

## The truth behind the fiction of Lark of Yesteryear:

\*Spoiler alert\*

The Great Peshtigo Fire of 1871 is a true tragic event. To this day, it is the worst fire in US history in terms of lives lost.

The Peshtigo Woodenware Factory where Papa was employed was the largest factory of its kind in the world. It produced ax and broom handles, buckets, clothespins and shingles. The factory, along with many of its employees, was completely devastated by the fire.

Father Peter Pernin was the parish priest of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Peshtigo at the time of the Great Fire. He indeed did much to help save whomever he could. Father Pernin wrote the most detailed survivor's account of the tragedy, in which I found most of the ideas for Lark's memories of the fire, including how her brother Anton and mother Katerina died:

*"At the moment I was entering the river, another woman, terrified and breathless reached its bank. She was leading one child by the hand and held pressed to her breast what appeared to be another, enveloped in a roll of disordered linen, evidently caught up in haste. Oh horror! On opening these wraps to look on the face of her child - it was not there."*- Excerpt from "The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account"

According to his account, Father Pernin was also responsible for pushing two people into the Peshtigo River in order to save them. In my novel, it was Lark's father who was pushed. The words he mumbled afterwards, "I am wet," were actually said by one of the men Father Pernin had pushed in. Most of the survivors were those who fled to the river, scrambled down the thirty-foot embankment to the mud flats, and into the chilly waters. However, there were many who perished by drowning or hypothermia in the same waters.

The traveling preacher mentioned in my story really did go about in the streets of Peshtigo in the weeks prior to October 8th with his dire warning that it is "the end of days." It was because of this mindset that many didn't even attempt to save themselves and perished in the fire.

In the weeks leading up to the tragedy, the citizens of Peshtigo had been battling smaller fires that broke out regularly, including one on September 25. That Sunday morning, the sawdust at the woodenware factory had caught fire and all hustled to extinguish it. It is because of the men's prior success in keeping the small fires under control that I gave Lark's father the feeling of dominance over the issue, which in turn caused him to refuse to leave Peshtigo.

The antiques in Lark's home in Yesteryear Settlement are authentic to the time and thoroughly researched. The story of the brown wedding dress is a true one, and I can add that my own grandmother wore such a dress on her wedding day in 1923 in rural Kewaskum, Wisconsin. My grandparents' wedding portrait hangs in an antique oval frame in my home.

Until as late as 1950, some people held funeral services in their home. It was not uncommon to place departed loved ones in the living room or parlor so that friends and family may come to pay their respects.

Other facts included in the novel were found in researching ancestry pages of known survivors of the fire. It was there that I found that many people buried their family heirlooms and important items such as tools and even furniture in the ground as the fires neared in hopes to save them. The term "heirloom graveyard" was used by a local newspaper journalist.

For more information on the Peshtigo Fire, I recommend a visit to these websites. Here are the links:

<http://www.peshtigofire.info/>

[http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term\\_id=451&keyword=peshtigo](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term_id=451&keyword=peshtigo)

<http://peshtigofiremuseum.org/>

<http://ci.peshtigo.wi.us/history/index.php>