

## CALLING PAPA HOME

By Julia Pferdehirt

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### INTRODUCTION

By 1871, THE YEAR OF THE great fire, nearly all business in Peshtigo, Wisconsin came from lumbering.

Men made buckets, tubs, broom handles, and clothespins in the woodenware factory. Other factories in Peshtigo built doors and window frames.

Outside Peshtigo, much of the land was still forest. Logging and railroad companies cleared land for track and timber. They left behind a terrible mess of stumps, rotting logs, piles of branches, and brush. Prairie grass grew in some places—an invitation for fire.

Fires had always burned in the big forests. The fires were usually quick and small, and they actually cleaned up the forest floor.

When forests were cut for logging or railroads, fires still started. But they weren't short and quick because the ground was covered with branches and rotting logs that burned long and hot. Now, fire was a terrible, terrible danger.

In 1871, almost no rain fell. Everyone feared fire. All it would take would be one spark from a railroad engine, one careless farmer burning stumps, one flash of lightning.

There were many fires across the state that year. But the biggest fire happened on October 8. By the end of the fire, 2,400 square miles of land (1.5 million acres) had burned. About 1,400 people died. It was called the Great Peshtigo Fire.

## CALLING PAPA HOME

NOBODY really knows what started the fire. For weeks before, Papa would stop and sniff. He'd mutter, "Fire out in the **sugar bush.**" Or, "Some fool's burnin' stumps west of town."

<p><b>sugar bush:</b> grove of sugar maple trees where maple sap is harvested to make maple syrup</p>
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Every day, the smell of smoke hung in the air. Mama's clean wash turned gray on the clothesline. My sister Lydia said she couldn't breathe. Sometimes, from the window of our little house on the hill, I could see a glow far to the west. Fires were burning.

Papa knew about forests and fire. He'd been a lumberman since he was fourteen. He'd cut white pine on the Wolf River. He had worked fifteen years for Mr. Red, logging and riding logs down the Chippeway.

Papa's name is Johnny John Regis McDonald. Mama's name is Lizette.

Papa met Mama at a dance in Eau Claire. He says he checked out the dance floor like a cruiser walking the forest, looking for the best white pine. He spied Mama across the room and "that was that! Your mama took my heart right then and there. I asked her to dance and won myself the prettiest girl in Wisconsin."

Papa was a river pig. He and the other men rode pine logs to the sawmills for Mr. Red and his partner, Mr. Ole. Mr. Red had red hair, just like me. Papa says Red taught him everything there was to know about lumbering.

So when Papa looked into the sky and said, "Too dry. Fire's bound to catch hold," I worried. When Papa said the whole state was dry as leaves in November, I worried more. When folks in Peshtigo spread sawdust on the streets to keep down the dust, Papa said they were fools. He said sawdust would catch fire in the blink of an eye.

Fires happened all the time. Sometimes hunters were careless with campfires out in the woods. Sometimes farmers burned stumps to clear their land. One

Saturday in September, fire blew in from the west. I saw giant flaming balls jump from treetop to treetop. Birds screamed in the sky. In town, men walked the streets, armed with shovels and wet burlap sacks. Everybody prayed for rain.

The town was saved when the wind changed and the fire burned itself out. Papa said someday the wind wouldn't change. He said one day the whole county could burn to the ground. I believed him.

After the fire, everybody believed him. At least everybody who was still alive.



Mama married Papa when he worked on the river. The first baby was born—that's me, Susanna. Papa took one look at my red hair and called me "Little Red." He always said, "We'll call her Susanna when she's grown."

Lydia was next; she was named after Mama's sister. Nels was the baby, named after Papa's best friend back in the pinery.

When Nels was born, Mama and Papa decided river work was too dangerous. Papa found a job in Mr. Ogden's woodenware factory in Peshtigo. I guess Papa knew how to keep people moving just like he moved logs to the sawmill, because right off Mr. Ogden made him a **foreman**.

**foreman:** leader

With the foreman's job came a foreman's pay. Now, we weren't rich like Mr. McCartney, the mill owner, in the big white house on the hill. But Papa's pay was enough to buy the old schoolhouse and build on a whole room for Mama and him and a loft for Lydia, Nels, and me. He bought a black and silver stove for Mama.

The best thing about living in the old schoolhouse was the bell. Mr. McCartney had bought a fancy brass bell for the new Union School, but nobody thought to take down the bell at the old school. When Papa bought the building, the town threw the bell in for free like a **runt** pig sold with its mama.

**runt:** small

So every morning papa walked to town, down the hill into the sunrise. He kept men and lumber moving all day. At night, when the sun was setting over the sugar bush, he'd walk home again. He crossed the river by the big bridge at Front Street and made his way up the hill. He was home in time for supper.

In summer, I'd see him coming up the hill. In winter, darkness covered Peshtigo like a blanket long before Papa came home. I'd rush home from school and wait until the hands on the windup clock stood straight up and down. Six o'clock. Then I'd run out and ring the bell. Of course, I didn't pull the bell rope. Papa said ringing the bell would bother Mr. McCartney in his big white house. He'd cut the rope and taken out the ringer when we moved in. But if I tossed stones at it, the bell would ring softly. With every ring, it was like I was calling Papa home.

Papa missed being a lumberjack and working on the river. But Red and Ole and his old crew of lumberjacks had followed the white pine west. Papa said Peshtigo was a good home for us. "As long as America keeps buying Mr. Ogden's barrels and broom handles, we'll live well," he said.

Mama said, "And as long as we have each other, we'll live happy." And we did. Until the fire.



It was Sunday, the 8th of October. All day the air felt thick as a feather quilt. One minute the wind blew, and the next, the whole world was still and waiting. Papa was waiting.

"Smells like smoke, but it feels like a storm comin'," Papa said. "If this wind picks up, the county could be one giant fireball."

Early in the morning Papa walked into town. While he was gone, Mama paced from the front door to the garden and back again. She stared into the forest to the west and held her apron over her mouth and nose just to breathe. First the wind raced up the hill like a runaway horse. Then, just as quickly, it stopped, and the silence took over again.

Papa came back grumbling and worrying. He paced back and forth like a dog on a chain. Even Lydia and little Nels could tell something wasn't right. Mama and Papa stood outside and whispered. I crept in behind the door and listened. "The

railroad brought in 100 new men this morning,” he complained. “**Greenhorns.** All of them. Greenhorns leave fires burning. They don't keep the brush cleared away from the tracks. Folks say down at the harbor the smoke has been so thick the boats sound their horns all day just to keep from hitting each other.”

**greenhorn:** newcomer

“I don't like the feel of the air,” Mama said. “And I don't like the look of the sky over the sugar bush. I'm worried about my sister Lydia and the baby.”

Nobody said a word for so long that I could hear my heart banging inside my chest like a bird trying to escape from its cage. Mama's sister Lydia lived west of Peshtigo where the sugar maples grew. Her big, handsome husband had taken a job up north in the lumber camps. He'd be gone all winter. So Lydia was alone with their baby.

I peeked around the door frame, looking to the west. I could see the tops of sugar maple trees. I could also see smoke. Smoke as thick as fog.

Finally, Papa spoke. “I'm going to fetch Lydia and the baby.”

Mama nodded. “At the first sign of fire, we'll wet blankets to cover our heads and go to the river.”

Papa wrapped his big lumberjack's arms around my mama. “I married more than the prettiest girl in Wisconsin,” Papa said. “I also married the bravest.”

In a rush, Papa hugged Lydia and Nels and snatched his coat from the hook behind the door. His bright blue eyes looked straight into mine. He didn't even call me Little Red. He called me my grown-up name.

“Susanna,” he said. “It'll take me about three hours to reach Aunt Lydia. Then three or four hours' home again. At the first sign of fire, you take the little ones and go to the river. You and your mama. Don't worry about saving anything, just get to the river.”

Mama handed him a blanket, a canteen of water, and a couple of burlap sacks. I watched as my papa walked out the door and to the top of the hill, past the big white house where Mr. McCartney lived. I watched as he walked over the hill toward the sugar bush and disappeared into the smoke.

Mama and I hurried out to the well. She wrapped her grandmother's silver candlesticks in a burlap sack and lowered them into the water. Then she sent me up to the big white house where Mr. McCartney lived.

"They're city people," she said. "They won't understand this strange weather. Not a one of them has enough sense to head for the river."

The manservant answered the door. "Sir," I stammered. "My papa says the sugar bush is burning. He knows the forest and he says the wind isn't right. Papa says we should go to the river at the first sign of fire."

The man smiled at me like I was Nels talking baby talk. "Why aren't you a sweet little thing," he said with a smile. "You just run on home and tell your papa not to worry. Mr. McCartney hired a team to plow a good **firebreak** around the property. Our well is the best in the county."

**firebreak:** plowed or burned land without plants to stop a fire

Just then Mr. McCartney himself walked into the room. "Who's at the door, James?" he said. The manservant told him why I'd come. Mr. McCartney stared so that I wished I could disappear right into the ground!

"Young lady," Mr. McCartney said with a scowl, "if we ran to the river every time we saw fire in the sugar bush, we'd come back to find thieves had made off with every stick of silver and every painting in the house."

Mr. McCartney kept staring. I stared right back. I couldn't help myself. Mama said these were city folks who didn't understand. Papa wouldn't have been so kind. He would have said they were fools to risk their lives for silver and paintings. I turned for home without a word.

An hour passed, then two, three. Thick smoke stung my eyes. In the late afternoon, the sky looked almost like night.

"Mama, will it rain?" Lydia asked. Mama sat in her maple rocking chair and pulled Lydia and Nels onto her lap. I wished I could crawl up there, too.

"A good rain might put the fires out," Mama said. "We'll wait and see." Mama didn't even light the stove. We ate cold cornbread and applesauce. Lydia and Nels took naps. I sat by the window, waiting and worrying.

The sky grew darker. How would Papa and Lydia find their way from the sugar bush? Worry almost choked me. No matter what Mama said, the sky didn't smell like rain. It smelled like smoke. And fire.

Suddenly I heard a howling sound coming from the smoke. My whole body began to shiver. How would Papa find his way through that blinding, breath-stealing smoke?

Just as quickly as it came, the howl died away. Mama's face looked as pale as flour. She began to pull blankets from the beds. "It's time," she said.

"But Papa!" I didn't mean to shout, but my voice almost echoed from the ceiling. Little Nels woke and began to cry.

Mama lifted coats from their hooks. "I'll go fetch burlap sacks from the shed," she said. "Get the children wrapped up."

My mind whirled like a fireball. Papa wanted to bring Aunt Lydia where she'd be safe. He'd head for the river, too. But how could he find his way from the sugar bush when he couldn't see?

Suddenly I remembered rushing home after school on winter afternoons. I remembered watching the clock hands move to six o'clock so I could run out and call Papa home. I remembered tossing stones at the bell on the roof of our funny, used-to-be-a schoolhouse house.

I felt hot, like standing too close to the stove. Could I call Papa home from the sugar bush? Maybe not, but I had to try.

Like a wild thing, I raced around our little house. How could I ring the bell without a rope or a ringer? Tossing stones wouldn't make the bell ring loud enough. I fumbled through Mama's kitchen. Could I use a soup ladle? Too light. Butcher knife? Too sharp. The iron poker Mama used to push wood into the stove was too thin and long. A brick was too short.

Papa kept his indoor tools in a small wooden bucket. There was an ax. Too heavy. A handsaw. Too light. Frantically I pulled everything from the bucket. My fingers wrapped around a wooden handle about as long as my forearm. On the end was an iron block about as big as my fist. It was smooth on one side, and on the other was a circle with the letter R inside. Papa's logger's mark.

Papa had brought his logger's mark all the way from the Chippeway. How many logs had Papa marked for Red and Ole's crew with this hammer?

I pulled my coat on, held the mark next to my heart, and ran out the door. Nels was wailing now and Lydia kept calling, "Mama! Susanna! I'm scared."

I ran to the side of our house where a metal pipe carried rainwater from the roof into a barrel. If I could just climb the pipe and pull myself onto the roof, I could reach the bell. I stuffed Papa's logger's mark inside my coat and hoisted myself up onto the barrel. The flat, wooden cover made a loud creaking sound as I pulled myself up and stood. Slowly. Slowly. Any quick movement could break the lid, and I'd fall into the barrel.

I wrapped my fingers around the rain pipe and pulled myself up. I'd climbed every tree in sight when I was a little girl—long after Mama told me that monkeys—not young ladies—climbed trees. So I wrapped my feet around the pipe just like I used to wrap my feet around the trunk of a tree.

The pipe was smaller than a tree trunk. My leather boots slipped. Once. Twice. I couldn't get a grip with those boots. I stood on the barrel lid again. Smoke stung my eyes. I bit my lip to keep from crying.

I used to climb trees with no shoes. That ridiculous idea popped into my head like corn popping over a fire. I grabbed at my shoelaces with frantic, shaking fingers. I unlaced one boot and yanked off my gray wool stocking. I pulled the second boot from my foot with the laces still tied. The stocking came with it. With my bare feet against the metal pipe, I began to pull myself to the roof.

By the time I reached the roof my feet were scraped and hurting. I didn't even look to see if they were bleeding. I grabbed the shingles and scrambled up. My fingernails scratched and scraped against the thick wood. Shingle by shingle, I pulled myself onto the roof. Then I crawled up the slanting roof on hands and knees. The logger's mark felt heavy and cold against my chest.

"Susanna!" Mama screeched. "What are you doing?"

I was shaking so much, I couldn't answer. Inch by inch I crawled up the slanting roof. The bell hung from a metal post at the very top. Every inch brought me closer to the bell, and closer to calling Papa home.



I could barely see. Up on the roof, the smoke was thick and choking. Finally, my fumbling fingers found the post and the rough metal of the bell.

I pulled Papa's logger's mark from my coat and swung at the bell. Clang! Clang! As close as I was, the gong of the mark against the metal bell made my ears ring, too.

Clang! Clang! I hit the bell again. Over and over and over. I kept on hitting. My hand began to throb. Then my arm. I used my other arm, though I was clumsy and almost slipped from the roof. I swung and swung the logger's mark. Soon, it felt like I was lifting a thousand pounds every time. But I kept swinging.

Finally, my arm wouldn't move. I couldn't lift the heavy mark even one more time. "Papa! Papa!" I cried into the smoke. "Papa, come home!"

I slid down the rough shingles to the rain pipe. Mama must have climbed onto the barrel, because I remember her warm hands pulling me from the roof.

"You did fine," Mama said as she wrapped her shawl around my head. "Papa will come. And you helped him." I began to cry.

I was supposed to help Mama, but instead, Mama helped me. The air was heavy and silent. Mama pushed dripping blankets into my arms.

"Can you carry these?" I could. I had to. Mama shoved a wet blanket into Lydia's arms. She hoisted Nels onto her left hip and grabbed another blanket. We ran. In the south, the sky was glowing red. In front of us, smoke and darkness hid the Peshtigo lights.

We ran down our little hill. We ran along the road where I used to watch Papa coming home from the factory. We ran until our lungs burned inside our chests. Nels wailed. I grabbed Lydia's hand and held on for dear life. We ran, clinging to each other like birds in a storm.

Then I heard a rumble like a railroad engine. At first it seemed far away. "Run!" Mama screamed. I dragged Lydia along. Other people were on the road, too. Some stayed in their houses, watching from the doorways. I glanced behind me. The southern sky glowed like a giant furnace.

We ran to the river. Everywhere people were shouting and running. Mama pulled us into the cold water, deeper and deeper. When Lydia couldn't reach the bottom, she climbed into my arms and wrapped herself around me. I saw a man

trying to wrestle two wild-eyed horses into the water. One lady sat in the grass at the river's edge and screamed, "I can't swim. I won't go in there." A boy floated by, hanging on to the horns of a cow. A man ran into the river with his clothes on fire. After that, I turned away and wouldn't look at the shore again.

The wind began to blow wildly from the south. The roaring sound grew louder and louder until it filled the whole sky. The roar was louder than Nels's wailing, louder than the screaming lady. It drowned out every other sound in the world. Mama dunked the blankets into the water and flung them over our heads, soaked and dripping. Lydia hung on to me. I hung on to Mama. And Mama hung on to Nels. We all prayed and cried and prayed some more. I could only think of Papa in the sugar bush.

How long we stood in the water, I don't know. I could see the fire coming, like a million white pine logs thundering down a wild, fast river. Fire climbed up trees and burned them like torches. Fire jumped from tree to tree. Some people tried to escape by crossing the bridge, but, on the other side, Peshtigo town was on fire, too. Then the buildings burned. At last, even the air was on fire.

Over and over Mama dunked us under the water. I don't know how, but balls of fire flew across the river. The sky was bright, like a giant red sun was shining. All around, people splashed water on one another and ducked into the river. I saw a lady float by, holding on to a log with one arm and splashing water on her head with the other.

I could hear screaming and crying everywhere. The air was like a roasting oven, but the water was cold. Lydia was shaking and my teeth were chattering. Nels stopped wailing and moaned like a sick kitten in Mama's arms. Still, we stood in the cold water.

I don't know how long we stood there, trapped between the cold water and the fire. People were crying. Animals howled and moaned. The air was filled with the crackling sounds of fire and the crashing of falling trees and buildings. Some people called the names of their families. I thought of Papa and tried not to listen.

I was shaking and numb. I leaned against Mama. Then I heard a voice calling above all the other noises.

"Lizette! Susanna! Lizette!"

Mama screamed, "Johnny!" She grabbed my arm and half dragged Lydia and me. My eyes stung so badly I couldn't see. But I could hear. We headed toward the one sound I wanted to hear most in the world. My papa's voice.

Over and over Papa called, "Lizette! Susanna!"

Mama's voice cried, "Johnny!"

Lydia and Nels called out, "Papa!"

We pushed our numb legs through the water. Then I felt strong arms around my shoulders. I felt Papa's scratchy beard against my face, and I heard his voice.

"We almost didn't make it out of the sugar bush," Papa said. "The smoke was so thick we were choking. I couldn't see, and Lydia was near to fainting. Then I heard the bell. Someone was ringing a bell!"

Nothing else mattered. I didn't care that our house was probably burned to ashes. I didn't care that I was shaking with cold and crying. papa wasn't lost in the smoke or burned out in the sugar bush. He was here, with us. He had heard the bell! I had called Papa home.

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This story is part of a historical fiction book titled "Wisconsin Forest Tales" produced by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources-Division of Forestry and LEAF-Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education Program for the 2004 Year of Wisconsin Forestry celebration. Find the entire book and the other stories in the collection at <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/education/WisconsinForestTales>.

