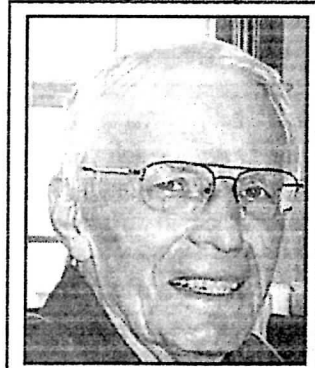


# The fire monster sows destruction—the forests

C/S/19/11

Feeding on dry conditions that presaged the great drought of the 1930s, fires raged through the forests and brush of Bayfield County, almost every year during the 1920s. The worst year appears to have been 1923. In June and July brush fires laid to waste large areas of the county before being extinguished by rain. In early October the Times reported that the "Woods are as dry as tinder," "Brush fires [were] running in much of the territory north and west of Washburn" and were "raging around the DuPont plant." And again a week later, "With smoke so dense at times that the rays of the sun have almost been shut out, the fire situation throughout the northern section of Wisconsin has become more threatening as each day goes by." Many fires burned to the edge of farm clearings, and only the absence of a strong wind prevented the destruction of the buildings. After "Hundreds of square miles of area in the county" had been burned over, rain finally put out the fires. In 1927 an elaborate system to detect and fight forest fires was established by the state Conservation Commission and Bayfield and Douglas Counties, with emergency fire wardens in each town, and fire towers located at strategic points. Despite these measures, in September 1929, when the forests were very dry due to the lack of



Lars Larson  
Guest Columnist

rain, large sections of the county were burned over by what the Times described as "One of the most destructive brush fires that has visited Bayfield county in several years," but once again what might have been an even greater calamity was averted by a providential rain.

Even more than in the previous decade, forest and brush fires raged in Bayfield County and throughout the north country cutover, during the 1930s. From 1930 to 1939, 15,866 fires ravaged the eight fire protection districts that covered the northern 18 county region. Two factors established the necessary conditions for this great fire calamity of the 1930s: the pre-existing accumulation of dried out slashings and stumps and a four year drought, from 1930 to 1933. It did not take much to ignite fires in this tinder and as usual people and their activities were the

main culprits, accounting for 98% of all fires, the remaining 2% being ignited by lightning.

Reports in the Times were primarily concerned with fires in the region surrounding Washburn, including the Moquah (now Chequamegon) National Forest. In May 1930 the paper reported that 15,000 acres had been burned over in the Moquah forest unit, fought by "nearly one hundred men," but a "gentle rain . . . quenched the fires." In August it reported that the "forest fire situation has become threatening," and that a serious fire had broken out on Outer Island. In July 1931 fires were reported raging in the Moquah forest, while over 1,900 acres on the barrens were burned over, destroying a homestead. Again in September 1931 and April 1932 the Moquah forest suffered serious damage from forest fires. In early August 1936, 6,800 acres were burned in the Town of Hughes, reportedly destroying five farms, while later that month the Times reported that "Three disastrous forest fires have swept over parts of Bayfield county in the last two weeks destroying forest cover on thousands of acres and burning out a number of settlers." Similar reports appeared periodically in the Times during the remainder of the decade.

As usual, careless, indifferent or malicious people

were the principal causes of these fires. The state ranger of the Moquah forest unit reported that of the 62 fires in the forest from 1931 through 1936, 49 were caused by smoking, campfires, and arson. The rangers repeatedly asked the cooperation of the public, promising severe penalties to those who abandoned fires that they had started. But people in the north country believed that the state was neglecting the fire fighting needs of the north country. In early May 1931, "incensed by the absolute lack of consideration on the part of the legislature to seriously consider the forest fire situation," "An army of north Wisconsin residents" marched on Madison "to present their case before the assembly and senate in joint session." As a result of this protest march, the Conservation Commission appointed a committee to "make a tour of the fire territory to inaugurate and develop a plan of cooperation between state forest rangers, private owners and counties." But an editorial in the Iron River Pioneer in August 1936 severely criticized "Wisconsin's forest fire fighting organization" for "inefficiency, lack of leadership, poor coordination, too much red tape," so it does not appear, at least in the opinion of Pioneer's editor, that matters had improved.