

# THE DEADLIEST

FIRES THEN AND NOW

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*Photograph, previous page:* Firefighters worked to control hundreds of wildfires in California in 2020. Scientists point to global climate change as one factor in the increase of severe wildfires throughout the American West and in other parts of the world.



## BEFORE YOU GO ON

**Y**ou're about to read about some of the deadliest fires in United States history, beginning with the deadliest of all in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, on October 8, 1871.

Peshtigo is often called “the forgotten fire.” It’s always been overshadowed by the Great Chicago Fire, which broke out on that same Sunday night. As we’ll explore in Part One, this wasn’t entirely a coincidence. Although the Chicago disaster is the one people remember, the fires in Peshtigo and Chicago are both part of a larger story—the **Great Midwest Fires of 1871**.

In Part Two, we’ll move on to deadly fires of the twentieth century, beginning with the Iroquois Theater in Chicago in 1900. We’ll explore how that tragedy, along with others, led to regulations to better protect people in public buildings and cities. We’ll see how fire

disasters have affected immigrants, workers, and communities of color more severely.

We'll end Part Two by looking back at the deadly wildfire summer of 1910, which will lead us into Part Three. In this section, we'll explore how decades of United States governmental fire suppression policies (putting out *all* fires), along with population growth and global climate change, are leading to more severe wildfires in the twenty-first century. We'll touch on some of the ways U.S. government agency policies to control fires have affected Native Americans in negative ways, and how people are trying to change that.

The challenges we face with wildfires now and in the future are enormous. That's why people are working together to find solutions and create partnerships among scientists, fire experts, Native Americans and other Indigenous peoples, farmers, forest managers, and local communities. People are trying to be open to new ideas and traditional practices, especially those of Native Americans and other Indigenous peoples in the world.

## The Deadliest Fires Then and Now

In this book, we use Indigenous to refer to people who are the original inhabitants of a particular place and space. Native American is the term used for Indigenous people from North America, usually the United States.

It takes a lot of people working together to make a book too. I've been guided by the advice of a Native American colleague, who read the manuscript in draft form. A wildfire expert also read the draft and made suggestions to improve information about wildland fire-fighting. U.S. Forest Service supervisor Merv George, Jr., a member of the Hoopa Valley Tribe, took time from his busy schedule to explain how essential fire has been to Native American communities over many centuries. I appreciate everyone's help, and any mistakes are mine.

Our new world of fire is here—right on our doorsteps—in a rapidly warming climate and more severe weather events. Yet this challenge also brings a chance—and an urgent need—for change. I hope you'll want to be part of it.

On this journey into fires then and now, we'll have several guides: resourceful kids, brave survivors, a famous actor of his time, and intrepid reporters.

Interested in being a journalist or a wildland firefighter? We've included interviews by students in the back. There's a section about studying forestry too.

Maybe you've faced deadly fires yourself or know people who have. Whether you have personal experience or not, fire is a complex topic, and this book is only a start. Throughout the book, and in the bibliography and resources in the back, you'll find suggestions for continuing your learning journey and discovering other perspectives.

You've already met our first eyewitness to fires of the past: Father Peter Pernin. He probably never imagined people would be reading his words more than 150 years later.

Father Pernin's harrowing account, one of the most complete we have from Peshtigo, reminds us that we're all part of history. Telling your story is important. Who knows? Someone might read your words hundreds of years in the future.

So let's head back to Peshtigo and catch up with Father Pernin in the days before the deadliest fire in America—then or now.

In this painting, Wisconsin artist Mel Kushner (1915–1991) imagines the deadly fire in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, on October 8, 1871.

