

Some of the nation's worst disasters resulted.

The Peshtigo, Wis., fire swept 1,280,000 acres in the Green Bay region and killed 1,152 persons. The Peshtigo survivors were unfortunate because of the cruel coincidence that touched off the blaze Oct. 8, 1871, the same day as the great Chicago fire. The Chicago death toll was 250, but practically no one outside Wisconsin heard of the Peshtigo tragedy for weeks. Relief was tardy and skimpy.

Another forest disaster was the Hinckley, Minn., blaze of 1894, which killed 418 and devastated Pine County. The 1918 Cloquet, Minn. fire razed that city, killed 538, and laid waste 250,000 acres.

These huge fires resulted from small blazes which had been set to clear land for settlements and farms. When humidity fell and winds rose, the small fires merged into the holocausts that killed thousands.

According to the Advertising Council, which has campaigned against forest fires for some 20 years, man-made fires now destroy some three million acres of timberland a year. When its campaign was started, the annual loss was 10 times greater. "Keep America Green" is the slogan of another campaign, launched in 1941 by the American Forest Products Industries, to preserve our woodlands.

Much progress is credited to the 50,000 professional fire-control experts, Federal and state rangers, and private employees of timber firms, who are constantly alert across the nation. The new techniques assisting them include radio communications, planes for patrolling and for carrying smoke-jumpers, water and chemical bombs to smother flames.

Price of this protection, \$55 million a year, is high. But the cost of fires through destruction of timber and other property, damage to future forests and topsoil, loss of underground water supplies, and flood damage from watershed destruction reaches \$1 billion annually.

Some of the loss can't be measured in dollars. The toll in game, birds, and fish is tragic. Adult birds, refusing to leave their young, are roasted to death in their nests. Fish die in streams—some scalded, others killed when ash and lye pollute the water. Deer die because they are attracted by flames.

Modern techniques of fire fighting have cut the fire toll. Carelessness with fire has been reduced through public education campaigns, such as "Smokey the Bear" films and posters.

If arson also can be slowed down, our forests may be preserved to recover from the mistakes of the past.

But incendiarism won't disappear until arson laws are better enforced and the public is better educated about the tragic consequences of deliberate burning. Education can come through lectures and films at school and club meetings, along with newspaper and magazine stories, radio and television appeals.

Sometimes the education is more complicated.

In a Florida district, rangers learned one family was responsible for most of the incendiary fires there. Members of the family grazed their cattle in a national forest, which they burned regularly to create grassland.

The rangers finally showed the family how to turn its own land into useful pasture. The fires stopped.

In the Chattahoochee National Forest area, rangers found that arguments about economic waste failed to stop arson. Then ministers of local churches were asked to help. Soon the people were hearing sermons asking for an end to fires because the Bible enjoins man to exercise "stewardship of the land."

The moral appeal worked and there were no more fires.

But in most instances confirmed arsonists will not change their ways unless faced with certain arrest and punishment. Sheriffs will not arrest, district attorneys will not prosecute, and juries will not convict unless the public recognizes forest arson as a critical evil.

For too long now, arson has been punished with nothing more than a judicial slap on the wrist.

Professional fire-fighters at work are a tragically familiar sight each year.

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