

Prairie Fires

The pioneer, suddenly aware that a long band of red light against the distant horizon was moving toward him and spreading its glow as it came, stood awed by the spectacle, notwithstanding its sinister significance. He was not at all callous to the fascination of the prairie scene in its many guises, but emotion was translated almost immediately into action.

Earlier in that autumnal evening he might have noticed with apprehension the dryness of the land. If he had stooped to pluck a blade of prairie grass, he would have found it dry, almost to the point of brittleness. When he felt the rising wind, his glance at the shocks of wheat and at his cornfield was uneasy. A fire would start readily, and his fields were excellent tinder. One precautionary measure had already been taken. A broad strip of bare stamped earth circled his cabin and the cattle sheds. There was reasonable safety within that line for his family and the stock. Fire was known to leap narrow streams, but his path of grassless earth formed a magic ring of protection.

Gradually the dull red glow in the distance was

brightening and widening. The whole picture was becoming further animated with sound. The burning grass crackled, and the wind sweeping the fire onward made a roaring noise, still faint but unmistakably ominous.

The settler paused no longer to watch the spectacle. He sprang into action. Hurriedly fire-brands were made. Armed with hazelbrush brooms to control the fires of his own setting, the pioneer, aided by his family, began burning strips of prairie around his fields in the hope of turning aside the general conflagration. The inner edge of the flame was beaten out and the outer edge allowed to burn away. Fire was fighting fire.

The distant "wall of flame" moved forward, lighting and heating the atmosphere. Meanwhile the backfire, or counter-fire, went to meet the giant enemy. The pioneer's wife and children were in the charmed circle of the beaten rim of soil; the cattle, too, were in comparative safety.

The fiery monster was actually turning its course! As the pioneer watched its progress intently, he knew it was no miracle that had happened. His little counter-fire had successfully battled the larger mass of flame and caused the prairie fire to seek easier onward passage to the right of his fields. The pioneer could now observe the scene in all its splendor, yet soberly.

He could scarcely have described what he saw. His impressions of the majestic beauty of the towering wall of fire were probably confused with a sense of terror at the demon beyond his control. Though his buildings, stock, and fields were saved, the prairie with its deep carpet of nutritious grass was only a black and barren waste as far as he could see. The neighbors might not have fared as well as he.

The casual traveler in the West was not directly concerned with the danger to life and property. He could view the fiery tornado in a relatively impersonal manner, something like a spectator watches a magnificent exhibition of pyrotechnics. Immune from the grim reality of the prairie fire, he was often moved to write of the splendor of the "scarlet hurricane of light". Such descriptions were usually extravagant, like the picture given in 1849 by a traveler in Appanoose County.

"Soon the fires began to kindle wider and rise higher from the long grass. The gentle breeze increased to stronger currents, and soon formed the small, flickering blaze into fierce torrent flames, which curled up and leaped along in resistless splendor, and like quickly raising the dark curtain from the luminous stage, the scenes before me were suddenly changed as if by the magician's

wand, into one boundless amphitheater, blazing from earth to heaven and sweeping the horizon round — columns of lurid flames sportively mounting up to the zenith, and dark clouds of crimson smoke, curling away and aloft till they nearly obscured stars and moon, while the rushing, crashing sounds, like roaring cataracts mingled with distant thunders, were almost deafening. Danger, death, glared all around; it screamed for victims, yet, notwithstanding the imminent peril of prairie fires, one is loth, irresolute, almost unable to withdraw or seek refuge."

The subject almost invariably evoked figures of speech from a writer. At times the prairie fire came "marching and advancing like an army over the hills and hollows in the night-time"; or "the red fire scourge was galloping over the billowy expanse". Again, it was "a sea of flame, crackling and roaring"; or perhaps a fiery steed, "its hot breath threatening destruction". "I know nothing like it," wrote one, "unless it could be a high sea surf, its breast on fire, rushing and roaring landwards and suddenly stopping at the beach". The prairie appeared to another as "wrapt in rolling sheets of flame, which float in mountain waves across the plains". To a group of spectators the fire "roared past us like a railroad train". The poet spoke of the "infernal geyser".

The prairie fire scene was a motion-sound picture of speed and light. "Faster than a horse could run", commented a witness. And the flight of animals, birds, and even people lent motion to the scene. By its light, wrote another, "we could read fine print for $\frac{1}{2}$ mile or more." Its departure left the sky in comparative darkness, the sun clouded by smoke, and the earth black.

The peril of the prairie fires lay in their swiftness. In nearly every case a high wind accompanied them, so that the fire spread rapidly over the surface of the dry grass. Charles Joseph Latrobe estimated their rate of progress at eight miles an hour, at least, though he confessed that this was extremely difficult to calculate. The fire could not only run, according to all appearances, but it could jump! It leaped great spaces; it crossed the river where it was from "seventy to one hundred feet wide." Streams or places without vegetation would have constituted a more formidable barrier if the fire had not been fanned by the wind.

There was little that could resist the hot swift flames, for the very heat created a powerful current of air that rushed toward the blaze and sucked everything with it. A prairie fire was like a hurricane in power; it could not be combated as a whole. Its course was diverted to some extent

by the contours of the land and other natural deterrents, such as groves of trees, which prevented the grass from becoming thoroughly dry. Its destructive career was somewhat checked by the efforts of the pioneer who stole the fire-demon's very thunder when he fought the prairie fire with a counter-fire. Nearly every farmer was protected at all times by the dirt moat of safety which he plowed around his property. Ditches and furrows he also found helpful if the wind were not too violent.

The most effective enemy of the prairie fire was fire itself. Small as the counter-fire was, it was sufficient to deprive the larger fire of its fuel. Like a huge army cut off from its means of sustenance, the prairie fire grew less until it finally died away; or more probably, it skirted the two ends of the backfire and marched undaunted onward. The success of such methods was not positive. Rowena and Jake in *Vandemark's Folly* found themselves in a serious dilemma.

"We were now between two fires; the great conflagration from which we were trying to protect ourselves came on from the west like a roaring tornado, its ashes falling all about us, its hot breath beginning to scorch us, its snapping and crackling now reaching the ear along with its roar; while on the east was the fire of my own

kindling, growing in speed, racing off away from us, leaving behind it our haven of refuge, a tract swept clean of food for the flames, but hot and smoking, and as yet all too small to be safe, for the heat and smoke might kill where the flames could not reach. Between the two fires was the fast narrowing strip of dry grass from which we must soon move. Our safety lay in the following of one fire to escape the other."

To watch the prairie burn from afar was a thrilling experience. The memory of such a sight lingered in the mind of many a western traveler. But for the pioneer on the frontier who lived in dread of catastrophe from the elements of nature, the ordeal of prairie fire was a terrible thing. On the wings of the wind came destruction, maybe death, swiftly, unwavering, inexorable. Whoever stood in the path of the holocaust had no choice but to fight. And the impressions of such a battle were seared into the very being of those who ran the backfires, and stamped out the flying sparks. Children who saw their parents struggle against apparently insuperable odds never forgot the vivid scene that was traced indelibly upon their minds.

"We youngsters of the family", wrote Ellis E. Wilson of a prairie fire near Waterloo when he was a boy, "were heedless of the remote reflection

in the heavens, for it seemed far away. Our parents, however, were cautiously apprehensive of the distant luminosity as their vigilance and movements showed. We never learned whether they retired at all during that fearful night.

"Sometime in the night brother Barnett awakened me with a vigorous poke as we slept in an upstairs room. 'What makes the room so light?' he asked excitedly. 'It looks like sunshine but it isn't morning. How the rays flash and flicker on the wall!' He looked out of the gable window to the east and shouted, 'It is a great fire. All the prairie land is on fire. I am frightened at the sight. Likely the world is burning up. Let's call father and mother. Get up quickly and look. Now I can see some one near the fire and it looks like father and mother. I am certain it is they. They are setting backfires. Rover is with them and is barking and running around. I think he is looking for his buried bones. If he doesn't keep away from the flames, he will soon be yipping. They resemble the flames that rose skyward when about two years ago we set fire to father's straw stable and roasted two chickens and the spotted pig. I can hear that pig squealing yet. Hurry, get up.'

"I did so. It appeared as though the bosom of old earth itself was ablaze, for there was a whir-

ring maelstrom of flame rolling westward over the prairie. Drawn by the wind, the chariot of fire which created the little glow that we had seen in the east the evening before had now spread into a spacious, vitalized panorama of swiftly scudding and soaring flames that were being puffed forward and upward, threatening destruction to everything combustible in their pathway. Their swirling outbursts made us shudder and shuffle our feet for we felt like fleeing downstairs and away from the scene that loomed in our sight like a supernatural orgy. Eastward lay a section of land, also several adjoining quarters of prairie which were wholly covered with a dense, all-summer growth of wild grass. On the hilltops it was short but in the fens or along the moist hillsides it was three to six feet tall. Killed by the frost, parched and dried by the sun and winds of autumn, it was very inflammable. There was yet a wide area of dry grass between the greater fire and lesser backfire. A vigorous gale was blowing out of the east and rushing the high-lifted flames with over one mile of frontage extending north and south, directly westward toward our home and the farm buildings of our neighbors. It is not exaggeration to say that the crimson blaze when the tall slough grass was burning zoomed up fifty feet, while the thick enveloping volume of smoke

that hung over the prairie had the appearance of a great black canopy.

"About twenty rods east of our homestead was a wide, marshy slough near the center of which ran a sluggish stream in which lived swarms of green frogs that croaked all summer long and only ceased their chorusing when numbed by winter's cold. The grass that grew near the waterway was coarse and bulky, forming a thick, evenly spread garb which when dry was highly combustible.

"Brother and I quickly dressed, hurried downstairs, and from the farmhouse stoop viewed the raging prairie fire. Gloomy shadows were cast by the smoke of the hurrying flames. We knew it was dangerous to venture away from the house. In early autumn the land around the farm buildings had been plowed, leaving on its exposed surface only the bare soil upon which there was nothing to burn. By taking such a precaution the pioneer settlers endeavored to prevent fires from reaching and annihilating their homes.

"From the house we could see our parents' silhouetted forms moving rapidly to and fro in hurried activity. They had lit backfires which were burning low and creeping in a lackadaisical way against the wind. Already a strip of grass land forty rods in length and thirty or forty feet in width was bared. The counter-fires moved in an

unbroken line toward the fire-fostering gale. . . . The prairie chickens were calling to each other in tones of distress like the wail of a banshee and skirring before the dazzling flames or flying bewilderedly into the seething holocaust. Some escaped but many were burned. A wandering wolf faintly tonguing a howl of defiance loped away.

"The critical danger point near our home came when the contending fires met. Suddenly whirling and twisting into one crimson column, the flames shot heavenward and threw athwart the gloom a great light, then faded. Anon we saw mother leave the prairie and come toward the house. When she arrived, her face was aglow with a conquering look which bespoke a combat waged and won.

"When the hectic danger had passed, father, followed by Rover, the dog's nose dilated and snuffing the smoky east wind, returned to the house. Standing in the front yard we talked and watched the vanishing of the prairie pyrotechnics. The farm stock sensed danger. The horses in the straw stable were pawing and neighing, the cattle were mooing and milling restlessly around in the barnyard. The roosters kept crowing. The wind still moaned about our home but fear of the flames had vanished. A cowl of calm darkness settled over the scene."

After the fire had spent itself, there was left in its wake little except the black surface of the earth, and a sense of great desolation. If by chance the fire occurred in some dry spring, the ruined nests of the prairie hens were conspicuous by their whiteness on the charred land. The sight of the vast bleak prairie was not as grim as that of the farmer's fields, for such a personal loss in many instances was a serious tragedy. The *Mitchell Republican* recounted an instance in October, 1856. "We have heard," reported the editor, "of several who have lost not only the fruits of their entire summer's labor, but also their house and stables; thus leaving them without shelter, and their herds of cattle without fodder for the coming winter. Houses can be rebuilt, but the season is too far spent for hay gathering, even if the fires made no ravages."

There was seldom any investigation of the source of the conflagration. The cause was less a matter of conjecture and worry than of escape from its ravages. Indians were known to have set the prairie afire deliberately, and this for a mixed motive. For his own advantage the fire would set the game in motion, and against the interests of the white man, a large fire despoiled the land for hunting purposes. Again, fires were kindled purposely "to find fresh feed, the old stubble being

dry and tangled." In general, a prairie fire was to be taken as an event as natural as a change of season for which preparation had to be made.

It has been suggested that the prairie fires were the means of making the prairie. Prairies, according to the theory, are forests denuded by fires. Destructive as were the fires, however, they have been insufficient to account for the destruction of whole forests. In keeping the land cleared for the grasses, the prairie fires may have contributed to the maintenance of the prairie itself.

Prairie land under cultivation made prairie fires impossible. Those mighty spectacles belonged to the experience of the pioneers. Pictures which artists have since attempted to color on canvas, and writers to paint with words, are entirely inadequate. He alone who has seen a prairie fire can fully appreciate its awful grandeur. "I would travel a hundred miles", wrote S. H. M. Byers, "to witness a prairie fire, to see a sea of flame and experience the wild excitement of those times long gone."

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