

Hemlocks and Fire Dangers



Even after much of Medford had been wiped from the map in the devastating downtown fire of 1885, early residents of the area continually lived in fear because fires started easily in the pine and hemlock slashings left over from wasteful cutting of the forest. The following are just a few examples:

In May, 1893, fire consumed slashings all around Perkinstown and the tannery, as well as nearby bark camps and cords of tan bark that had been peeled in spring. One hundred-fifty men fought the blaze. In August of that same year, Ben Colbrath of Perkinstown lost 180 cords of bark in a fire.

In August of the same year, Rib Lake was threatened by forest fires. All the men in the neighborhood went out to fight the fire. They earned \$2.00 a day. About 3,000 cords of tan bark were destroyed.

In November, 1893, electricity already lighted the tannery in Medford, but a lantern in one of the buildings exploded and started a blaze.

A drought in 1894 made forest fires a constant problem. The worst fires were along what is now County Trunk E. Homes, other buildings and livestock were burned. Every farm house on either side of the meridian was a total loss. Thousands of cords of tan bark were again destroyed. In Chelsea, six farm houses were destroyed and a bridge burned.

In July, 1894, Phillips was on fire. The tannery of Mr. Fayette Shaw was totally destroyed. The entire town was wiped out except for thirty-seven houses. "Mr. Fayette Shaw, of this city, (Medford) the owner of the Phillips tannery, was forced to swim across the river to escape the flames, which feat he accomplished successfully notwithstanding his 65 years." People of neighboring towns provided relief. (Taylor County Star and News. August 4, 1894)

In September, 1894, people in the vicinity of Chelsea and Whittlesey reported heavy losses of timber and bark.

In 1896, a large part of the Perkinstown tannery was destroyed by fire. That community never returned to its former size and opportunities for employment. It is said that untanned hides from that tannery still lie buried in the area today.

In January, 1898, fire again threatened the Rib Lake tannery.

In February, 1906, part of the tannery in Prentice was destroyed, but plans were already in progress in March to rebuild.

Fire destroyed the Tomahawk tannery in August, 1907. The loss was estimated to be \$500,000.

Tom Johnson, who moved from Medford to Merrill, lost several hundred cords of hemlock bark in 1908.

A poem about the effects of fire written by a Westboro pastor was published in the May 27, 1910 issue of the Taylor County Star News.

We are having a wild old time
In Westboro and neighboring town,
The fire is doing fearful crime
On forestry and ground.

Hot and smoky over all
With endless flame and crush,
I hear and see the **hemlock** fall
And hide among the brush.

Sweeping thru the swamp and hills,
The sorrowful cry we hear,
The little creatures living still,
But lost their way thru fear.

The rabbit runs from place to place,
Plunges into the flame,
Poor creature! In our pitiful way
We plead for our small game.

The birds have lost their birds and eggs,
It bleeds my heart to see
How they flutter, how they beg,
As they hop from tree to tree.
We watch and fight with will and strength,
What more can mortals do?
It will have an end at length.
It will be checked anew.

I'm like a bird upon a limb
That upward flies and dives,
Pouring forth their sweetest hymns
When in safety of their lives.

The hunter will not aim at me,
The art of fire I know,
My life is in the hand of thee,
That rules the heaven and earth below.

Harold J. Reykdal, Westboro, Wisconsin

Threats from fire were again increased during the drought and heat of the 1930's, prompting a much needed emphasis on conservation education, reforestation, and means of fire protection. That need continues today

Bibliography

- Taylor County Star and News. May 23, 1891, Star, Vol. XV, No. 51, News, Vol. XIII, No. 15.
- Taylor County Star and News. May 27, 1893. Star. Vol. XVII, No. 52, News. Vol. XV, No. 16.
- Taylor County Star and News. August 19, 1893. Star. Vol. XVIII, No. 15, News. Whole No. 899.
- Taylor County Star and News November 4, 1893, Star, Vol. XVIII, No. 26, News No. 910.
- Taylor County Star and News. July 28 1894, Star. Vol. XIX, No. 12. News, No. 948.
- Taylor County Star and News. July 28 1894, Star. Vol. XIX, No. 12. News, No. 948.
- Taylor County Star and News. August 4, 1894. Star. Vol. XIX, No. 13, News. No. 949.
- Taylor County Star and News. August 4, 1894. Star. Vol. XIX, No. 13, News. No. 949.
- Taylor County Star and News. Star , Vol. XIX, No. 18. News, No. 954, September 8, 1894.
- Taylor County Star and News. October 3, 1896. Star. Vol. XXI, No. 22, News. No. 1062.
- Taylor County Star and News, December 19, 1896, Star, Vol. XXI, No. 33, News, No. 1073.
- Taylor County Star and News. January 1, 1898, Star. Vol. XXI, No. 34, News, Whole No. 1127.
- Taylor County Star News. February 23, 1906, Thirty-first year, No. 47.
- Taylor County Star News. March 9, 1906, Thirty-first year, No. 49.
- Taylor County Star-News, Thirty-third Year, No. 19, August 9, 1907.
- Taylor County Star-News. October 2, 1908, Thirty-fourth year, No. 27.
- Taylor County Star-News May 27, 1910, Vol. XXXVI, No. 5.