoke. For awhile longer we watched the flames burn their way across the meadow; then the teacher dismissed school for the day. We went home through a smokey haze that dimmed the sun hanging low in the west. There was no longer much wind to blow the smoke away.

The main efforts, of the day, had been to save the homesteads threatened with destruction, by fire. No doubt there was some activity along the black edges to keep a burnt strip from widening. Probably some back-firing was done to save buildings and stacks of feed and grain. With the available fire fighting equipment of that date, efforts to stop the blazing front would have been useless, and dangerous, - until the strong winds subsided.

Well after dark, that night, mother, dad, and I walked the mile to the section house, and the White's dance. It was a slim affair. Too many people had worn themselves out, fighting fire. As we neared Dix we could see fires down the Lodgepole valley, far to the east. They resembled the lights of a sizeable town, which wasn't there. The blaze still had a long way to go before "playing out its string" against a high Burlington railroad embankment, just east of Sidney, Nebraska.



One windy, early October Saturday, Mother and I were helping dig the year's potato crop. Digging may not be the correct word. Dad was turning the rows over with a walking plow behind our old gray team, while we two "pawed" them out of the resulting dirt ridge. The last row plowed he unhooked a tug on each singletree, picked up a bucket, and started to help us. It was Mother who first saw the smoke.

"George! Look!" she said.

Dad "looked" and ran for the plow. The tugs rehooked he popped the team into a trot and headed for the gate in our north fence. For added insurance there was an old fire-guard, just beyond the line of posts, awaiting its annual fall treatment. The time for that HAD arrived.

Compared to us the Clausens were old-timers. They were a large family, and not a smoke-eating novice in the group, excepting Herman, about my age. When clouds of grass smoke started to roll, male and female all turned out. Mother and I could see several of them in the thick haze, beating out flames along the side of a widening, lengthening black streak. A wide sand draw, with sparse plant growth, drained northerly, from our land, toward the railroad, and the Lodgepole Creek bed beyond. The plan to kill the fire along the draw's left, (west) bank was partly aided by a good northwest wind. By the time it reached dad's fresh plowing, the burning strip was less than a hundred feet wide. The only real smoke was that which curled up from smoldering piles of dried cow manure. The land north of our fence was one of the Clausen's cattle pastures, and a good portion of the grass had been saved for fall grazing. The tired, thirsty fire fighters came to our well, for water and a short visit. Their burlap sacks, used for beating the flames, were ragged and almost dry. They had been dripping wet at the beginning.

For fires covering much larger areas, men with teams and wagons carrying filled water barrels sometimes moved along with the fighters. They probably had an extra sack supply, too.

It looked like the Clausens could go home, and we back to the potato patch, but suddenly there was fire on the east side of the draw, a lot of it. With no one staying behind to guard against that possibility, the flames had somehow "jumped" the dry sand channel,



and were racing south along a weedy edge of cultivation. This field farmed by Clausens, marked west and south section lines. There was no fire guard east of the draw, and the first fire had kept dad from crossing to plow one. East of the draw, the far side of a plowed field of ours, was along the toe of a steep slope. The west side of the Clausen cultivation was along the top. No one could reach the narrow gap, between the two field boundaries, in time to keep the flames from ducking under the fence. Free of obstacles, for the time being, they spread rapidly, and took off for the southeast, like a scalded cat. It pretty well blackened the east half section of our summer pasture, which, fortunately we did not need until the following spring.

One of the Clausens, Minnie, I think had a homestead shack off in that general direction. Her brother, Johnny, guessed it was probably gone up in smoke. He and dad decided for a tour of inspection, and the red-head tagged along. Strangely enough I can't remember the method used to get there. Just possibly it could have been a brand new 1913 Stupmobile, dads, but I'll declare for the light spring wagon, behind the gray team. Either way it followed the lines of least resistance along prairie wagon trails, and through barbed wire fences, via a series of handy gates. When you found them closed, they had better be left that way, behind you.

We were "in the black," before reaching the shack, but it was still there, unharmed, with about six inches of unburned edging all around the four walls. Settlers in and near the fire's path had also been fighting it. By the time we arrived to view the expected remains, the second "fire brigade" had "herded" it to death against a stray piece of plowed sod. The interrupted potato "pawing" was completed the next day.

### **Sheriff Traced 1878 Indian Scare to Hunting Party Driving Antelopes**

**Harold Spruce  
Phelps Co.  
1878**

Indian scares were numerous in the years following the outbreaks of 1864-65 along the Platte Valley. This is the story of one of them.

It was in October of 1878 and may have been the last such incident in south central Nebraska.

There was some basis in fact for the rumors that swept across the prairies since it was in the autumn of 1878 that the Cheyennes broke away from the agency in Oklahoma Territory and headed back to their northern homeland.

Files of the Nebraska Nugget, early-day Holdrege newspaper, tell the story of the Indian scare of 1878 and describe a destructive prairie fire which added to the fear of settlers who fled their homes.

Immediate cause of the scare in Phelps County was later related by James Sweezy, who was sheriff. He wrote: "It seems that a hunting party was driving a herd of antelope and by someone at a distance they were taken for Indians and away went the story that a war party of blood thirsty savages were sweeping over the country, burning property and murdering settlers."

The rumor spread like wildfire across the prairies and almost everyone pulled up stakes, loaded their families and precious possessions into wagons and headed for Kearney.

One account of the day and night of flight was given by T. M. Hopwood who later became editor of the Nugget and a Phelps County commissioner. In the fall of 1878 he and his wife were living in a sod house on their homestead east of the present site of Holdrege. He wrote:

"... After a hurried consultation with Mrs. Hopwood we decided to go. I tied the cow behind the wagon and tied the dog to the little 6 x 8 sod dwelling, while Mrs. H. loaded a featherbed, some quilts and some truck to eat, and away we went, leaving the dog, cat and chickens to their fate. The door of the house being a quilt, of course we left it unlocked.

"Darkness soon hid us from view of the savages which we supposed were approaching, but we trudged along as fast as a cow is liable to lead. As we passed our neighbors we gave the alarm and they joined us. By the time we got into the sandhills we made quite a train, but we were defenseless. We had guns but there was little, if any, ammunition among the party.

"We drove to within sight of the Platte bottoms and then by common consent we stopped and camped until morning when a man with an ox team came along and scared us again by saying the Indians were coming this way, and that they had traveled all night and came from near Phelps Center.

"We were all up and going within a few minutes and did not stop until we had crossed the Kearney bridge. Here we stopped, unhitched and took lunch. Some of the men then went to town to secure guns and ammunition, but found the Kearney people so scared they would not part with munitions of war for love nor money, and our men came back disgusted. Among them were John Morehouse, Ben Morehouse, Henry Banzet and J. M. Hopwood."

"In the meantime some freighters came in from the Republican Valley and we learned from them that no Indians had been seen and they thought it was all a big scare . . . About noon our train started back home."

Many of the Phelps County people returned home to find their farmsteads and crops more of a shambles than marauding Indians might have left.

Late in the afternoon of the day of the trek to Kearney a prairie fire had started near Spring Creek in southwestern Phelps County. Racing ahead of a southwest wind it reached the Platte River by about noon the next day. About that time the October weather suddenly changed, the wind veered to the northwest and the blaze which was dying out on the river banks did a turnabout and swept toward the southeast.

As the wagon train of settlers drove toward their homes through the sandhills between Kearney and what is now the Holdrege vicinity, the fire raged all around them.

They managed to keep out of the way of the flames, meanwhile hoping and praying that the fire had not jumped the fireguards around their sod homes.

Mr. Hopwood continued his story:

"We hurried to our own home which we thought was so well guarded that it was perfectly safe, but imagine our feelings when we



discovered that our unpretentious little home (all that we had on earth) was a blackened mass of ruins.

"The little pile of corn we had raised was still burning. The chickens had their pen on the plowing, and they were alive and had gathered in their little sod coop for the night. The kitten we left so white and clean and happy was now, alas, a tangled mass of burned fur and though it still lived its eyes were sightless. And the dog! What a tale of woe he could have unfolded had he lived. Like a brave Casibianca, he had stood at his post and perished in the flames, and his remains were still smoking in the ruins."

"We made haste to save what little corn was left in the still burning pile and Mrs. H. sat down in the ruins and wept. Her nerve was gone and her brave heart was almost sunk within her. Only a year before she had emerged from an eastern college as a classical graduate, a bright light-hearted girl."

"That night was dark indeed for us. The blackened earth, the moonless night, and the dismal future, all conspired to drive the last hope from us, but when the firebrands were scattered, we tied the old cow to a post and sought shelter at Morehouses, three miles away. Here we stayed all night and the next day moved into a dugout a mile from the ruins of our own home.

It was the same story over the entire area. The fire was the most disastrous known to the settlers on the divide.

Many other accounts of those two days appeared in the Holdrege Nugget. John Lindblom was with a party of men helping build a chimney on the new home of Gust Logan a half mile south of Phelps Center. "About noon", he reported, "John P. Nelson rode up white as a sheet and scared half to death. He could hardly catch his breath to talk but finally told us the Indians were four miles north of town, killing, burning and destroying everything."

"Dinner was ready but no one was hungry any more. A guard was put out until the children and valuables could be loaded up, and we all started for Kearney."

At the Spring Creek neighborhood in southwestern Phelps County, a Mr. Stonefelt, who lived near the school house, had taken all the children and the teacher into the canyons where they hid out

through the night. The children, "in later years recalled their terrible experience . . . the fire roaring across the prairies; wakeful and trembling with fear and cold and expecting every moment to hear the war whoops of the Indians."

One party of settlers, which was joined by others along the way, decided to make a stand when they reached the Otto Abrahamson place in northwest Kearney County. While the women and children were being bedded down in the large sod house there, the men made breastworks of the wagons about the home. Many of the men were Civil war and Indian war veterans.

During the night a man rode in from the west and told the settlers he had seen the Indians out on the prairie doing a war dance by the fire.

The following morning Peter L. Johnson, a former cavalryman who had served with Gen. George Custer on several campaigns, was sent out to reconnoiter.

He discovered the Indian "war dance" was in reality several men battling the prairie fire with gunnysacks and blankets, trying to save their crops from the flames. The man who had looked on the scene from a distance, saw the men jumping about waving sacks and blankets.

A young man by the name of Forseman and his mother were trapped by the fire as they drove their wagon toward home. The ox team became unmanageable and when Mrs. Forseman got out of the wagon she was soon lost from sight on the blazing prairie. Her son got down from the wagon to look for her and also became lost from the team.

During the search for his mother Forseman saw what he thought was an Indian following him. He made his way to the F. O. Peterson farm, where he and Mr. Peterson armed themselves and went back to the blackened and smoking fields. The men soon came in sight of the "Indian" wandering on the prairie.

As one of the men raised the gun to shoot they discovered the strange looking creature was not an Indian, but Mr. Forseman's mother.

Every thread of clothing was burned from her except the upper part of her dress and the soles of her shoes, along with all of her hair but a bit at the top. Her skin was blackened and her eyes burned out.

Taken to the Peterson home, the woman lived until late that night. She was buried in the tiny Scandanavian cemetery east of the present town of Holdrege.

### **Prairie Fire Remembrance of 1895**

**Jules L. Haumont  
Blaine & Custer Co.  
1895**

My name is Jules L. Haumont. I was born February 27, 1890 on French Table at Elton, Nebraska. In 1920 I moved to a farm in the Round Valley Community. This is about 7 miles north of the French Table and I still make my home on this place. My father, Louis Haumont, homesteaded and lived until his death on the French Table.

The fire started near Brewster in Blaine County, Nebraska, burning everything in its path except where fire guards were wide enough, or where enough people got out to backfire or whip it out with wet gunny sacks. The path of the fire was southeastward into Custer County. The fire jumped the Middle Loup River just east of the Walworth postoffice (Walworth is about 20 miles north of Broken Bow, Nebraska and 3 miles east ) and since most of the land was grassland the fire burned everything southeastward to Clear Creek. The fire burned past the postoffice at Somerford and also the postoffice at Elton (Elton was about 11 miles northeast of Broken Bow) on the French Table. Two tablelands were in its path, Boggs and French Table.

The wind was very strong and when a cow chip caught fire the wind would roll it for 100 yards or more and spread fire as it rolled. I was just 5 years old and my brother W. T. "Bill" was 7 years old. My father was out with the other men fighting the fire. Our soddy was 14 feet wide and 24 feet long inside. The smoke got so thick inside it that my mother made my brother and I lay down on the floor with our faces to the floor so that we could breath. About 5 o'clock that



evening my father got home. He was very black and grimy with ashes and soot but otherwise all right. There were no buildings or livestock destroyed but a great many Prairie Chickens were lost.

For fire guards, they plowed a strip of ground 4 rods wide and the land was burned off every fall. All sod houses had wood floors except two that I recall and they just had dirt floors. Dirt floors were sprinkled with water, then swept like a wood floor.

During this prairie fire of 1895 my father and two other men had backfired around a hay stack and whipped out the fire thinking they had accomplished a good deed. A whirl wind came along and wrapped fire clear around my hay stack and it burned to the ground.

Archie E. Leopold

Hitchcock Co.

1896

One Sunday afternoon in the early spring of the year 1896, our family had just finished eating Sunday dinner, when to our surprise, our Uncle Ed, with several of our neighbors drove into our yard, with a team of horses pulling a wagon containing a breaking plow, a large barrel of water and many gunny and feed sacks. This meant there was a fire in our area and my father immediately prepared to accompany the men. The fire was burning chiefly in canyon pasture land northeast of our place.

Men from all directions of the area came to assist. The method of fighting the fire was to beat out the fire with the wet sacks. Where it was possible they used the breaking plow to plow strips ahead of the fire and then start a fire which would burn toward the oncoming fire. This is called "back firing."

After the fire had burned over many acres it was finally extinguished and people were thankful it had not reached any homesteader's home or buildings. Fighting fires was indeed hard work.

The fire was started by two little boys who took some matches to try them out and see if they would really burn - and they did - and the boys could not make it stop burning.

Pansy Hill Spring  
Phelps Co.  
1893

The Prairie fire I so well remember was in the fall of 1893, when my father and mother decided to go to Bertrand for the weekly supplies. Our only transportation was a team of horses and a lumber wagon. My brother and I, age 5 & 4, were seated in the back of the wagon on straw covered with quilts, we were very comfortable and happy.

After purchasing supplies the older folk visited and the youngsters played. Word came there was a prairie fire south of Bertrand, and as we lived seven miles south, my father was very concerned. So finding mother and us children he started for home. He was very much alarmed and rushed the horses to a run. When we discovered the fire was coming to our place. We watched the smoke moving in the direction of our building as we rumbled along in the lumber wagon over prairie roads. Nearing home we were relieved to see our three neighbors, Mr. Harry Moor, Mr. John Benson, and Mr. Samuel W. Springmen plowing a fire guard around the house and barn. The fire guard kept the fire from our house.

The fire went on west but how far I do not know, but I do remember my father being gone with other neighbors to fight the fire. The fire was contained much farther west, but I never knew how far. The fire was started from the train at Oxford, which was 18 miles south east of the farm.

This was the last prairie fire I remember in Gosper County, Nebraska, near our home.

Lloyd Wallace  
Otoe Co.

My grandfather settled on NE¼ of Sec. 4, T8N R10E Otoe County, Nebraska, in the year of 1854. My father was born 1874 on this land. He lived to be 85 years old and lived all his life within 1 or 2 miles of the original farm. As a youth, he told me their greatest fear was of prairie fires. Grandmother, he said, would watch to the west continuously for fires and many times they could see them burning in the night sky.

Only once could he remember one coming through the area. They saved the homestead but lost all the feed for the cattle as little farming was done then, only run cattle for many years. He said they pastured around homestead heavily to keep grass down as there was no way or equipment to mow or cut the hayland. There were no forest or trees, he told me, only the grass shoulder high as far as he could see.

Jane Herndon Taylor  
Saline Co.  
1879

The country was new and there were wide stretches of unbroken prairie which had not known a plow. Prairie fires were frequent, often several were in view at one time in various directions. Their columns of smoke rising far into the sky. At night the sky would be lighted up with their glare. Sometimes destructive fires would sweep across these stretches of prairie leaving desolation in their wake. This happened to us in March 1879.

It was Sunday morning and the wind was blowing a gale. About two weeks before a fire had started in Fillmore County to the west of us. Father had plowed a fire guard along the west side of the place as a protection against the burning of the buildings. This Sunday morning the fire was getting close and Father sent Ella to Mr. Wilson's on the east side of the section for help, telling her to stay. Their son, Lincoln, then about 19, came. Mr. Van Dooser, the neighbor to the south, Mr. Kassabaum who lived north, and Tom Tike, an Englishman who lived east between Wilson's and us also came to help. All lived on the same section, and the fire was a menace to all.

Father went to the top of the ridge a little distance west of our west line to get the exact location of the blaze. He found it very near. Before he could return to the house the fire had reached the homestead and the wind was blowing fragments across the fire guard, igniting the dry grass, high at that season. Father had to run to keep out of the way. The field west of the house was covered with stubble, and the fire crossed that unhindered burning two straw stacks with it. It was soon all about the house.



Susie and I were left in the house alone while the folks were outside looking after things and fighting fire. For the time being the inside was the safest place for us. I was not six until April and Susie was not three until July. The fire was burning across the yard and we were sitting on the floor watching everything. We would stay until the heat would burn our faces and then we would dodge back and laugh. For us it was both funny and interesting. But after awhile the house caught fire and it was no longer funny.

Father sent Lincoln Wilson in to look after us until the fire would get by, so we could be taken out and put in a safe place. He found us on the floor with our arms around each other, both of us crying. He picked up Susie and sat her down on a chair by the door to wait. I stood by the chair and looked up at him. I still have a vivid recollection of the serious expression on his face. When it was safe to take us out he carried us, one under each arm, both crying. He placed us on some bedding and told us to stay there. Susie seemed perfectly satisfied but I was not. I wanted to be running around seeing all there was to be seen and cried because I was not permitted to do so.

Mother went to the hogpen to turn the hogs out so they could keep out of the way of the fire and Father went to the stable to turn the horses out. He went on to help Mother and found her almost overcome with smoke and heat. Helping her to a safe place, he worked with her until she recovered and then went on to work at hand. Neither of them thought she would have been able to get out alone. But happily Mother was spared for many years.

The stable was a straw structure, with a strawstack at the end of it. The grainery stood between the house and the stable. It was built of native lumber and was covered with long slough grass which made an excellent roof. Strange as it may seem, the fire passed both of these without igniting either. It missed the strawstack by only a foot or two, if I remember correctly. The direction of the wind was such that the sparks were blown away from, rather than toward the stack. The fire went on, crossed the creek and burned itself out a few miles to the southeast. It had destroyed the house with most of its contents. We did not have a change of clothes. Mother made most of our clothing in those days. Father had been to town and had bought goods for supply of clothing and it all burned. Since that happened, it was well it happened before she had made the clothes.

## My Memories of the Early Nebraska Fires

Mrs. Ruby Kidwell  
Lincoln Co.  
1907

I remember very clearly two fires. The first fire was in April, 1907, and took the life of my cousin's husband, Eddie Kain of Wallace, Nebraska, leaving his widow with two little children. Many head of his stock perished with him as well as his horse. When the horse went down Eddie was afire. His clothes were all burned off except for his boots. He walked a mile and a half to his family, stopping and putting dirt down the tops of his boots. He made it home, but lived only a few hours. That fire did so much damage.

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My father, Walter Tucker, was helping his half-brother Henry Bebout with farm work five miles from our home. I had been hauling corn from my uncle's farm with a team and wagon. That morning was the most beautiful day—not a breath of air stirring. While mother and I were choring, our little dog howled and cried so pityful that mother and the dog decided to go with me to haul the corn. Mother only had one arm and this was the only time she had gone with me. We put the dog between us on the spring seat of the wagon and was soon on our way, before it got so hot. We had never seen a prairie fire, but had heard how terrible they were. We had no idea what they were talking about. My family lived in Arbela, Missouri, before coming to Nebraska and they never had them there.

We loaded our wagon with corn (the wagon had two additional side boards besides the wagon box) and started for home. We didn't go by my uncle's ranch house since it would have taken us longer to reach home. By that time the wind had come up from the northwest and we could smell smoke. The sky was looking dark in the northwest, but we started home anyway. I don't believe we got over half-way when the smoke, wind and dust got so bad we couldn't see. I made the horses trot—I thought real fast and hard—but all at once a horseback rider rode up and jumped off his horse and tied his horse to our team. We could hardly see him. Charles Kidwell, the horseback rider, jumped up in the wagon and said, "There's a prairie fire right behind us, hang on, we have got to hurry or it will catch



us." And how we hurried. We never took such a ride in our lives! Charlie lashed the team with the end of the lines to make them run. The wagon was going too fast that we unloaded corn from then on. The wind changed to the east, and we were all choking from the smoke as the side fire was right behind us. He couldn't see any road, and we didn't know where we were. Charlie Kidwell, was from Wallace, Nebraska, and he lived in town four miles from the farmstead.

Since Charlie knew I was hauling corn with a team and wagon, he saddled his old faithful horse "Nig" and started to find me. Charlie went to the farmstead, not even a dog was there; so he started northwest, across the prairie between fire guards. He never lost his direction, while he was trying to get to a fire guard with us. So when the wind turned east, it was then the head fire went on east, but the side fire was coming right for us. He never once let up whipping the horses, as he knew our range cattle were in the north pasture. When we did get home, he said, "Take care of the horses—I'm going to bring the range cattle in." The cattle were bawling and running, but they really ran when he caught up with them. A neighbor Fred Swanson, had brought the milk cows from another pasture. Fred was frantic when no one was at the farmstead. He also knew I was hauling corn from the ranch.

The head fire burned everthing in its path. One or our neighbors the J. M. Werley family had four boys—the mister and two older boys went to fight the side fire, the older boy on horseback. The rest of the family stayed at home and clubbed jackrabbits when they ran into the hay and feed stacks and farm buildings, as the jackrabbits were on fire. That saved the farm buildings.

The father of a family just east of the Werley's took his older boys and did likewise. That was Mr. Yonker. When the Yonkers' got home all their buildings were burned to the ground, and all the livestock that were in feed lots and in the barn (horses in the barn; hogs in the pens) were dead. Everything was gone! They had an outside cave, and that's where Mr. Yonker found his family. They had taken a big comforter and hung it up at the bottom door, soaked it with some water, then shut the wooden door down, and it was just starting to burn when the men folks got there. The windmill and well-house were built on sand or they would have burned.



On Sunday after the fire, Charlie asked me if I would like to see the remains of the fire. Oh yes, I did, and you can bet your last dollar, I'll never forget the sight I saw. Horses, cattle, rabbits were still burning. There were so many rabbits that year. I don't remember of any lives being lost, because I was heart sick and only 17. We heard a pitiful meow, and we found a burned cat in the well house. Charlie said, "Go get in the buggy, I can't leave this cat here." So he put it to sleep.

My daddy took the picture of the burned, dead horses, and he was going to take more pictures, but we were all sick at heart. In the picture, my mother is in the spring wagon, the two horseback riders are my two cousins, Ora Rhea on the light colored horse and Owen Tucker on the dark horse, then in the buggy next was Charlie and I, the next buggy I have forgotten who.

Charlie and I were married in December, 1917. We moved to Sharon Springs, Kansas, in the spring of 1920. I have lost my parents, my little boy, and now Charlie is gone. He died in 1973. I'll soon be 80, but I'll never forget that 1915 fire. I have seen a few since, but nothing like that one.

If it hadn't been for Charlie, my mother, the dog, the horses, and I would have perished in that fire. Our friends and neighbors knew he saved our lives, and we will never forget his thoughtfulness. I hope never to go through an experience like that again.

Marion Shipman  
Cherry Co.  
1925

In 1925 I was living eleven miles north of Kilgore, Nebraska. Early in April that year I noticed a large amount of smoke northwest of my place a short time after noon. I didn't think much of it as the government was paying the Indians in South Dakota to help fight any prairie fires. As it was north of the south fork of the White River I supposed they would get it put out there.

But late the next afternoon a man on horseback rode in and said the fire was headed our way and they needed help. So we all started back fires around all the ranch buildings. A little before sundown it had reached my place, then on south toward the Nebraska line. So

we all went south to the Nebraska line and started back fires west of the St. Francis highway and then north of the Minichaduza Creek that was just over the Nebraska line. By that time the wind had died down some and we got it out there. But some time during the night it started up and jumped the creek and headed south to the Northwestern railroad. It jumped that and also highway 20 between Kilgore and Crookston. Then over the Niobrara River and was at last put out near Kennedy and Brownlee, Nebraska.

This fire started north east of Martin, South Dakota. It burned almost three days and at times there were one hundred people fighting the fire. We used four horse header sweeps loaded with wet hay to put out the side fire, with men coming along to put out the little fires that would start up. After the fire the government discontinued paying the Indians to fight prairie fires.

There were several head of livestock lost in this fire. Tony Bell, a rancher living southwest of my place was burned pretty bad fighting the blaze around his buildings.

I will be eighty years old my next birthday and I do not know of any of the old timers left that helped fight that fire.

Alex A. Liska  
Knox Co.  
1923

It was about 4:30 P.M. on a dry windy day. We children were walking home from country school. Directly 1 mile east of us we saw a dark cloud of rolling smoke. When we got home mother said it was a prairie fire in virgin prairie.

We lived close to a country road and it wasn't long until neighbors and townsmen started to come by on horseback, in wagons, and cars. They had shovels, plows, water in cans and wet sacks. Some had tarps with rope tied on two corners which men on horseback pulled between them as they straddled the smaller side fires.

The horseback riders had to switch sides often so that the horse running on the burned over ground didn't get his feet too hot and get the "hot foot."

The head fire went faster than some wildlife could run ahead of it. There wasn't time for an organizational meeting on how to fight the fire. Fighters converged from all sides. Those on the sides fought side fires. Those ahead of the fire a mile or more plowed fire guards along ridges where the grass was shorter and started so called back fires to make the barrier wider.

The same as any other fire fighters, some men had near misses, being almost engulfed by fire in the hills and deep valleys. But no one was hurt other than utter exhaustion. After about 5 hours the fire was under control, and other than a few on watch, every one went home to carry on their own work. Just another day, but different, then pioneer life.

Some of the after effects included several miles of fence burned out, and cattle mixed up. This fire traveled north to south seldom used roadways. Some people seeing the smoke went toward the fire cross country, cutting fences as they went causing more livestock to get mixed up among neighbors. But no complaints, no law suits, the helpers were welcome.

Mrs. Harley Birth  
Logan Co.  
1909

I've seen many prairie fires, was a homesteader during these and have a book written of my trials of hardships. Came to Logan Co. in 1908, age 5. The lightning set many fires. The one in 1909 that went across north of Logan County and burned several buildings in Dunning was over a mile wide in place. Cattle were driven in deep blowouts. This fire swept northeast, had hard wind behind it, 2 men were burned badly. This fire burned the lumber yard where my folks had everything stored until we got a sodhouse built. Yes, many tears have been shed over prairie fires.



## A Tragic Prairie Fire

Charles M. Turner

Jefferson Co.

1873

The three dangers that the early settlers feared most were grasshoppers, prairie fires and Indian raids. When the country was first settled, unbroken prairie extended for miles and miles and, as long as the grass was fresh and green, there was not danger, but as soon as the grass dried, the danger came. In those days every farm had a strip of land from one to three rods wide plowed around the place and sometimes they plowed two strips some rods apart and burned the strip between, but during the high wind, especially if there were tumble weeds rolling along from some new piece of breaking, the fire would cross a wide fire guard. Before a very strong wind, the fire would jump Swan or Turkey or Rose Creeks and I believe there is one case on record where, before a terrible gale, the fire jumped the Blue River.

South and west of where Wilbur now stands, there is a school house that for many years has been known as the Golden School House. On election day in 1873, there was a young lady teaching there, and looking out of the window, she saw a big prairie fire coming towards the school house driven by high wind. Now it is told as a fact that this fire ran from Swan Creek where it started, to Pleasant Hill in two hours, at least fifteen miles. Quickly marshalling her little band of scholars out into a nearby corn field she set them pulling cornstalks and clearing as large a place as they could before the fire reached them, piling the pulled hills of corn on the north side of the clearing so the heat of these stalks would not be so intense when they burned. While they were thus busily engaged, Grandma Morey arrived on a pony for her grandchildren, of the Benney Family.

Now at this time the Benney family lived on what was known for years as the Stanley place and Grandma Morey lived about a mile west on the north side of the road. In spite of anything the teacher could say, she took her grandchildren and started northeast across the open prairie. Before they had gone very far, the fire overtook them and the old lady and three or four of the children lost their

lives. The two boys that did live through this terrible experience were so burned and scarred that they carried the marks as long as they lived, while the teacher and the children that remained in the corn field escaped without a burn.

For 50 years, at least, it was never known how this fire started, but this is the story of it as told by a very old settler on Swan Creek. On the day of the fire a party of emigrants stopped on the south side of Swan Creek for dinner and, after eating and before leaving, they carefully put out their fire, but sometime during the meal a spark had lodged in an old rotten stump nearby. After the party left, the wind fanned this spark into a blaze that caused all the destruction.

### **A Nebraska Prairie Fire**

**Mrs. Hervert A. Sandberg  
Boone Co.  
1899**

When a very small girl in our home was threatened by a prairie fire. I remember watching out an upstairs window. It was dark. The flames seemed to be coming ever closer. We could see the men, our father and some of the neighbors who had seen it and come to help. The wind was blowing hard. The men were running back to the water tank for the water needed for dipping their gunny sacks. These they used to try to beat out the flames. They looked like black shadows working in front of the flames. Some one hurried to the barn and hitched a team to the plow. Several furrows were plowed around the buildings in hopes the flames would not jump over the bare ground. Finally the wind shifted and our home was saved. It was a never-to-be-forgotten experience.

### **Nebraska Prairie Fires**

**Emil Elmshaeuser  
Perkins Co.  
1912**

In September 1912, when I was a youngster of seven years old, I experienced a prairie fire that started about twenty-two miles south of my parent's farm. This fire traveled nearly due north all the way.

Of course, the land was mostly prairie, and most of it had a good stand of grass, which helped the fire to spread, and continue on.

Water was hauled in barrels on wagons, and this water was used to wet the burlap sacks so that the fire could be stopped. Wet burlap sacks were quite effective in beating out the fire, but the south wind boosted it on and was a winless battle.

To my recollection, a lot of men were fighting this fire, and various areas it spread out more than at others, depending on the amount of tall grass and wind, which increased from time to time to spread the fire.

This fire started early in the forenoon, and lasted until late that afternoon, and it burned out just one quarter mile south of my parent's house and barn. I can remember my father hitched up three horses on a two bottom plow, and hurriedly plowed a fire guard about ten rods ahead of the fire, in order to save our home and other buildings, and yet we were not so sure if that would stop the fire. My mother and the rest of us became quite frantic and much worried, but fortunately our grazing land or pasture was quite short of burning material, and stopped burning before it got to the fire guard. I remember that my father plowed several rounds in order to keep the fire from jumping over the fire guard, and continue to burn.

To this date I have not been able to find out just what caused the fire, and the date may not be quite right, but if I find out for sure, will let you know, as dates are never sure unless they were written down at the time.

And so the story of a real prairie fire which stopped before we lost our happy home.

### **The Prairie Fire I Remember**

**Nora Sanderson Hays  
Furnas Co.  
1892**

My parents, Jonathan and Rebecca (McCloughan) Sanderson, first homesteaded in Nebraska in 1872, about seven miles northeast of Edgar. Twenty years later, with their family of five sons and two



small daughters, the decision was made to move west where more farmland was available. We arrived in Oxford in late February and moved onto a farm eight miles northwest of Oxford. We lived in a part dug-out, part sod house until our own farm home was built that summer.

About two weeks later, in early March of 1892, as my father was working in the farmyard, he caught the smell of smoke. Calling to my mother, they could see clouds of smoke billowing to the south of us. They knew what that meant! A prairie fire had started in the dry grass on the north side of the CB&Q railroad, three and one-half miles south of us. There were no fields nor farmsteads—just open prairie between the railroad and where we were living. The fire was spreading north and we were right in its path!

Father quickly hitched his team of horses to a walking plow and started to make a fire guard to protect the farmyard. The fire came so fast he hardly had time to get to shelter. He brought the team to the side of the dug-out, broke the window sash and crawled inside, holding the team as close as possible to the sod wall. The fire did very little damage as it spread around us, only singeing the horses a bit.

After the fire had passed, Father hitched the team to the wagon, and we drove a mile or more north, where my brothers Robert and Ralph (ages 14 and 12) were herding the cattle in a dry stalkfield. You cannot imagine the feeling we had when driving over the burned prairie, seeing piles of smoldering shucks and stalks, never knowing if this was all that remained of my two brothers. What a relief we had when we found that the two boys had driven the cattle to a thin place in the field and were safe! Both boys had laid face down, Robert covering his younger brother Ralph, while the fire passed overhead.

How far this fire burned, I do not know, but I heard in later years that fires started by railroad engines had burned as far as the Platte River, thirty miles to the north. Could this fire have been one of those?

Frank Piersall  
Brown Co.  
1890's

Pearria, or Grass Fires, the great dread and fear for the early day settlers of the Great Plains, and cattle countries of Nebraska and South Dakota through the 1890's and our crude ways of combatting . . .

Through the 1880's my father lived with his family on a homestead in Brown County Nebraska, I was a lad of eight or ten years....I recall very clearly our whole family staying up all night watching a raging Pearria fire, though it might be twenty miles away....one watching might think it not more than four or five miles from where you are....I might say, it is a truly marvelous sight....at night to watch the leaping flames....it might be a fire with a front of eight to sixteen miles in width, with side fires running from the place of starting to the lead fire. These side fires would be steadily burning their way back and into the standing grass. If the wind did not shift, the fire was more easily brought under control. The homesteader would try to protect his small home and out buildings by plowing what was called a fire guard around his place, but all to frequent the fire would jump those guards, and wipe out the homesteader. Therefore, a great number of settlers would build their small homes with sod, using a sod or dirt roofing, therefore the families were saved from bodily harm.

The early day methods of combatting the raging fires. Many times groups of settlers would get together and study and make plans. A neighborhood would buy chains, great lengths of chain, use one piece, say thirty foot in length, another twenty-five feet in length, another twenty feet, another fifteen feet, and a piece ten feet. These chains would be linked together, each with some slack, so when dragged by two riders, one on each side of the burning side fires, by riding on a slow walk, dragging these bounding beating chains, over the grass fire, a man or two would follow-up with wet bags or wet blankets, and beat out any sparks that might spring up behind the chains. This method was used a great deal.

Another method used a lot in the range countries was when a fire was spotted all hands for miles around, would drop off from any and

all jobs they were on, and race to the scene of the fire. Very often two riders would locate a grazing bunch of cattle, not wasting much time in locating the most unvalued critter, a bullet from a forty five and the brute was dead, then the hide slit full length down the belly. A rope placed around the neck, another around the hind legs, and the drage of the flames would be on. If water could be found, blankets were wet, then placed over the horse and saddle, hanging low down the horses legs, to keep the heat from the fire, away from the horse and rider, the carcass of a nine hundred pound brute will drag out three or four miles of fire before becoming dragged out. But the stunt worked.

Strange how dumb animals, cattle and horses on the range, would sense a coming grass fire. You would see them making a fast retreat, but would not be going with the wind, but straight sideways to a wind, smart!

I could relate some very amusing things I have saw happen, as well as some that has happened to me—this sketch written by an Old Range Rider.