



Left photo: Wisconsin pine forest fire, May 2005, caused by a man using fire to clear his land. This impressive image of an intense pine forest fire that burned 3,900 acres barely suggests the magnitude of The Great Hinckley Fire that was a hundred times larger and burned 350,000 acres (480 square miles), photographer Mike Lehman, from the web collection at wildland fire.

Right photo: Pile driver steamboats "Arcola" and "AB Trow" breaking the log jam at Taylors Falls, Minnesota Historical Society

Soon citizens noticed a coal-black cloud to the south and began to hear a distant roar. A cyclone of fire was now pushing a strong, hot wind. Multiple fires had joined together to make one solid wall of fire with flames that licked through the heat inversion, pulling the cool air above into the flames to create a vortex. A fierce firestorm was approaching Hinckley with flames 200 feet in height, sending flaming debris thousands of feet into the air due to the convection column. Temperatures at the core of the fire were over 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit, hot enough to melt barrels of nails and fuse rail car wheels to the tracks. The town of Mission Creek, several miles to the south, had by now also been destroyed.

By the time the fire chief informed Hinckley residents that the fire was beyond control, and that they must save themselves, a half dozen houses on the west end of town had already burst into flame and the heat and smoke had become intense almost to suffocation. At 2:45 p.m. the Eastern Minnesota freight train pulled into Hinckley and ran onto a siding to wait for the southbound passenger train, which was due at 3:25 p.m.. Luckily the St. Paul-Duluth train pulled into Hinckley on time, but by now everything in town was afire. A decision was made to couple both trains with one engine in front and one in back. They also added three additional boxcars, and the St. Paul-Duluth and Eastern Minnesota trains were readied to make a run north away from the fire and back to Superior, Wisconsin.

Then the town of Hinckley virtually exploded. The very air seemed to be burning, and the roaring of the firestorm drowned out the screams of the townspeople. Dense smoke completely hid the sun, but as buildings took fire they briefly lit the howling darkness like flashes of lightning. People were running for the train and the crews helped them aboard. By the time the train did begin to move about 4:05 p.m. the paint was melting and running off the cars, and the ties beneath them were afire. But seven miles outside of Hinckley the air freshened a little, and two miles later the train entered the undamaged town of Sandstone. Crew and passengers called to the people there to come aboard and save themselves. But despite the tall flames right outside town, and the obvious fate of Hinckley, few, if any, Sandstone citizens chose to leave. The train moved on, and an hour later Sandstone was gone and forty-five of its people dead.

The same could not be said for encampments of Ojibwe who got caught up in the fire with no means of escape other than on foot. Two months earlier a small band under Chief Wacouta left reservation lands and erected a hunting cabin near the village of Pokegama. As the fire approached they headed west but could not escape. The bodies of 23 young and old, men and women and children were later found on the dried out swamp lands between Pokegama and Opstead, a little settlement on the east bank of Mille Lacs Lake. Their fleeing path, a stretch of 5 miles, could be identified by their half-burned bodies.

Many Hinckley townspeople made decisions that day that cost them their lives. Some people in the path of the fire waited too long to leave, some sought safety in wells, swamps, and the river. Others, the lucky, escaped by way of the St. Paul-Duluth and Eastern Minnesota trains or in the gravel pit, which the Eastern Minnesota Railroad had dug for right-of-way fill. More than 100 people survived in the three foot deep water of the gravel pit. The caprices of the fire meant the difference between life and death for people in almost identical circumstances, and despite the death of 45 people of Sandstone who, when given the chance to board the train to safety, remained and were killed, many more actually survived. Among the communities destroyed by the fire that came to be known as The Great Hinckley Fire, were the Scenic Byway towns of Mission Creek, Hinckley, and Sandstone.

It is a matter of conjecture as to how the fire actually started. An 1894 publication, *The Cyclone of Fire or The Hinckley Fire*, casts suspicion on "timber thieves, who against all law and regulation and without ow(n)ing a twig of the tracts of the woods they devastate, and who cut thousands of acres of valuable timberland. . . in order to wipe out any trace of their thefts, had set fire to the devastated area and that the fire spread itself beyond reach of their control." The publication goes on to state, "(i)f this is the true situation, then the horrible guilt rests on these conscious-less (sic), great thieves and sawmill millionaires." However the fire started, it cannot be denied that clear-cutting the forests, leaving behind the slash debris, coupled with a dry summer, combined to turn ordinary smaller fires into the wall of fire that swept through east central Minnesota destroying lives, property, and communities. It is clear the author of *Cyclone of Fire* blames "(t)he headless and conscienceless cutting of the woods for sordid gain's reason, (which) has drawn much suffering over our land..."

The story of the pine cut, the loss of wilderness, and the aftermath is one of deep change for native peoples and settlers alike. Yet it is also a story of adaptability, persistence, ingenuity and resourcefulness among diverse groups of people who, then and now, personify the heritage of the region. Following decades of immigration during the years of declining fur trade and logging, the population of the Upper Midwest came to have the greatest percentage of foreign born residents in the United States. Perhaps it was the diverse mix of ethnic backgrounds that enabled the cross-pollination of ideas, or a need to cooperate in finding solutions, that allowed residents of the region to slowly begin to reshape the region economically, redefine what is meant by wealth, and restore the devastated landscape. Of necessity immigrants had been forced to find new means of employment and new ways to make a living from the land that were based on economies less dependant on widespread extraction of natural resources.

Working together, they also came to adopt a regional conservation ethic that has spread to the nation. As early as 1870 tourism in the St. Croix valley had become an established business. People arrived by steamboat, stage and train, some to view the spectacular log jams that plagued the seasonal run of logs down the river, some to experience what remained of the wilderness, some to enjoy the spectacular geology along the river. In any case the seeds of tourism in the region had been sown and in 1895 and 1900 Minnesota and Wisconsin, respectively, established the first Interstate State Parks in the nation facing each other across the St. Croix River. The Interstate Parks are the second oldest park established in Minnesota and the oldest park in Wisconsin. The work of restoration continues into the present and this region is again one of national environmental significance, with the St. Croix National Wild and Scenic River at the heart of the restored North Woods of our collective imagination.



Last logs through Boom Site June 12, 1914, photographer John Runk, Minnesota Historical Society

Just beyond Sandstone a bridge stood 115 feet above the Kettle River. As the train approached, the bridge was afire from one bank to the other. Incredibly the two bridge watchmen had stayed by their posts and as the train approached screamed "for God's sake, go on—you can cross it now and it will go down in five minutes." The northeast portion of the 1600-foot long bridge fell shortly after the train crossed. Before the train traveled another 2000 feet the entire structure collapsed. The train rattled on and at last reached Superior and safety. It had crossed nineteen bridges on the way, most of them burning. Both engineers were blind from heat and smoke when they got to Superior, and did not regain their sight until the next morning. The two engineers and their crews had saved some five hundred lives.

As the fire was passing over Hinckley, Duluth pedestrians, more than 70 miles from the fire front, were being assaulted by ash and cinders and the air felt like furnace blasts. In these conditions a second rescue train left Duluth headed through thick smoke for Hinckley. Jim Root, the engineer, had pressed on diligently through "total darkness about forty miles" until he neared Hinckley, when he saw the glare from the flames ahead illuminating about 160 desperate people on foot trying to outrun the fire. They told him everything in Hinckley was burned up. Root had earlier thought to make a run through the fire but now realized that this fire was bigger than anything he'd ever seen. The only solution was to quickly load the people aboard, reverse the train, and make a run for it. As the train began to move the cars were burning and the window glass melting. At one point Root fainted from the heat and smoke. Revived by his fireman, and with the fire gaining on the train, he had given up any idea of outrunning the fire. He was making for Skunk Lake, a marsh with a small pond of scummy water that would be the only hope of salvation for him, his crew, and passengers. They huddled in the dank waters of Skunk Lake for four hours until the incandescent ground cooled, and then crept out. They had survived.

Before the Hinckley Fire when one traveled by railway between Duluth and St. Paul one could not avoid noticing the great timber cutting that went on along the whole line immediately north of Pine City. Almost every station had its sawmill, and almost every settler and farmyard showed evidence of mighty piles of cut cord wood, railroad ties, shingle blocks or the like. Pine trees just outside the door of their residences were like money in the bank and could be depended on for extra earnings. Sawmills had been established here and there, railroads had come in, wages were good, and year round work was found for almost all. Lumber was the principal product, and here was an almost immeasurable supply of the finest timber, which only awaited the axe.



Farewell photo of the St. Croix Boom taken on June 12, 1914 in front of the cook house included log drivers and men who had worked the site as boys 50 years earlier. Everyone took off their hat after the last meal in farewell to the great logging industry on the St. Croix River, photographer John Runk, Minnesota Historical Society

Right photo: Hinckley Fire Monument, photographer Bill Neuman

