Prairie fires sparked fear, awe among early settlers

By Bill Kemp
The Pantagraph, September 30, 2007

This image of a prairie fire comes from the book “Marvels of the New West,” written by William Makepeace Thayer and first published in 1887.

“Imagine,” wrote Major W. Packard, “a line of fire miles in length, sweeping on before the wind with the speed of a fast horse, a perfect billow of flame from ten to fifty feet in height, with a thick, black cloud of smoke above—snapping, crackling, hissing, roaring and rolling on with a fury defying all interference.” Packard knew of what he spoke, having experienced firsthand more than one prairie fire in central Illinois.

Fire, along with climate and grazing animals, shaped the emergence and persistence of the prairie. Not only are the deep, fibrous root systems of prairie plants well protected from fire, but periodic burnings can also increase the growth and productivity of perennial grasses such as big bluestem, one of the keystone species of the tallgrass ecosystem.

Native Americans employed fire for varied reasons, including the need to communicate over distances and travel more easily. Most importantly, though, fire was an ideal mechanism to funnel game to waiting hunters, and it’s no surprise to learn that white settlers used fire for similar purposes.
Today, biologists, environmental historians, and others are examining with ever-greater precision the symbiotic relationship between fire and prairie. Was the tallgrass prairie a timeless, “natural” landscape, or was it, in fact, an artifact of human making?

Putting aside this debate, we do know that prairie fires—or what Packard called “tornadoes of flame”—could wreak financial ruin on early settlers, laying waste to hard-won “improvements” made on the land, including split rail fences, fields of corn, livestock, farmhouses, outbuildings, and orchards.

Firebreaks were the most successful means of halting or redirecting such conflagrations. Pioneers would plow furrows between their property and the open prairie, hoping to arrest an onrushing fire by depriving it of fuel. Sometimes they would space these furrows further apart and burn the grass in between, creating more expansive “firewalls.” Despite precautions, the larger, faster fires were often capable of jumping across these barriers, consuming all in their path.

Prairie fires inflicted heavy losses on Benjamin Wheeler, an early settler of Hudson Township. In the fall of 1830, winds drove a fire from Twin Grove northward up to Wheeler’s farm, taking with it his fences, wheat, and hay. About a decade later, he lost 900 fence rails in another costly fire “Mr. Wheeler has seen fire going faster than a horse could run and taking fearful leaps,” wrote Etzuard Duis, a chronicler of McLean County pioneer days. “It would suck the air behind it, and move like a flock of wild geese with the center ahead and the wings on each side hanging back.”

Major Packard’s first encounter with a prairie fire occurred in either 1845 or 1846. A strong northerly wind had pushed a fire from Hudson to what would become the Town of Normal, endangering the residence of Edwin W. Bakewell. Packard was one of about twenty-five Bloomington citizens who raced to “North Bloomington” to lend a helping hand. The volunteers set back fires and extinguished outbreaks caused by errant sparks. Though the hour-plus contest was “hot and earnest,” the volunteers, whose appearance afterward resembled “bituminous coal miners,” saved Bakewell’s property from the unforgiving flames.

Mary A. Marmon, daughter of settler Owen Cheney, recalled the great fires that would sweep across the unbroken prairie of eastern McLean County. Settlers, she said, would tie old clothing to the end of ticks or poles, creating crude but effective tools to tamp down brush fires and control back burning.

Prairie fires were dangerous and destructive, but they could also be beautiful, especially at night. A wall of fire stretching to the horizon would illuminate roiling clouds of smoke; an epic interplay of flame and shadow with few rivals in the natural world.

“Viewed in the nighttime, at a safe distance and location,” wrote Major Packard, “one of these fires, when the dried vegetation was ample, presented a spectacle never to be erased from the tablets of memory.”