

The Great Forest Fire of 1845

written by Leonard Whitmore in 1986

Edited & typed by Dean Bones

The north half of Lincoln County and the south half of Tillamook counties were engulfed by flames destroying most all the old growth timber of the area.

Forty-nine years after this fire the editor of the Sheridan Sun journeyed to Woods. As he traveled through the coast range he noticed as far as the eye could see in all directions stood dead and charred old growth snags. Because of the vast expanse of totally destroyed forest that was once green and majestic he became curious about the fire's origin and decided to look into its history.

While at Woods he met Peter Belleque, a commercial fisherman, who was knowledgeable of pioneer events and threw light upon the great forest conflagrations of 1845 not before published.

Mr. Belleque was born in 1836 near Champoeg of a French father and Indian mother. The fire's origin was near Champoeg when he was 9 years of age. He related that several years before 1845 an English sailing ship entered the Columbia River. On board was a black man named Mr. Johnson who was the ship's cook. Being dissatisfied with his occupation he deserted the ship at the first opportunity of Champoeg. Here he took up land claim and immediately started clearing his land of brush and logs.

The summer of 1845 was unusually hot and dry. Springtime was short of rain causing all vegetation to mature early and dry up by the first of July.

Most of the Willamette Valley was covered with tall grass. The Indians for centuries periodically burned portions of the valley to kill the brush and encourage the growth of grass. The new grass growth made ideal forage for the numerous deer and elk that inhabited the valley. This was made to order for the Indians who depend on the larger game for their livelihood.

Mr. Johnson thought conditions were just right to burn the debris from his cleared land. He touched it off and succeeded to get a good burn, but unfortunately a west wind blew a path of flames across the Willamette Valley into the Cascade Range. The wind direction suddenly changed into a frenzy making an end run around the previously burned path and blazing westward across the valley toward the coast range. The hot wind fanned it day and night, and the whole valley was filled with a billowing pall of smoke. The smoke became so dense that the settlers were forced to eat their midday meals in candlelight. Many of the settlers felt the end of the world was at hand.

The flames reached the Coast Range that was covered by a thick forest. With this added fuel the flames lashed out to the north, west and south.

At this point let's see what was in the path of this conflagration.

Old growth virgin timber 400 - 600 years old extended from Willamette Valley to the ocean beaches and indefinitely north and south.

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At this early date of 1845 there were no settlers west of the coast range. The only inhabitants were small tribes of Indians located at bays or where sources of water flowed into the ocean. Such tribes were located on Siletz Bay, Neskowin Creek, Woods, Sand Lake and Netarts Bay.

Several years before 1894 Peter Belleque interviewed old Dick Harna who was retired on the Siletz reservation about the fire in Tillamook County. Harna was chief of Nestuccas living near the present town of Woods. Harna, according to Belleque, gave a vivid description of the fire as witnessed by himself.

He and a portion of his tribe were encamped on the Big Nestucca River 4 miles upstream from the present site of the village of Woods.

For several weeks, according to the Indians, there had been a great deal of smoke. Each day it grew denser and filled the Indians with alarm. Finally one night the Nestuccans were awakened by a bright red glare in the eastern sky. By sunrise great flames were seen leaning skyward from summits of the nearest hills. So rapidly did the flames approach that terrified Indians had no time to gather up their scanty belongings but hastily jumped into their dugouts and paddled down the river to the ocean beach with all possible speed.

Below Woods about 1 1/2 miles is a sand point between the Nestucca Bay and the ocean where its greatest width is 1/2 mile. The bare sand here afforded a safe refuge for Harna and his people for some weeks until a heavy rain put out the fire. Their only source of sustenance was fish.

Paddling up the river to their old haunts gruesome sights met their eyes at every turn. Here and there piled up in groups were bands of elk and deer charred crisp. Bear were found nearly barbecued. And there were panthers with their bodies in the water showing their ghastly cooked heads.

Another band of Indians retreated before the flames at Sand Lake where they found safe asylum until the rain came.

Footnote:

Old Peter Belleque (Pronounced Blake) an emigrant from Canada was originally named Pierre, but he preferred an Americanized name and changed his name to Peter.

Two of his grandsons, Ernest and Pete lived in the Cloverdale area all of their lives. Pete is the only survivor at this date of 1986.

This fire has two areas of historical significance. It's the first forest fire recorded in Oregon. Evidence of the remnants of thousands of snags killed by the great fire of 1845

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can still be found extending from Tillamook southward 60 miles to Newport and from the westward boundary of the Willamette Valley for 40 miles to the ocean beaches. This encompasses 1,500,000 acres, the largest area of old growth destroyed by a single fire in the United States.

Here is an additional footnote added by Dean Bones 2022:

John R. Blalock (1911 - 2012) grew up on Borba Road about 4 miles east of Beaver. In one of his many writings is this paragraph, "When I was a small boy an old man and his wife, Charlie and Lizzy (Elizabeth) Sears lived between us and the Borbas. He and his father (Valentine Sears 1825 - 1908) had come into that part of Tillamook County before 1850. He had never learned to read or write, but he could tell wonderful stories of hunting and trapping. He said they were there when a fire burned across that country from east to west. He and his father went down the river to the sand at Pacific City where together with the Indians and animals they watched the country go up in smoke and flame. When I was a boy all the hills round about were covered with the burned trunks of tall trees. We called them 'snags'."