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News of natural disasters has a fascination for many of us

By Steve Horton

We are privy to all sorts of news, be it public affairs, sports, entertainment, crime, the weather report, or the deeds of good Samaritans. None, though, seem to capture our interest quite like people caught in a natural disaster, complete with stories of the devastation, the hapless victims, and those making narrow escapes.

These disasters include hurricanes, blizzards, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and wildfires. The narrative can be a combination of the approaching calamity, the actual event, and the aftermath or else the focus is on the sudden, unexpectedness, and random nature of the calamity.

Such news has a fascination for many of us. Morbid curiosity might be a reason, but there is usually empathy as well. We feel kinship towards those caught in the path of nature's fury.

Earlier this year we had the hurricanes that caused widespread destruction to North Carolina and the Florida Panhandle. Over the past couple of weeks, beginning on Nov. 8, the headlines have been on the Camp Fire in Northern California that lasted 17 days, burned across 153,336 acres, destroyed 13,972 residences, 528 commercial buildings,

and 4,293 other structures, and (more importantly) was responsible for the deaths of 88 people with over 200 people still unaccounted for as of early last week.

Alongside those gut-wrenching numbers were the before-and-after images of Paradise—a city of 27,000 residents located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada that was pretty much wiped out and where most of the casualties occurred.

Adding drama to the story is that it apparently began as a small brush fire in a forested area northeast of the town—a fire reportedly caused by sparks from an electrical power line—but because of the extremely dry conditions and strong wind this seemingly manageable blaze turned into a rapidly approaching inferno.

The residents of Paradise, with little warning, began fleeing for their lives in cars, taking what few possessions they could grab, only to get stuck in a traffic jam and having to abandon everything and take off on foot.

We've seen such scenes in movies. But this was not make believe. It was real-life. It happened. And, thus, it gives us pause. We see the burned over town, mentally picture the scene of terror, and think "There but for the grace of God go I."

For many, the reflex is to reach out and do whatever they can to help and offer comfort. Our better angels are stirred to action.

WILD FIRES ARE NOT A NEW PHENOMENON IN CALIFORNIA any more than hurricanes coming ashore in Florida and North Carolina or tornadoes touching down in Kansas or the flooding of communities along the Mississippi River or a winter blizzard paralyzing Michigan are unusual. It's the degree of destruction, and, more specifically, the human toll, that distinguishes the commonplace from something unique and historical.

Camp Fire fits that definition. It now ranks as California's deadliest, most destructive ever—three times worse than any previous one.

Here in Michigan we have our share of wild fires, though nothing like what California and other Western states suffer on a regular basis.

Ours generally occur during that transition between winter and early spring, after the snow has melted and prior to the arrival of new vegetation, and during periods when not enough rain has fallen and the dead grasses and old growth vegetation have become dry and flammable.

Firefighters keep busy attempting to contain them— usually with success. Occasionally, an outbuilding or even a house is destroyed, but in most cases only the dead grass and vegetation is lost. And that's generally a plus since it clears the land and allows new growth to emerge.

Every so often there have been wild fires that are more threatening and wide ranging. For example, a few years ago one burned for a long period of time in the eastern end of the Upper Peninsula.

As far as being victim to one of those unique and historical disasters, our state did suffer an experience similar to what happened in northern California. It occurred on Oct. 8, 1871 when five major fires broke out in the Upper Midwest, with three of them taking place in Michigan.

The region, according to an article from the Michigan State University archives, "had experienced a lengthy drought that had left the dense forests dry and susceptible to fire."

Also, Michigan and Wisconsin (where another fire broke out) were in the midst of the lumber boom when the vast white pine forests were being clear cut. "Local loggers had left much of their debris lying around without properly disposing of it," the article noted, "providing a ready fuel."

Still, the drought and debris, while creating a fire hazard, were not solely responsible for what unfolded. The third element was the fierce wind that began blowing that evening, taking several small fires that had broken out and likely could have been contained by the local population and turning them into growing walls of flames—similar to what happened with the Camp Fire.

One of the major blazes is famously known at the Great Chicago Fire—the one that Mrs. O'Leary's cow allegedly started by kicking over a lantern.

Whatever the actual cause, a large swath of the city, made up of wooden structures, went up in smoke. The historical record indicated that "The fire raged from the evening of October 8 to the morning of October 10, killing about 300 and destroying over three square miles worth of property, totaling 17,500 buildings and $400 million in damages."

Another of the blazes is known as The Peshtigo Fire and remains "the most deadly

fire in American history, killing anywhere between 1,200 and 2,500 people."

This disaster took place in northern Wisconsin (just north of the present day city of Green Bay) in what was then a largely rural area. "The entire fire covered an area about twice the size of Rhode Island, and it claimed twelve rural communities before finally subsiding," the MSU article stated. "The town that had the tragic fate of being at the center of this blaze was Peshtigo. Well over a thousand people in this one frontier town perished."

Some of the victims were killed by the fire itself. Others, seeking to escape by wading into the frigid waters of a nearby river, died from drowning or succumbed to hypothermia.

THE GREAT MICHIGAN FIRE (as it became known) included ones in Holland, Manistee, and Port Huron, plus several smaller ones. One arm of the fire swept across the state, going from Lake Michigan to Lake Huron, and destroying everything in its path.

In his book *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State,* Willis Frederick Dunbar wrote that "The summer had been hot and dry. In the cut-over areas (in northern Lower Michigan) brush (called "slashing") was like tinder. Mills, houses, and stores in the lumber towns were all made of wood; even the sidewalks were built with boards.

"As the fire raged in Chicago a southwest gale of tornado proportions sprang up," Dunbar's narrative continued. "Some contemporaries believed it carried sparks from the Chicago fire across Lake Michigan. At any rate, fires sprang up along the whole west coast of the Lower Michigan."

Aided by the strong wind that started in the afternoon of Sunday, Oct. 8, they became unstoppable.

The town of Holland, a community that had been founded by Dutch settlers 24 years earlier, was destroyed within two hours during the early predawn hours of Monday, Oct. 9.

Manistee, a thriving lumber town located further to the north, likewise was wiped out.

"The flames spread with lightning-like rapidity eastward across the state clear to Port Huron, carrying everything before them," Dunbar wrote.

The Port Huron Fire included other communities near that city located in the Thumb Area. One of them was Forestville, a small village in Sanilac County on the shores of Lake Huron.

An eyewitness report stated that "The firestorm forced people onto the beach or into the water. Some took refuge in boats, covering themselves with wet blankets." In just a half-hour, Forestville was in ruins.

At nearby White Rock, the historical accounts noted that "People plunged into the lake, but the lake was so rough that women and children were thrown back on the beach. They risked death by drowning in order to be saved from death by fire. Some dug holes in the ground or a bank and managed to survive by crawling into the shelter."

A first-hand account from a resident of Holland told of how efforts to prevent fires burning to the south and southwest of the town throughout the afternoon and evening were hindered when "the wind increased in force, until at midnight it blew a hurricane, spreading the fire and the flames with an alarming velocity toward the doomed city."

Even so, he noted that parts of the city might have been spared with the fire heading in a more northerly direction, away from the center and eastern parts of the city. However, when the wind shifted more to the west (what he called "this fatal moment") all was lost.

"No one unless he has been an eyewitness of such a scene, can conceive its terror or its awfulness," the gentleman concluded.

While the death toll could be calculated in the settlements, much of the fires "engulfed

huge swathes of Michigan wilderness, home to an unknown number of loggers and settlers."

Given that unknown, estimates were anywhere from less than 500 to over 1,000 lives being lost. Thousands more, however, while surviving the disaster, had lost their homes, farms, livestock and belongings to flames, "watched them vanish in smoke and ashes."

There were causes and contributing factors to the Camp Fire disaster in California—a disaster in terms of the high number of deaths and the huge amount of property loss—that can be blamed, in part, on nature, but also on human activity and decisions. The same can be said of Michigan's Great Fire of 1871.

From our mistakes and miscalculations, we attempt, or should attempt, to learn and make changes. As for nature— it remains a force to be reckoned with.

While we find the news of these natural disasters compelling, the story does not end with a tabulation of the death and destruction or the immediate aftermath. It includes the resiliency and determination of the survivors—how they attempt to rebuild their homes, their communities, and their normal routines of family and work.

How from the ashes and smoke, life emerges and goes on.