

A Memory in Fire

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Abstract

Throughout history the issue of remembering certain events or people has been changing with every new generation. Some events and disasters are remembered throughout all of time because of the multitude of sources. Still others are remembered for the uniqueness of their sources rather than their size. Many unique types of sources for remembering a particular event come from ordinary accounts or pieces of literature that fictionally capture the events aura. With the case of the Great Hinckley Fire of 1894 there is just a sufficient amount of information. This information comes in many forms, all of which have valid means of conveying a very interesting topic. However, this disaster is not as well known as it perhaps could be. Is it because of the lack of sources, or just a lack of public awareness? Perhaps the sources themselves are truly not accurate enough to captivate a wide audience. In the end, the real issue is the memory of this event and how it is best carried on for future generations. The notoriety gained from this disaster is not as sufficient as some other major disasters that occurred during this era. In the end, this event, and most importantly the people involved, should be captured in many Minnesotans' memories for what they withstood on that fateful day.

Introduction

“Flames shot a full thousand feet into the air and the whole burning mass took on a rotary motion. Whole piles of burning lumber were carried high into the air, and the section of the whirling mass seemed to draw everything loose toward it from hundreds of yards outside its periphery.”¹ During the summer of 1894, the state of Minnesota was faced with record temperatures that were coupled with immense droughts. Throughout the state there were numerous forest fires that became a regular occurrence in the daily lives. Each day a mist would be seen and a layer of smoke could be seen throughout the morning air. The morning of the first day in September began much the same way. However, something in the air was not right. There was an eerie coolness to the air and the wind that day. There was what scientists would call a temperature inversion, or a layering of drastic differences in temperatures. The topmost layer was cool, while the layer towards the ground was much hotter and drier. A series of two fires had been raging recently and converged. This convergence sent the flames upward and passing through the inversion barrier. This is when all hell broke loose and it appeared that the heavens were on fire. The cool air and warm air converged and along with the fires created a vortex or tornado of flames.(Artifact 1)² This horrific scene eventually turned into a rare disaster known as a firestorm. What followed would be one of the greatest disasters in

¹ Brown, Daniel. *Under a flaming sky: the great Hinckley firestorm of 1894*. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2006. 3-5.

² "Firestorm - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firestorm> (accessed December 12, 2011).

Minnesota history that would claim over 400 lives and burn and destroy around 200,000 acres of land.³

Prior to what would become known as the Great Hinckley Fire of 1894, the small mill town of Hinckley Minnesota was blossoming into one of the largest lumber hubs in Minnesota. The story of Hinckley begins as a small rural village in the 19th century. This village was first established back when the Ojibwa were present. To them this area was primarily known for its grindstone and prominent sandstone. Back in the early 18th century there were fur trading posts in the vicinity of where the Native Americans lived and the two groups often interacted with one another. The first European settlers in the region also noticed and began to use the rich forests of white pine in what would become one of the largest lumber stations in the Midwest. The single biggest moment in this tiny village's history next to the fire it was the introduction of the railroad to the ever-growing lumber company. In many ways the lumber itself made the city what it was for the greater portion of the 19th century (Artifact 2). With the arrival of the railroad in 1869, Hinckley, Minnesota was finally on the map. The railroad went from St. Paul to Duluth and stopped at the halfway point which was Hinckley. Before the firestorm occurred, the town of Hinckley was a prospering lumber area that was blossoming into an epicenter for transportation and industrialization.⁴

Since this tragedy that occurred over a hundred years ago there has been some literature on the event itself. This literature, like much of historical literature, has the aim and goal of establishing an events worthiness of being remembered. Given that this

³ Larsen, Lawrence H.. *Wall of flames: the Minnesota forest fire of 1894*. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1984.

⁴ Anderson, Antone A., and Clara Anderson McDermott. *The Hinckley fire*. New York: Comet Press Books, 1954. 1-5.

particular event has been written about in a historical fashion before I hope to have a different goal in mind rather than just give the overall history of the fire itself. My argument and aim for this paper is to examine the various ways that disasters are remembered in history, from the perspective of this particular event. By examining the many ways in which the story of the Great Hinckley Fire was told be it literature, media, or personal narratives, I hope to answer the greater question of what is the most effective way to convey tragedies in history. I will also be able to come to the conclusion of whether or not the memory of this event has been remembered enough based on the sources that are available on the fire. The goal of this paper is to not tell the story of the fire itself. But rather how it has been remembered in Minnesota history and why it is important to remember tragedies such as this one and why memory is pivotal for the study of history.

Outline of Tragedy

On the morning of September 1st of 1894 layers of smoke from fires in the area of Hinckley could be seen as far north as Duluth and as far south as the Twin Cities. At this time it was not an odd sight for the dry and drought-ridden Minnesota landscape to have clouds of smoke billowing overhead. As previously stated the weather, and more importantly the wind conditions were fierce enough on this day that there was significant chance of fires spreading rapidly throughout the region. At first it could be seen that “the overheated air rose with unimaginable speed and left in its place a vast vacuum, which was instantly filled by fresh streams of air.”⁵ It was in this vacuum of air that the cyclone

⁵ Åkermark, Gudmund Emanuel, William Johnson, and Minn County. *Eld-cyklonen: Hinckley Fire*. S.l.: Pine County Historical Society, 1976. 9-11.

entangled itself with the fires below. Because of the intense atmospheric pressure the streams of air filled the vacuum and the “irresistible violence and cyclone was thereby awakened.”⁶ It was at this moment that a whirlwind of fire had created a firestorm. Firestorms are a technical term for a convection column of atmospheric pressure accompanied with fire that can reach heights of 30,000 feet. Many eyewitnesses claimed to have seen a massive “wall of flames” rolling across the landscape.⁷ This massive wall consumes much of the oxygen in this vacuum and releases so much energy at one moment that it could be comparable in temperature and instant energy release to a Hiroshima-like atomic bomb. People in the area would begin to run for their lives and would cry out that the air itself was catching fire.⁸

It was around 3:00 pm in the afternoon that all of hell was unleashed on the town of Hinckley and its surrounding communities. In the little village of Pokegama a few miles away came a telegraph stating that the situation had turned dire and the fire had sprung up to unimaginable heights. Within minutes all of the residents of Hinckley were on alert and preparing themselves and their families for an evacuation if needed. Though dire the situation, the winds were calm so many felt that the fire would not get to the town as quickly as it did. Some inhabitants were altogether unconcerned and did nothing to pack up or prevent their lives from being in danger. Once the breeze came at around 2:00 Pm the danger was able to be felt in the almost un-breathable air. Towards the southwest there was a bright glow in view on the horizon and all within Hinckley understood that the neighboring villages of Pokegama and Mission Creek had been

⁶ Åkermark, Gudmund Emanuel, William Johnson, and Minn County. *Eld-cyklonen: Hinckley Fire*. 11.

⁷ Brown, Daniel. *Under a flaming sky: the great Hinckley firestorm of 1894*. 20-25.

⁸ Peterson, Clark C.. *The great Hinckley fire*. 2d ed. Smithtown, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1980.

enveloped by this fire. In a matter of minutes the wall of flames had overtaken the small town of Hinckley and had ignited the entire area into a roaring flame.⁹

By this time fire chief John Craig and his loyal 40 volunteer firemen along with 200 men from the lumber mill had begun to unroll the hoses and brought out the pumps to make a stand against the fire (Artifact 3). It soon became apparent to Chief Craig that the salutation was direr than anyone could have expected. To combat the fire the men were forced to section off the town and prevent it from spreading. Sadly, as one section was doused, another portion of the town was in need. After he had dispatched an urgent request for more hose from a neighboring town the fire chief found that all the firefighters had fled because the “red demon” had finally reached the doomed town. Upon seeing this he exclaimed, “We can’t save the town; it’s burning at the south end; run to the gravel pit; don’t lose a moment, but fly”.¹⁰ A survivor at this time recalled, “the dense columns of smoke now rolling majestically upwards, now torn and riven by the wind into fantastic forms and black as midnight, now flaming red and in a moment gone.”¹¹ All around the firemen and their captain, people began to scream for fear of what was coming. A train on the outskirts of town was departing the doomed town with all speed. Thankfully, the engineer of this train had compassion and saved over 500 lives that day.¹²

Over the next three hours the tremendous firestorm that rose up 30,000 feet into the air, would continue to burn its way northwards. In the end the lives claimed was over 400 and estimates much higher. All of the lives lost were burned and charred and some

⁹ Åkermark, Gudmund Emanuel, William Johnson, and Minn County. *Eld-cyklonen: Hinckley Fire*. 11-20.

¹⁰ Larsen, Lawrence H.. *Wall of flames: the Minnesota forest fire of 1894*. 30-37.

¹¹ Larsen, Lawrence H.. *Wall of flames: the Minnesota forest fire of 1894*. 20-24.

¹² Larsen, Lawrence H.. *Wall of flames: the Minnesota forest fire of 1894*. 49-63.

were beyond recognition at the time. Burnt animals and humans lay where they perished with agony and fear on their faces as death took them. For the next three days a relief group began the gruesome and horrendous task of finding the remains and identifying them for burial. If the people could not be identified they were laid in a pile that was going to be buried altogether. There were 96 total bodies buried in a mass grave. In the end officially the fire took over 418 lives and oddly enough covered 400 square miles of Minnesota and parts of Wisconsin (Artifact 4). All over this area survivors hid themselves from the horrific firestorm in lakes, swamps, gravel pits, and potato fields until the fire had left the area.¹³

Forms of remembering this tragedy

Throughout all of history events have been passed down from generation to generation through a variety of means. Some ways such as the written form are still used today. With the even of the Great Hinckley Fire, many who were involved had certain means of remembering the fire. One long term way was to create monuments for those that were lost. Others wrote journals that were kept personal for years. Still others wrote books and newspaper articles to commemorate and tell the story of what happened that fateful September day.

One of the methods that best captures this event and place in history is through the newspapers that reported the tragedy. The Hinckley Fire itself took place on Saturday September 1st in the early afternoon. Because of this most newspapers within Minnesota itself would not be able to fully report this as a story until the next day's paper edition. The Saint Paul Daily Globe, one of the primary newspapers for both the capital and the entire state, placed the Hinckley Fire on its very front page on September 2nd. In fact the

¹³ Larsen, Lawrence H.. *Wall of flames: the Minnesota forest fire of 1894*. 63-78.

front page was dedicated to the disaster that occurred in the Hinckley region. Headlines on the cover read “Towns in Ashes: more than two hundred people lose their lives in frightful holocaust.”¹⁴ Interestingly enough, it should be noted that the term holocaust is used within this time frame. This is 50 years before the world would know the term for a different historical tragedy. One aspect that the Globe directs a lot of the front page to be stories and personal recounts of the Fire as it occurred. For the readers of the Globe it is critical that they are able to visualize soon after what this experience truly felt like for the residents of Hinckley.

Back during this era of newspapers and correspondents it was much more difficult for reporters to convey a scene to their readers. Because of this words and not photos were used in papers to show the readers a horrific or emotional scene. In the Globe, the bluntness of some of the reports was astounding and should be noted. For some of the sections of this front page, the editor makes sure the reader is able to identify the horrendous scenes that are taking place in Hinckley. Headlines of paragraphs such as “Hundreds are dead” and “Horror upon Horror” were just some of the sections that were meant to strike the reader with awe about the destructiveness of the fire. However, and oddly enough, the first half and left side of the front page, was dedicated diligently to the appalling and often blunt descriptions of the scenes in Hinckley. In contrast with the first half, the second half is dedicated somewhat to reactions of people or commemorating those that died as well as what happened in the state of Wisconsin due to this fire. Stories

¹⁴*St. Paul Daily Globe (Saint Paul)*, "Towns In Ashes," September 3, 1894.
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed October 28, 2011).

such as the one that came out of Milaca of the townspeople stopping the fire from taking their town and the reports that came about how the fire spread eastward into Wisconsin were also prevalent on the left side of the paper. Even though these stories were less gruesome they were still worthy of the front page. For the readers of the Globe it put into perspective just how far the fire went with the headlines of “The village of Barronette Wis, is almost wholly wiped out of existence” and “Badgerdom ablaze.” With sections and headlines such as these the reader is immediately given the visualization of this being more than just a Minnesota tragedy.¹⁵

Much like most papers of today, The Globe had another page dedicated to this tragedy just a day after the event happened. The 5th page of the September 3rd paper edition had mostly personal exploits and heroics of the men and women that survived the fire. Stories such as James Root’s and John Blair’s on the trains that saved hundreds of lives are meant to captivate the reader and give them a sense of heroism that occurred just a day before. Like many events throughout history the idea of latching onto a hero is one that has become ever more prevalent with the written word. The story of the Hinckley Fire is much the same. Names such as James Root, John Blair, fire chief John Craig, William Best, Mary Gorman, and Edward Barry are among the heroes of the day the firestorm took all of Hinckley. Within the commemorative paper made by the current city of Hinckley it states “Any great catastrophe will bring out acts of great heroism and many heroes are born through fear or necessity in times of great calamity.”¹⁶ This statement is true especially in regards to this catastrophe. In the years of the late 19th century it was

15 St. Paul Daily Globe (Saint Paul), "New Hinckley has Arisen," September 2, 1895. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed October 28, 2011).

16 Åkermark, Gudmund Emanuel, William Johnson, and Minn County. Eld-cyklonen: Hinckley Fire. 28-34.

important to give the reader something to look forward to each day that they read. By having the heroes at the forefront of the page, other Minnesotans could read the paper and know that there were fellow statesmen who acted courageous on such a dark day in history. Newspapers around the state heralded the stories of train conductors and engineers going about their everyday job and being thrust into a horrific situation and coming out a hero. In the days after the fire it was pivotal for the editors to capture the true essence of what this tragedy was for the people of town of Hinckley. This is when the papers began to hear the compelling stories of the everyday families. Newspapers were strewn with various excerpts and paragraphs on families losing their home and livestock, but managing to save their dog. Even a noteworthy story of how a family saved their lives in a bunch of barrels of water. These stories in the newspapers were not the first to appear on the front page like the heroes or the tales of imagery. But in the end of every disaster, it is the story that goes untold, about the average family losing everything, which comes to epitomize what true imagery and heroism mean (Artifact 5).¹⁷

Just as compelling is studying newspaper editions from around the United States days after the disaster in Hinckley took place. From September 3rd, two days after the catastrophe, all the way until the 8th the Evening World newspaper had three sections a day dedicated to the Hinckley Fire. The first days headlines read “Hundreds perish in forest fires,” “a race for life with flames” and “a passenger train missing.” Two of these sections we see more writing on the topics of heroes of the railroad and the engineers exploits on that fateful day. Once again this is pertinent to the overall argument that using

¹⁷ *St. Paul Daily Globe (Saint Paul)*, "Towns In Ashes," September 3, 1894. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed October 28, 2011).

the newspaper is useful because it can convey a sense of awe for the reader and quickly can captivate them. In the days that followed this first edition *The Evening World* published stories that demonstrated the true breadth of the fire and how it overtook county after county and town after town in the Minnesota and Wisconsin region. Many sections were dedicated to the nature of illustrating for the audience estimations on how many lives were lost, amount in dollars of property lost, and total amount of acres burned. These estimation numbers are the ones that were bound to captivate most people not directly related to the fire itself. All across the United States, from New York to San Francisco there were headlines of this catastrophic event that had occurred in the forests of Minnesota.¹⁸

By having the theme of heroes at the forefront of the page, other Minnesotans could read the paper and know that there were fellow statesmen who acted courageous on such a dark day in history. Newspapers around the state heralded the stories of train conductors and engineers going about their everyday job and being thrust into a horrific situation and coming out a hero. In the days after the fire it was pivotal for the editors to capture to true essence of what this tragedy was for the people of town of Hinckley. This is when the papers began to hear the compelling stories of the everyday families. Newspapers were strewn with various excerpts and paragraphs on families losing their home and livestock, but managing to save their dog. Even a noteworthy story of how a family saved their lives in a bunch of barrels of water. These stories in the newspapers were not the first to appear on the front page like the heroes or the tales of imagery. But

¹⁸ *The Evening World (New York City)*, "At least 500 Died by Fire," September 3, 1894. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed October 28, 2011).

in the end of every disaster, it is the story that goes untold, about the average family losing everything, which comes to epitomize what true imagery and heroism mean.

Upon examining the newspapers and the editions that came out just after the Hinckley Fire happened, it is also crucial to look upon and study how newspapers since this event have commemorated the fire. In the years that followed the fire it was pivotal for the inhabitants to overcome all the hardships that had come with the devastating fire. One way was to rebuild. In subsequent years following this event it was important for the people of Hinckley to rebuild their community. Although never fully getting back to its initial prosperity, Hinckley did become a close knit community in the immediate years following the devastation.¹⁹ Within newspapers since the fire there have been a series of crucial stages of the recovery period that have helped the people of Hinckley cope. Initially, the silent remembrance and dedication in talking about the victims was enough for the newspapers to illustrate the emotions of the day. Such headlines as “New Hinckley has arisen” and “Fire Memories Stir Hinckley” were ones that helped people all over Minnesota, but more importantly ones directly affected by the fire, to remember and dedicate days to the remembrance of all that was lost. In one newspaper it even outlines how the people of Hinckley generally do not celebrate Memorial Day because they have their own day of remembrance or September 1st.²⁰ (In the years since up until the end of WWII, the papers are quick to call this disaster a “holocaust” of epic proportions.

¹⁹ *St. Paul Daily Globe (Saint Paul)*, "New Hinckley has Arisen," September 2, 1895. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed October 28, 2011).

²⁰ *St. Paul Daily Globe (Saint Paul)*, "New Hinckley has Arisen," September 2, 1895. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed October 28, 2011).

It was not until 50 years had gone by that the wording more so focused on the fire and victims and not really glorifying through words the devastation of that day. The overall effectiveness of this method in writing and remembering events through newspapers is one that should be judged by the different time frames in publication. For instance, upon analyzing the newspapers in recent years commemorating the Hinckley Fire it is easy to examine wording that is not as drastic or emotionally charged. This could be because all of the victims of this event are long gone and the need to use emotion to convey and commemorate a disaster is less needed. In comparison, the events of 9/11 are still in all of our minds and articles are less about getting the facts of the tragedy correct and more on the emotional remembrance. When examining the first 20 years after the Hinckley Fire it is easy to see the emotional words such as “holocaust,” “hell-fire,” and gruesome descriptions of those that perished are littered throughout newspaper headlines. In coming to the conclusion of the overall effectiveness of the newspaper as a remembrance tool in regards to the Hinckley Fire I believe it is a question of who the audience has been for each publication commemorating the tragedy. Readers in the early 20th century read differently than people of today do. I think that it was its most effective to use the newspaper as a remembering tool the time immediately following the Hinckley fire until WWII or even The Great Depression. Up until this time the newspapers were able to emotionally hook in readers into remembering this event. After it was hard to talk about hard times or devastating events because disasters were happening each and every day and nobody wanted to hear about worse things.

Historiography/Sources of memory

Books as sources of memory

Like newspapers, it is imperative to look at what usefulness there is for having literature outlining a tragedy and the stories that have come out of it. For this particular event of the Great Hinckley Fire there is not a very extensive amount of literature or even books on this topic, which makes it ever more pertinent to find the most successful way of telling the story. Two of the books are written in the “story-telling” style and are meant to hook the audience into a compelling historical narrative. In both of these books the aim is not to give a complete history or an important historiography, but rather tell a compelling story of tragedy. Throughout all of these books there are apparent themes that take shape that give direction and guidance to studying the memory of this fire. The books themselves are really a culmination of how the story of the fire is told. The three main themes that can be identified within all of the books are depicting graphic images of the fire, heroes who saved lives in some way, and how families coped and got through this disaster during and after. In the end it is important to study all of the books that are completely on the topic of the Great Hinckley Fire of 1894. These are the most popular of all the sources of this story and because of this they should be examined thoroughly.

To start examining the first book published about the tragedy is a good place to start. Amazingly enough the first ever technically written book was a history of that fateful day that was wrote in Swedish and later translated into English some 80 years later. The book was entitled *Hinckley-Branden* which almost directly translates into Hinckley Fire itself. The author of the book was evidently a Swedish immigrant by the name of Gudmand Emanuel Akermark. Akermark himself was an editor of a Swedish

newspaper at the time of the fire in Hinckley. Within the preface it states that “he wrote this book as a side venture (Yellow preface). It is intriguing to believe that this very important, and indeed the very first literature on the Hinckley Fire, was merely a side note in an editors career. The book itself is only 120 pages and was compiled by the Swedish author with many of the accounts the other books possess. Throughout the book there phrases inserted in the middle of paragraphs that describe the situation and actually how dire it was to be there. Subject headings and inserts such as “fiery furnace” and “a tale of sorrow” create a vision of what that fateful day was like. This book is written in probably the most intriguing styles out of all the books available on this topic. For one, the only guide that there is for following the book is the actual course of the fire itself.²¹

The author does a good job at maintaining a sound and historically unbiased approach to his presentation. However, it should be noted that the writing itself is less educational and merely informative for an audience who might not be as literate as our society today. Indeed this could be seen through the fact that this book was written just one year after the fire storm in 1895. Although basic in nature, this was perhaps the first and most to the point compilation of the events that took place on that horrific day. Interestingly enough, and unknown to me at the time of choosing this topic, my dad had read this exact book when he was in grade school some 50 odd years ago. He said he could not recall the reason it was mandatory reading, but speculated that it was about Minnesota history. This book, much like the newspaper representation and accounts of this time period was meant to awe and show great amounts of emotion in a tragedy such as this fire storm. The main focus was to display to the audience the sheer terror that was inflicted by nature on this helpless town, all the while telling the story of the fire itself

²¹Åkermark, Gudmund Emanuel, William Johnson, and Minn County. *Eld-cyklonen: Hinckley*. 11, 35

and many involved. This book has vivid and at times crude imagery that greatly enhances the historical need for more public knowledge on this particular topic. In the end, this book's description of the fire helps the readers find meaning around this horrific disaster in Minnesota history. Much like the newspaper representation of this tragedy, this particular book is one that was written to captivate and scare the reader into a desire to read more.

The next book that should be examined by those looking for information on the Great Hinckley Fire of 1894 is entitled *Under the Flaming Sky* by Daniel James Brown. This book is probably one of the more circulated pieces of work on the fire itself. This book which is the most recent of items to be published on the fire came out in 2006. Upon reading the first few chapters of this particular book it became evident that it was published more for a literary purpose rather than a historical one. A quick analysis of the cover as well as the author brings some of these assertions to light. On the cover, like much other literature in recent years, a way to captivate a new reader is to put quotes about what reviewers of the book have to say about it.²² The reviewers all wrote how the great imagery and story-telling can rival that of other disaster novels such as *The Perfect Storm*. It is fairly easy to believe that this book was created by the author more for a captivating story and not a historical analysis of the event itself. Daniel James Brown, who is a writing professor, did a very enthusiastic job at producing this story and was able to keep the readers wanting more.

This book in particular places great emphasis on main characters of the fateful day and some of the heroism they possessed. Like the oldest book, this relatively new

²² Brown, Daniel. *Under a flaming sky: the great Hinckley firestorm of 1894*. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2006. Preface, Cover.

book on the Hinckley Fire produces a narrative of the fire that goes through the event chronologically with accounts of various witnesses and survivors. The first few chapters follow the families of the Grissinger and Hansen and their experiences leading up to those significant hours prior to the fire storm. Like many of the families of this area the two husbands worked in the Brennan Lumber yard.²³ The next chapter is dedicated to setting the scene for the reader to give them a vision of what a small lumber town like Hinckley looked like in a hot summer day. Throughout all of these first few chapters the author uses the ordinary family theme as well as a profound sense of imagery to set the scene for the horror to come.

Most of the book itself is dedicated to providing the reader with imagery rather than factual data or accounts. While important to gain the readers attention, it takes away from the historical significance of the book itself. The author chose to captivate the reader by using a chronological time frame solution starting out in the dead of night and up until the day after the fire. With both the chronological ordering and the vivid depictions of the entire layout of the town it is easy for the reader to follow along as if they were there over a hundred years ago. The author also in the first two chapters outlines how people kept track of the weather during this era of no technology.²⁴

For the remainder of the book the author takes on the role of telling the story of the heroes of the few trains that saved many lives that day. Edward Barry was the engineer of the train that was travelling from Superior, Wisconsin to Hinckley right before the fire itself started. The other train that was entering the town was the Number 4

²³ Brown, Daniel. *Under a flaming sky: the great Hinckley firestorm of 1894*. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2006. 7-13.

²⁴ Brown, Daniel. *Under a flaming sky: the great Hinckley firestorm of 1894*. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2006. 21-25.

“Limited” by Engineer Best who was headed through Hinckley. As the fire approached the town it became apparent to these two men that danger was near and that the trains should be combined and utilized to bring people to safety. For a few chapters the author dedicates to these two trains as well as the Number 69 train engineered by James Root, and the stories that accompany them. Of all the sources on the memory of this fateful tragedy, this book has the best writing on the heroes of the railroad that saved many lives that day. Both engineer Best and Barry were able to save hundreds of lives that day as they left the scene of the firestorm. This particular book paints the picture of heroic deeds as its main theme throughout its entirety. The author does an excellent job at drawing on the readers emotions with suspenseful scenes of daring escapes of the fire on the railroad. While this is more of a literary tactic at storytelling, it is affected in this case of a historical narrative. Even though the theme of heroes outweighs that of the common family, the author still finds time in between his narrative of the fire to incorporate more personal stories. These personal stories take on the tone that is similar to that of the newspaper headlines of the average family of Hinckley. They capture the small but brave accounts of survival from the average man, woman, and child. This book is the ultimate storytelling book for all those who are interested in this tragedy, or like reading about disasters in history. Brown has done a remarkable job at encompassing the true nature of this fire and being able to tell a concrete narrative that is appealing to both the historian and the average reader. Out of all the books, this newest one could be considered the most affective in its approach in carrying on the memory of the fire that burned all of Hinckley in 1894. It is appropriate towards the memory of those lost because it paints a

picture that truly solidifies the three main themes of vivid imagery, heroism, and the average survivor of the fire.²⁵

The next two books are from the perspective of the individuals themselves and their personal stories. The first book, *Wall of Flames*, by Lawrence Larsen, is a well-written narrative of the events on that fateful September day. It chronicles the entire event as it unfolds through various accounts of people that survived as they tell of the victims that could not survive to the end. Larsen does not focus on heroics and is not pressed in his writing for intriguing story lines. Rather, he successfully conveys to the reader and the historian alike the valid and needed accounts of this disaster from the voices of those that witnessed it. Out of the selections that are available on this specific event, *Wall of Flames* illustrates what it would have been like if someone was observing this calamity from a normal person who may be reporting the event live.²⁶ With less emotion than the first book by the Swedish author, this book is able to go through those terrifying few hours both from the average person's perspective and through what would be considered a bystander to the tragedy altogether. The book takes a backseat role in identifying heroes and verbally painting imagery of the day. Unlike the newspapers and the first Hinckley Fire book, *Wall of Flames* depicts for the reader a calmer narration of the events.

Although less graphic descriptions are used, Larsen is still able to use imagery to enhance the story of the fire's survivors even if they are not as noteworthy.²⁷ Much like the other books, Larsen also has some writing on the heroes of the day. However, unlike many other cases, he does not exalt their stories above others, but merely uses them to continue

²⁵ Brown, Daniel. *Under a flaming sky: the great Hinckley firestorm of 1894*. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2006. 151-181.

²⁶ Larsen, Lawrence H.. *Wall of flames: the Minnesota forest fire of 1894*. 63-70.

²⁷ Larsen, Lawrence H.. *Wall of flames: the Minnesota forest fire of 1894*. 49-50, 142-150.

to piece together his narrative. This book does great justice to the stories of the common people that perished. This book reads the most like a history of the event rather than the other few books on this disaster which have various purposes of telling a dazzling tale of heroism with vivid imagery. In a *Wall of Flames* the author just plainly tells the story without using many writing tactics to draw the reader in. While not as exciting to some, this type of narrative is the most valid in a historical context.

The next book was compiled by Antone A. Anderson, a lone survivor of the hundreds who fled to a local swamp on that tragic day. It is plainly entitled *The Hinckley Fire: Stories from the Hinckley Survivors*. This book was a nice change from the other publications on this topic. The man who compiled all of these narrations and stories was a survivor who lost his entire family when he was just a boy.²⁸ This book solely takes into account what happen to individual people and families in and around the area of Hinckley on that tragic September day. The interesting thing about this book is that it was written in a commemorative fashion, and that many of the stories of individuals were indeed told in a memory fashion by the survivors. It was 50 years after the tragedy occurred that this book was written as a commemorative to those that lost their lives and families. It tells the stories of those who survived, as well. This book was the first English version account or narrative book on the events of the fire and the people involved. Many of the excerpts from this book began with “As told by...” and offer a sense of authenticity to the stories that the survivors are recounting. Many of the people who witnessed this fire had not yet told their stories. Others were relatives or children of those who survived and were only able to retell the story as they had heard it long ago. Although not as chilling of a narrative, much like *Under a Flaming Sky* this short book about the “normal” people

²⁸ Anderson, Antone A., and Clara Anderson McDermott. *The Hinckley fire*. 3-11.

that survived is both historically significant and necessary for the purpose of remembering an event of this magnitude. Given the complete story of the everyday lives of the ordinary people of Hinckley is significant to the remembrance because it gives a realistic view of the tragedy, one that is not comprised of literary angles or depictions, but just historical reality (Artifact 6).²⁹ These types of narratives are the type you might encounter when you stroll into an old coffee shop today in Hinckley and hear an elderly gentleman recounting how his grandfather survived the “Great Fire” in Hinckley over 100 years ago. When becoming familiar with the topic of this fire this would be a very interesting read for anyone who is interested in the background story of the fire and how it impacted the many lives. It mildly uses the other important themes of vivid imagery in the stories and also incorporates personal heroism of many individuals who just tried to save their loved ones lives. These ordinary people who perished, as well as those that survived, are the reason why people today will have the chance know about this in the annals of Minnesotan history.³⁰

The author also took the time to delve into many people’s stories rather than just a select few. Much like the first Hinckley Fire book, many people’s perspectives are taken into the narrative to give more weight. However, the first book more so told the story from a terrified child’s perspective and not of someone who might just be observing. Both books are thoughtfully written and each with their own purpose.

The next books are all very similar in representation than the previous books. These books are also only available in select libraries and are harder to come by. The first is plainly titled *The Great Hinckley Fire* by Clark C. Peterson. This book was written in a

²⁹ Anderson, Antone A., and Clara Anderson McDermott. *The Hinckley fire*. 28-31.

³⁰ Anderson, Antone A., and Clara Anderson McDermott. *The Hinckley fire*. 116-119.

style similar to the other accounts of remembrance previously written about. The same chronological order of the day and its tragic images was given in this book. The author states at the beginning that he will attempt to write an hour by hour account of the fire from the victim's perspective. He does this by using the graphic imagery that other books have used and by depicting the average person who witnessed the fire.³¹ The one uniqueness about this depiction is that the author attempts to address common questions that have arisen over the years about the fire. Such questions as: How many died exactly? How large was this fire? And how many bodies were not able to be identified? These questions are then answered with the best estimates given. This style of writing is effective in the case of this historical event since so much is still under question and many legends have been created. The one theme that is missing is using heroes to verify and account for certain events of the fire. In many other books this is not the case. However, this one is appropriate for those wanting to read about the fire itself.³²

Another book that is well-known about the subject, but is going out of print, is *From The Ashes* by Grace Stageberg Swenson. This book is also an attempt to solely encompass the fire and to commemorate those that were lost. As far as covering the most widespread amount of information, this book does this the best. The author outlines for the reader the themes she conveys in her preface of heroism, rescue and relief, and the politics of the aftermath. One point that the author succeeds at is going over the story and also gleaning over the areas commonly forgotten in some disasters: who came to the rescue of these people and who outside of the area had the desire to help and aid the

³¹ Peterson, Clark C.. *The great Hinckley fire*. 2d ed. Smithtown, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1980.7-26.

³² Peterson, Clark C.. *The great Hinckley fire*. 2d ed. 1-5.

victims monetarily. This book reads much like a history book that is both accurate and compelling (Artifact 7).³³

Another book brought a comparison of two different fires. One fire the author described was the Great Peshtigo Fire that took place in 1871 and was much like the Hinckley Fire in its devastation. After the first half of the book concludes in talking about the Peshtigo fire, Clark C. Peterson (Author of another Hinckley Book) goes on to tell the story of Hinckley fire with some comparison between the two. In this narration, Peterson uses the theme of imagery and description probably more so than any other history book on this topic. He uses the words like holocaust and horrific blunder to describe the fire's events and how it impacted humans living in the area. This descriptiveness, although noteworthy, is on par for its emotion as many of the newspapers had been reporting days after the fire had commenced. The book does not address the heroes of the day or the average survivors, but illustrates an image of what the fire looked like on that hot September day. This book is valued for the comparison it draws from a similar fire that occurred in the same horrific and unnatural way.³⁴

A book by Elton T. Brown was a narration of the fire events focusing on how the people survived the tragedy. The book is entitled *A History of the Great Minnesota Forest Fires; Sandstone, Mission Creek, Hinckley, Pokegama, Skunk Lake* and gives descriptions of the fire as it raced over Pine County. This book, much like other narratives, is losing popularity and is not widely printed anymore. Much like the language used in the previous book and in the newspapers, this author uses vivid imagery

³³ Swenson, Grace Stageberg. *From the ashes: the story of the Hinckley fire of 1894*. Stillwater, Minn.: Croixside Press, 1979. 22-34.

³⁴ Peterson, Clark C.. *The devouring rages of fire*. Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Pub., 2006.

as a key element to conveying the true nature of the fire itself.³⁵ One thing that this author does quite diligently is talk about the relief efforts after the fire was over. He illustrates both monetary efforts as well as general aid given by people who were not affected by the fire directly.³⁶ It is comforting to know that people, even during this age of limited communication, were still able to help out a neighbor in need. Although indirectly, because of the descriptive imagery and the vivid writing style, the author is able to draw in readers with emotion and also be historically accurate.

The next few books are all historical fiction and are loosely based on heroes and survivors. One titled *Firestorm*, by Jan Neubert Shultz is about a young girl who lives in the Duluth-Superior area but must move away to the small town of Hinckley in the summer of 1894. This book was written in 2002 and was meant to captivate a younger audience to the story of the fire in Hinckley. The story is from the perspective of a 13 year old girl named Maggie. This book is enjoyable for a younger audience and is able to depict what happened during the fire and how it affected the average teenager of that time. Although not as compelling as some of the stories that in truth come out of the fire, this book illustrates in true fictional form the image of a young girl struggling through a fire with her grandma at her side. The powerful images that come from this book are hard to imagine for a teenager in the world today. However, this book is able to captivate what that terrible day may have been like for a young girl growing up in Minnesota.³⁷

35 Brown, Elton T., and Carl C. Brown. A history of the great Minnesota forest fires: Sandstone, Mission Creek, Hinckley, Pokegama, Skunk Lake. St. Paul: Brown Bros., 1894. 10-32.

36 Brown, Elton T., and Carl C. Brown. A history of the great Minnesota forest fires: Sandstone, Mission Creek, Hinckley, Pokegama, Skunk Lake. 86-139.

37 Schultz, Jan Neubert. *Firestorm*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2002. 2-29.

The final historical fiction book to come out about the Great Hinckley Fire is about one of its heroes. John Blair, an African American porter on The Limited No. 4, was one of the few people easily recognized as a hero of that horrific day (Artifact 8). The story of John Blair is one of a man who just did what he had to do and completed his duty that day with courage. This particular book is a children's book that is filled with rich and colorful pictures that depict the various scenes of John Blair's ride. The No. 4 was headed south to the Twin Cities and was running on time. Throughout the afternoon the people on the train noticed a dark cloud that was to the south. As they approached the town of Hinckley the forests on either side of the tracks were enveloped in flames. At the time, nobody was terribly frightened. However, minutes later the flames began exploding into the sky.³⁸ This is where John Blair's heroics came into play. Throughout this ride the porter remained calm and managed to hand out damp towels and buckets of water for people to use in protection from the heat. As the train lurched onward, the situation became much grimmer. Blair had the knowledge to stand firm and when the time came to get the people off the train and into nearby Skunk Lake he did so with an air of calmness that is hard to fathom from anyone in so desperate a situation. For the next several hours, John Blair and the survivors of The Limited remained in the murky Skunk Lake until relief crews arrived on the scene. At the end of the children's book they talk about how the railroad, Pine County officials, and state officials, commemorated and thanked John Blair for his heroic deeds on September 1st, 1894.³⁹ Overall, this book uses the two themes of heroes and imagery to depict the fire. The imagery in this case was

³⁸ Nobisso, Josephine, and Ted Rose. *John Blair and the great Hinckley fire*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 1-5.

³⁹ Nobisso, Josephine, and Ted Rose. *John Blair and the great Hinckley fire*. 7-14.

accompanied by illustrations, which for the first time were rendered by the imagination of somebody who did not witness the fire. This is the type of book a person can sit down with their grandchildren and read about a devastating day in Minnesota's history.

However devastating it might have been, in the end there were still heroes like John Blair who held firm against a terrifying disaster.

The last remaining fully historical and accurate book about the fire is by Reverend William Wilkinson who aided in the relief effort after the fire. Although not at the fire himself, the Reverend was able to compile many different stories and accounts of survivors into one collection. Interestingly enough, in this book entitled *Minnesota Forest Fires*, the compilation of narratives are all still in the original format of letters addressed to the Reverend himself. While having all of the other books about this topic is vital, this particular book or collection of accounts is one of the most historically sound pieces on the Hinckley Fire itself.⁴⁰ This compilation of letters, ranging from men, women, clergymen, and families of all backgrounds, give a sound narrative on many people's stories of that terrible day. This collection would be a great read for any historian, but for the common reader might be a little dry. This collection was brought together by the Reverend just a year after the fire. The Reverend himself makes it his main goal of hearing from the various religious leaders of all sects of Christianity in the Pine County area. While only coming from Christian leaders, these accounts are still valuable to the relief effort. Many of these leaders were either in the fire or helped in the aftermath.

⁴⁰ Wilkinson, William. *Memorials of the Minnesota forest fires in the year 1894: with a chapter on the forest fires in Wisconsin in the same year*. Minneapolis: N.E. Wilkinson, 1894

Some of the graphic images that come from these accounts truly tell a tale of terror that is almost unfathomable.⁴¹

All of these books offer a variety of information that is presented in multiple formats. Some are purely historical fiction that is meant to enthrall the reader into a tale of the event. Still others are meant to be pure recollections of the survivor's stories and are needed for the memory of the Great Hinckley Fire. Authors wrote these both to sell stories and books and to compile narratives of the victims who witnessed and survived this horrific tragedy. Each book holds its own place in respect to having the people of Minnesota remember the fire that took the town of Hinckley.

When studying any topic or disaster in history it is often the case that primary documents such as journals and diaries are overlooked. Many would say that is why we have books. However, the merit for these types of primary sources when retelling an event is probably the most valuable of all the sources of data that can be read. Once again, these various primary sources should be examined keenly for their main thematic connections that they have with other secondary and primary sources. These three themes include vivid imagery, personal narratives of average people, and tales of heroic deeds during this fire. Two primary sources that are both journal/diary entries come from women who both survived the epic fire in Hinckley. The first is an account of a girl who, 59 years earlier at the age of 16, witnessed and endured the day the fire destroyed all of Hinckley. This account was told by May Gorman Newman and is titled *Death at My Heels*. Out of all the pieces of information and literature that is to be found on this particular topic, this reminiscent account is probably one that everyone historian and

⁴¹ Wilkinson, William. *Memorials of the Minnesota forest fires in the year 1894: with a chapter on the forest fires in Wisconsin in the same year.* 28-46.

common reader should glean over to fully understand the terror of that day. This girl's story begins with her family being separated and her father and older brother having to go fight the initial forest fires to the north of the town. The remaining family members included a younger brother, infant sister, and their mother was forced to run in various directions. Mary Gorman was placed in charge of her young sister and ran all the way to the nearby river and then waited there for the train. Finally, after abandoning the train and the remaining people at Skunk Lake, Mary ran for her life down the track for miles with her baby sister in her clutches. She and a handful of other survivors of this trek went to a depot where they waited for a rescue train coming from the Town of Willow River to the north of them. This gritty recollection of a young girl's frightening survival story is not one of the heroic tales that is narrated and told in other pieces of literature time and again. However, this story, and others like it encapsulate why it is important to learn about Minnesota history.⁴²

Another significant recount of that historic day was told by one Alice A. Nelson Wilcox and is plainly titled *The Hinckley Fire*. Alice and her family were living in the nearby village of Pokegama when the Great Hinckley Fire started. Her account comes 62 years after the fire took place at the elderly age of 78. On that historic day, Alice and her younger sister were out picking blueberries with their pails when they noticed the sky turning very dark in the afternoon. They heard a roar off in the distance. They immediately began to sprint towards the nearest railroad tracks. Along the way they filled up their pails with water they found in a dike. From there they went to a nearby sluice which was low to the ground near an embankment. For the next several hours, they lay

⁴² Gorman Newman, May . "Death At My Heels." Reading, Hinckley Fire Pageant from Hinckley Fire Museum , Hinckley, September 1, 1954. 1-6.

there as animals sprinted passed them and the fire raged around and above them. Animals came to stand next to them, stunned by the fire and humans alike, only to fall down dead where they stood. Each time the girls' clothes would catch fire they would douse them sparingly with water. The two girls were truly unaware of the danger, for each thought of the tale she would be able to tell after the fire was over, and that is all they could think of. After several hours they awoke together and realized the fire was over. One of the first things that these two sisters saw was the devastation that the fire had rendered on both the land and its inhabitants. They walked through the debris and charred remains and luckily, in the end, found that the rest of their family had survived. Alice's family had gone into a small pond and covered themselves with bed sheets that were kept damp to prevent them from setting ablaze. At the time of the fire, the girls' stepmother was pregnant.⁴³ Thankfully, the baby was born healthy a few months later. Much like the previous personal accounts, Alice Nelson Wilcox tells her story with a keen amount of descriptiveness that is noteworthy for a memory of over 50 years. For instance, at one point the girls begin to attempt to wash themselves from all the ash "but the minute the water hit our hot smoky faces, the skin puffed out like a marshmallow held too close to the fire." It is this vivid imagery that helps this account becomes one of interest for readers. Whether it by describing how Wilcox and her sister survived or the bravery and calmness of her step-mother throughout the fire, the dramatic images that are received from reading this narration make it a valid source for this disaster.⁴⁴

⁴³ *The Hinckley Fire*, 1962. Alice A. Nelson Manuscript/memoirs. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁴⁴ *The Hinckley Fire*, 1962. Alice A. Nelson Manuscript/memoirs. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

In both of these cases the reader would probably question the overall memory of the writers. However, the images that each survivor witnessed were so engrained into their minds that it would be hard to be rid of them even after 50 years. Towards the end of Alice Nelson Wilcox's account she states that she can still recall how the burning of her skin felt and that her memory of that day shall never be forgotten. Both writers lament that many who read these accounts will not believe or take heed the message that nature can change at any instance and turn into a disaster of epic proportions, much like this fire storm in 1894. Both of these accounts are some of the most important items found on the subject of the Great Hinckley Fire and its history.

The final case of remembering this tragedy comes in the form of the memorials that have been erected and dedicated to the victims in the years following the fire. The first memorial was a large statue that was erected in 1900 in the town of Hinckley near where the four trenches were dug for the unknown dead. Unlike previous numbers on the unknown deaths that were recorded in books, this memorial states that two hundred and forty people who could not be identified were buried in these trenches. For the memorial, inscriptions were placed on all four sides of the pillar that stood just over 50 feet tall. On the south side they placed a generic memory statement about the legislation and the purpose for the monument. The west side had an inscription about the day that the monument was erected exactly six years after the fire occurred. The north side had a dedication to the unknown dead who were buried in the nearby trenches. Finally, the east side described the fire and the tragedy in a small paragraph. The second monument is just to the south of Hinckley in the area where Pokegama stood. Much like the other monument, it has inscriptions on all four sides about the legislation and the erecting of

the statue in 1915, those who died, and the unknown graves. Both of these monuments are erected near mass graves of people who perished on that tragic day. Memorials such as these are important to the memory and remembrance of this event because it is a way for the public, 100 years later, to recognize and commemorate the lives lost. It also was a way at the time of the dedication to help the survivors come to terms with what happened and how their lives were affected from by that fire (Artifact9).⁴⁵

The remaining memorial sites are Skunk Lake, where hundreds fled from a train to save their lives in the murky waters of a swamp, and the reconstructed St. Paul and Duluth Railroad Depot (Artifact 10). The memorial at Skunk Lake is mostly just a scene of prairie grass today, and is not the same in appearance due to the lack of water. Visiting this place is particularly eerie for the passerby of this small town. This prairie and the soil beneath, along with what was a swampy area, helped save hundreds of lives on that horrific day. The old depot had gone into disrepair, but in 1971 was purchased from the railroad for one dollar so that the local community could rebuild it to look like its original form. The revised depot included the separate men's and women's waiting room, the beanery or eating area, freight room, and the depot agent's small apartment. Although all of this was destroyed in 1894, this nearly exact replica stands as a reminder today of what was lost during that fire. In 1976 the museum became a part of the National Register of

⁴⁵ Museums & Memorials - Pine County Genealogical Society." home - Pine County Genealogical Society. <http://www.pinecogen.org/Museums%20&%20Memorials%20-%20Pine%20County%20Genealogical%20Society.html> (accessed December 12, 2011).

Historic Places. Since then, thousands of people have visited this site to learn about one of America's most devastating forest fires.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I felt it important to examine all the forms of memory in which both scholars, survivors, and the general public have remembered the Great Hinckley Fire of 1894. First, the newspaper clippings of the days following the tragedy told a story of an emotional ordeal with great imagery and many articles focusing on the theme of heroism to best represent what the event was like. The positives of this means of retelling the story for the purpose of memory is that the readers from all over Minnesota and the United States are able to hear of the travesty and desolation that happened because of this fire. The newspapers used the two main themes of heroes and graphic imagery to captivate the readers. This is a positive because it gives recognition to an event that might have easily been forgotten or overlooked. However, coupled with this style of writing in the late 19th century reporting and narrating an event obviously there are some negatives. The vivid retelling of the various stories and accounts of the fire was often "over the top" with emotion and was unrealistic at times. Even though this was the writing style for the time, it did not a positive effect for the overall remembrance of the event in many ways. Although many unimaginable things happened on that day, it is unjust to paint a picture of a grandiose tale that cannot be backed up with evidence. Also, the newspapers rarely touched on the common family or person who was impacted by or survived the fire. This does them an injustice in some ways; by not talking about them, much of the actual event's history is lost. It is the victims and survivors who led an

⁴⁶ Museums & Memorials - Pine County Genealogical Society." home - Pine County Genealogical Society. <http://www.pinecogen.org/Museums%20&%20Memorials%20-%20Pine%20County%20Genealogical%20Society.html> (accessed December 12, 2011).

ordinary life before and after this tragedy that should be remembered. However, sharing the tales of the heroes of this day is a noteworthy positive for newspaper coverage on this fire. Stories and accounts that normally get coverage are engineer Roots' ride on the train that saved many lives along with John Blair, the African American porter who was in the passenger coach at the time (Artifact 11). Also retold are the stories of the engineers Best and Barry as they guided a dual train through the fire to safety. There were both advantages and disadvantages for newspapers that covered this story. However, it is the media then and today which covers stories and tales of heroic deeds to more readers around the world.⁴⁷

The next type of documentation on covering this disaster was through the use of books and formal forms of literature. There are only a handful of publications that have been written on the topic of the Hinckley Fire. These books usually center on the retelling of the fire in its entirety with snippets of personal accounts and is mostly written through a chronological order of the event itself. Each book is different in that a multitude of people are "the characters" and not all of them would be considered heroes. Each book also deals with the theme of imagery in a different manner. For instance, in *Under a Flaming Sky*, the author uses vivid narrations of pictures to keep his audience guessing what is coming next, much like a modern day novel. In the *Hinckley Fire* book, written by a Swedish immigrant, the author depicts the event with headings and captions that are meant to terrify and capture the reader's attention. These two books are in stark contrast to both a *Wall of Flames* and the two books that are solidly compilations of recounts of people's stories from that day. Both of these styles of writing have merit for the overall memory of the fire for a number of reasons. For writing only compilations and short

⁴⁷ Nobisso, Josephine, and Ted Rose. *John Blair and the great Hinckley fire*. 7-14.

accounts of survivor's stories they give the reader a sense of reality when reading many of the tales. When reading the books that are more vibrant or flamboyant in their retelling, the readers are exposed to great images that are easily believable, even though they might be over-described.⁴⁸ These images are meant to enthrall the reader and keep them captivated and in these books. Books that are merely compilations are probably better utilized by readers who like to read histories. The literature on this fire that is meant to be a story or historical fiction should be read by those who want to gain knowledge of an event, but also be kept guessing about what they will read next. Overall, reading books on the subject of the Great Hinckley Fire is one of the most common ways for people to learn about this event. Most people would rather read a book on a historic subject than track down old newspapers or personal accounts of survivors. With literature available for all types of readers, this disaster is covered adequately and should be remembered into the future.

Another way that an historic event is remembered is through personal accounts such as diaries or journals of the survivors. These accounts are told by those who are considered heroes and others that are common survivors of the fires that just did what they had to do to escape the flames. These accounts also dedicated a significant amount of their writing to very descriptive images of the fire. With the diary/journal source a positive that is often overlooked is that this is probably the most reliable account of what occurred on that day the fires struck. Another positive element is that the stories, such as the ones retold by Mrs. Nelson Wilcox and Mrs. Gorman Newman, are about ordinary people who lived through this ordeal. In both of these and other personal narratives the writer tells their story with vivid, but realistic imagery, in which the reader is able to see

⁴⁸ Brown, Daniel. *Under a flaming sky: the great Hinckley firestorm of 1894*. 63-81.

perfectly in their mind while reading. This moment- by- moment retelling of the day's events are not widely distributed and that is possibly the largest negative.⁴⁹ However, if these items were readily available to the public it may increase the likelihood of people having more knowledge about the Hinckley Fire. Personal stories are ways real and average people can relate to the raw emotions of a particular event or disaster in history. One way that this type of source is utilized is by compiling the accounts like the Reverend Wilkinson did with many of the survivors tales from that day. Although not as rich as reading the journal or diary entries themselves, these types of books are still needed for the complete picture of the day's events and the magnitude of the disaster. Overall, personal accounts could arguably be the most valuable of all the sources that can be retrieved and studied on a historical event.

The final and most visual of all the sources that help the remembrance of a tragic disaster such as this Hinckley Fire would have to be the monuments and museum that have been erected to honor those that perished. The positives of these monuments are that they are used to put an object or a place into the memory of this terrible event. These are places that will be forever there so that relatives and fellow Minnesotans will be able to look upon them and remember and pray for all the lives that were lost. It is fitting that monuments and other forms of physical sources of memory are the last to be made. They are often the reason why memory survives. Written words will be there for a long time. However, the sacred ground where this fire took over 400 lives and ultimately changed the landscape of a section of the state will always be a place to remember this devastating event that both horrified and united a state.

⁴⁹ *The Hinckley Fire*, 1962. Alice A. Nelson Manuscript/memoirs. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Throughout all of history there have been many ways that historians have been able to remember particular events, quotes, disasters, and most importantly people. In every case there is a drastic need for the memory of these items to be carried on to the next generation, for that is the importance of history. Many would say the old cliché “history repeats itself” and sometimes they would be correct. This is one of the key needs for the study of history. However, another critical elemental need lies in the fact that each historical event, moment in time, or person is remembered because of somebody’s memory. Without memory it would be quite hard to study the history of the world. For as the great Roman orator Cicero wrote, “Memory is the guardian and the treasury of all things.”⁵⁰ This quote epitomizes why historical events such as the disaster of the Great Hinckley Firestorm should be remembered and studied for all time. Not only are people today studying the disaster and its affects, but most importantly they are remembering the people and their fellow statesmen who survived or lost their lives that fateful day. It is important to remember the events of history, but it is also valuable and ultimately respectful to honor the memories of those that were personally affected by an event such as this Hinckley Fire.

To turn back to the aim of this paper it should be restated that this event gets greatly overshadowed or goes untold in the history of Minnesota. Although there are many types of sources available, there is still a lack of public knowledge of this tragedy that affected so much of Minnesota and took many lives as well. In the end, it needs to be asked: are we doing the victims and the survivors enough justice with the handful of sources and monuments? Are we honoring their memory enough over 100 years later? As

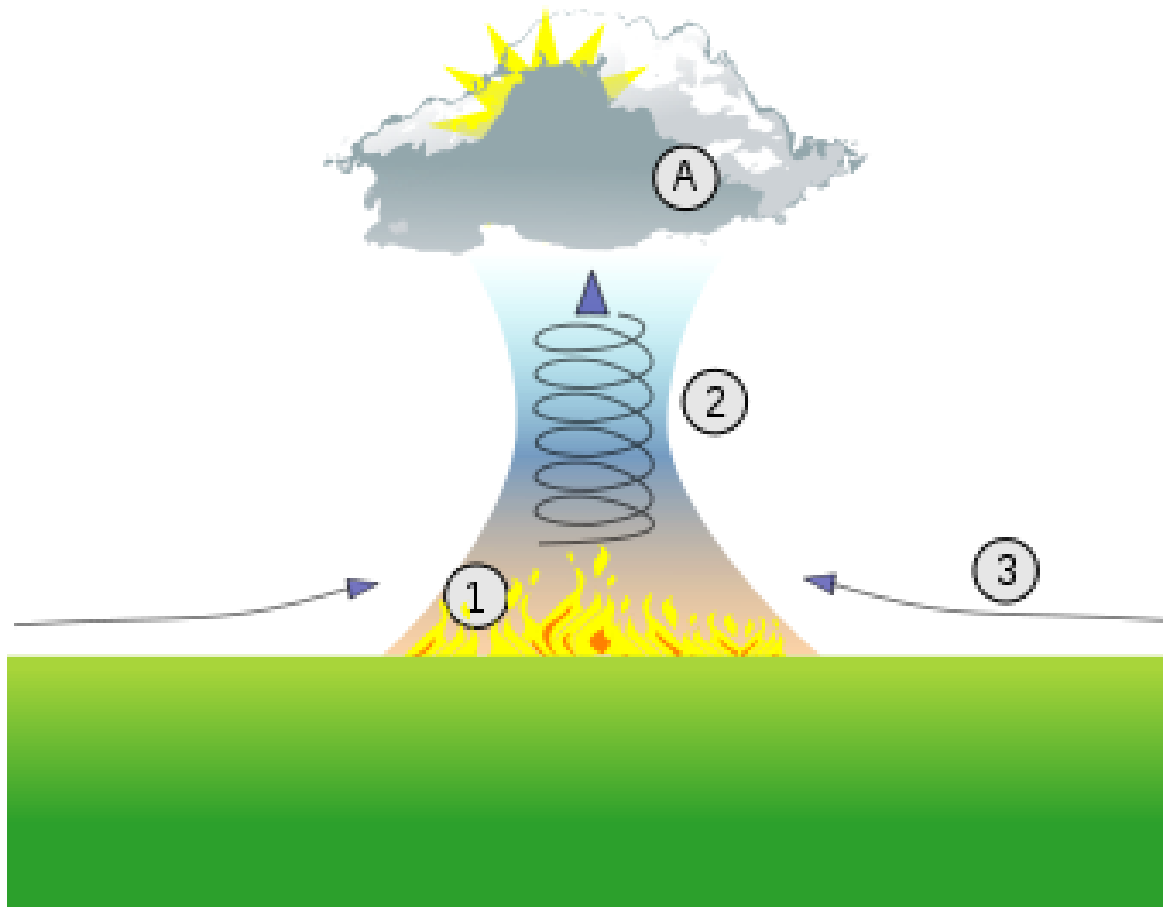
⁵⁰ Tullius Cicero , Marcus. "Memory Quotes - BrainyQuote." Famous Quotes at BrainyQuote. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/memory.html> (accessed December 12, 2011).

a student of history, and having studied for a few months this topic I would have to conclude that the memory of this event is not given enough attention today. Perhaps it is because we are focused more on a countries history that we miss our own states history. Why are we not remembering this event because of the three main themes that most of the sources addressed: visual images, heroes, and the regular people involved? Why there are not more dedications or avenues named after John C. Blair whose heroic bravery saved many lives that day? Why are personal accounts such as Alice Nelson Wilcox not retold as a pioneer of Minnesota during a terrifying event in the old west during the year of 1894? Finally, why are graphic imagery such as a fire that spans miles into the air and the charred bodies that were burnt that day not used as a harrowing reminder of nature's awesome power? As a student of history and a fellow Minnesotan I believe that we are slowly forgetting this important day in our states history. It may never be completely forgotten in the annals of Minnesota history, but the Great Hinckley Fire and those that were there that day deserve more attention in history than they get. In comparison there are far more books and sources on the Chicago Fire that occurred over 20 years before the Hinckley Fire. This fire was about a hundred times smaller and only destroyed 4 square miles and took around a hundred less lives. However, because it was a major city and the loss of property and the amount of those affected was so great, America history scholars have remembered and honored the memory of this fire. In sad comparison the Hinckley Fire is outmatched. In the coming years, as history continues to unfold around us it should be each states goal to remember and cherish the memory of their own states historical events and common people. Hopefully someday, long into the future, what little amount of sources there are on this subject will have survived so that

the memory of this great devastation that took the town of Hinckley will never be forgotten.

Artifacts

Artifact 1



3 Stages of Firestorms.

"Firestorm - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firestorm> (accessed December 12, 2011).

Artifact 2



Brennan Lumber Mill in old Hinckley

<http://www.macalester.edu/geography/mage/urban/hinckley/fire.htm>

Artifact 3



Fire men in the late 19th century

<http://www.macalester.edu/geography/mage/urban/hinckley/fire.htm>

Artifact 4



Where Hinckley is on the map.

Artifact 5

14

HE KNEW
WHAT HE WANTED
 and got it, because he adver-
 tised his "want" in the
GLOBE.

Daily

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TOWNS IN ASHES.

Hinckley, Mission Creek, Pokegama,
 Sandstone and Willow River De-
 stroyed by Forest Fires.

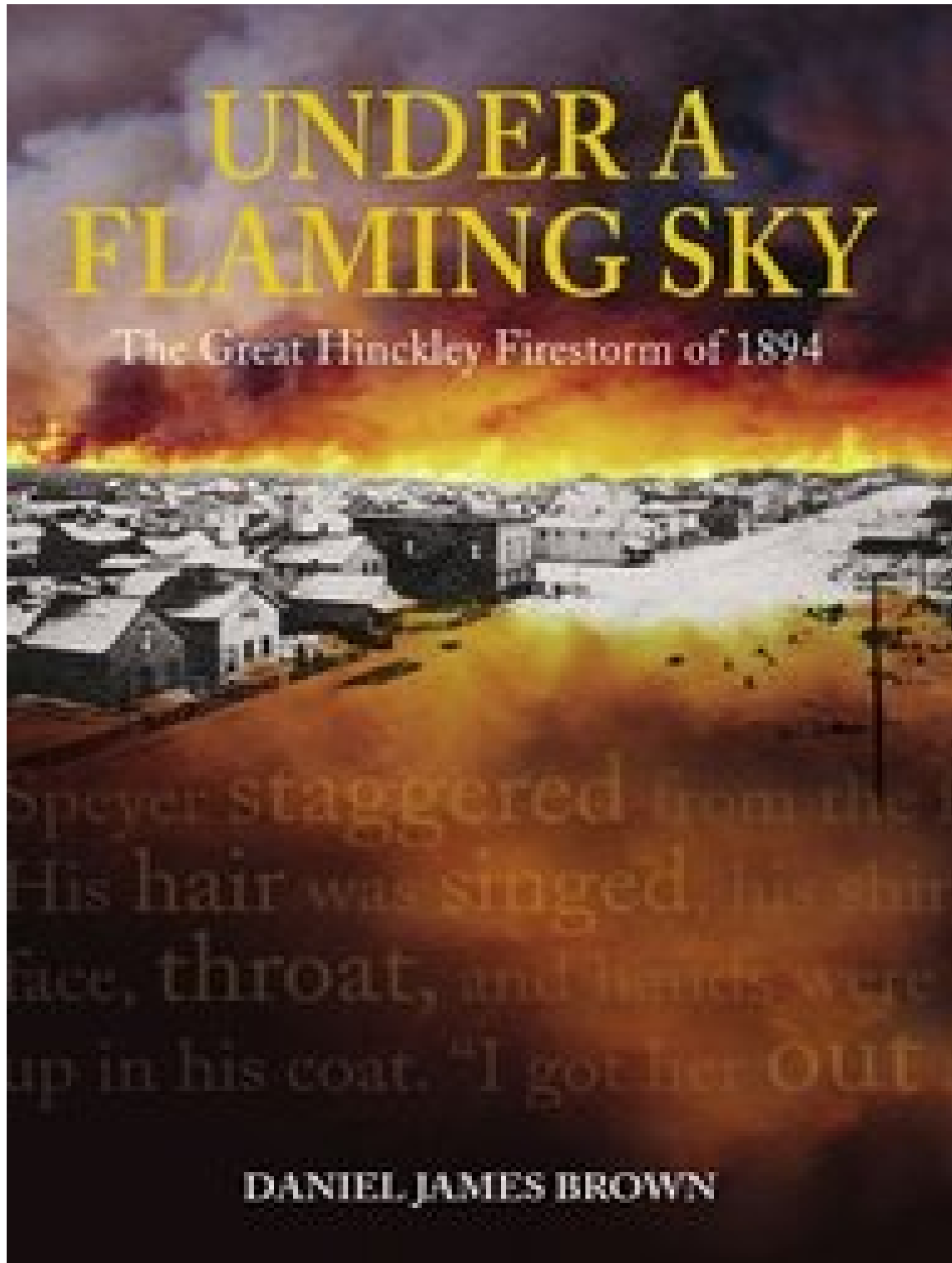
More Than Two Hundred People Lose

we would come across a
 man only saved by accident
 at a railway cut, where he
 really had been made
 stone thinking the fire
 grew thicker. Most of
 them suffocated. In one
 had saved their heads by
 hats and traps, only
 bodies as they burned.

Could have been
 "In one place we found
 one trap, a mother and I
 she had her three or four
 then ran down on them
 in great haste. Every at
 was behind them every
 the the way down he
 counted twenty-one and
 point we learned that the
 all would reach here. It
 seems the distance is

Clip from St. Paul Daily Globe

Artifact 6



Cover of 2nd edition of *Under a Flaming Sky*

Artifact 8

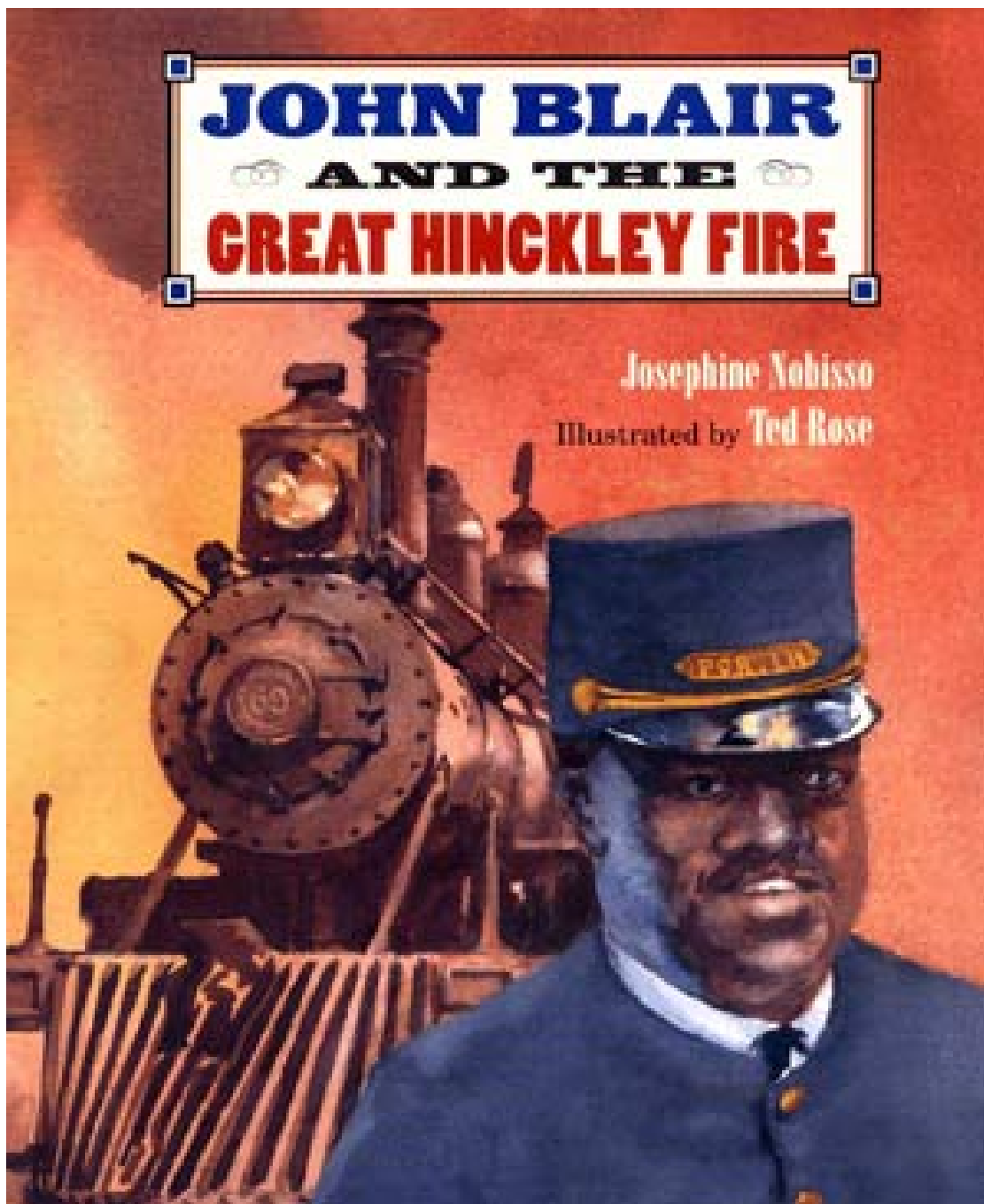
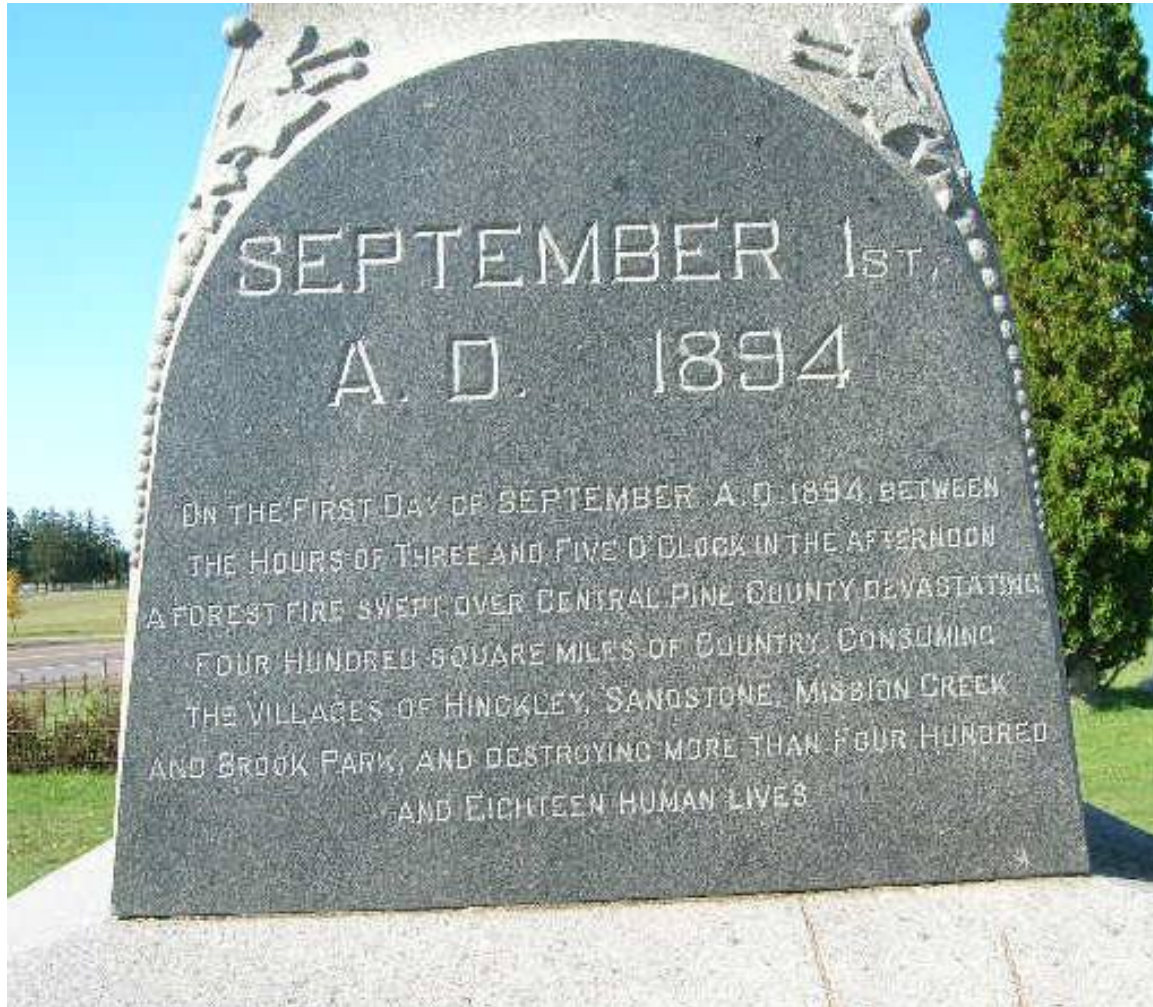


Illustration on cover of children's book about John Blair.

Artifact 9



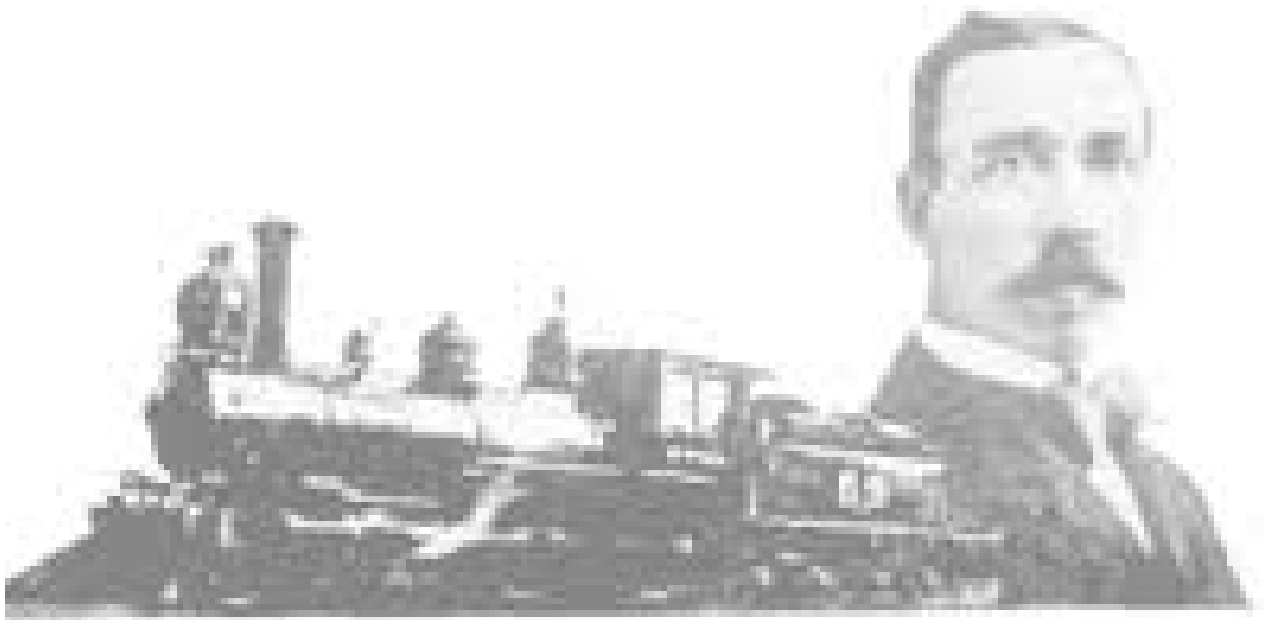
Memorial for lives lost

Artifact 10



Hinckley Fire Museum on former Depot site.

Artifact 11



James Root and his train engine.

Artifact 12



Hinckley after the fire.

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