

# SCENE 3 SCRIPT

## THE CUTOVER AND DEADLY FIRES *(A Survivor's Account)*

*It is the late 1800s and the arrival and spread of European immigrants has changed the Wisconsin landscape. They brought with them a vision of conquering, using, and controlling the landscape. The forests of northern Wisconsin were logged to build many of the cities and towns that we know today. The near complete logging is known as "The Cutover." It changed the landscape and people of Wisconsin. In this scene, the state historian interviews a survivor of a deadly wildfire that burned very hot in the limbs and dead trees that were left behind after logging.*



### • CHARACTERS •

State Historian \_\_\_\_\_

Rev. Peter Pernin \_\_\_\_\_

Other Characters \_\_\_\_\_

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**State Historian** .....Reverend Peter Pernin, it is good to be here with you.

**Reverend Peter Pernin**...Thank you. It is my pleasure.

**State Historian** .....Let me first explain to you why I am so interested a wildfire that occurred nearly twenty years ago. The wildfire was in and around Peshtigo in the fall of 1871. It was very large and very destructive. It burned nearly 2,500 square miles of land and killed nearly 1,000 people. It also occurred on the same night as the Great Chicago Fire that destroyed about 200 million dollars worth of property.

Both of these fires were a result of human actions. Because of this, I have been doing research to find out if the Peshtigo Fire has changed the way that people in Wisconsin think about forests. Your story, as a first person account to the fire, is very important to this research.

**Reverend Peter Pernin**...Well, I hope I can help.

**State Historian** .....First, let me ask you to describe Peshtigo before the fire.

**Reverend Peter Pernin**...Peshtigo was found in a rolling landscape of dense forests. The forested landscape was covered with newly open roads, cleared areas, and farms. The climate of the region was predictable and the rains generally fell at a good time for growing crops.

Peshtigo was a farming community surrounded by forest. Many families farmed small plots and the town had the nation's largest woodenware factory. The factory converted logs into pails, tubs, broom handles, and clothespins. Hundreds of people worked at the factory. The logs for the factory were cut from neighboring forests and forests to the north. Many of the logs came to the factory on the Peshtigo River.

**State Historian** .....Before I ask you some specific questions about the fire, will you please describe, in a few words, your general impression of its size and strength?

**Reverend Peter Pernin**...It is hard to describe the size of the fire. It burned an area nearly twice the size of the state of Rhode Island. Neither can I find words to describe its strength. Maybe a description would help you understand.

When the fire was upon the town of Peshtigo, many of us were taking cover in the river. From the river, I saw nothing but flames. Houses, trees, and the air itself were on fire. Above my head, as far as the eye could reach into space, I saw nothing but flames covering the sky. Flames rolled like clouds over one another in a fierce storm.

**State Historian** .....For me, your description is only words. I do not have a way to understand a fire of this size.

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**Reverend Peter Pernin**...I will just say that, even in the middle of the Peshtigo River, the air was on fire. We needed to cover ourselves with wet quilts and blankets and continually splash water in the air. The blankets would dry in a matter of seconds and begin to burn and we would need to go below the water again. On land, the fire was so hot that many of the rich, black soils around Peshtigo were burned to sand.

**State Historian** .....An amazing story. How did a fire of this size start?

**Reverend Peter Pernin**...I am not sure exactly where it started, but I'm sure it started like many other fires of that time – as a very small man-made fire.

**State Historian** .....Could you please explain more about how people were using the land and using fire?

**Reverend Peter Pernin**...It may be best to tell you about the specific activities that I witnessed during the year of 1871. It was a very dry year. Farmers took advantage of the dry conditions to clear areas for planting by cutting the trees and burning the brush and stumps that stood in their way. A railroad was being built into town, and hundreds of workers were clearing land in the same way.

Hunters and Indians also spread throughout the woods, fishing for trout and hunting deer. They built fires at night to cook and keep warm. I saw many of these fires still burning the next morning. Conditions in the forest were dangerous. Many branches were left in the forest after loggers cut trees. The branches and leaves were very dry and would ignite very easily.

**State Historian** .....What you describe is similar to the conditions that existed before major fires in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and in other parts of the world. Large, destructive fires have been occurring throughout the late 1800s around the globe where settlement is expanding. They have destroyed frontier communities in northern Sweden, Russia, New Zealand, Australia, and British Columbia. All of these areas had similar conditions to Peshtigo.

**Reverend Peter Pernin**...It makes sense that when these actions occur and the climate conditions are just right, destructive fires happen. In Peshtigo, two fires threatened the town in the months prior to the fire that destroyed us. I realized then that it was only a matter of time.

• END SCENE 3 •

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What happened in the city of Peshtigo in 1871?

How did the destructive Peshtigo fire start?

What human and natural events caused the fire to be so destructive?

Was Peshtigo the only place where big, destructive fire happened?