

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

Sept. 5, 1881

Fire burns Michigan's thumb

After loggers slashed their way through the forest, they left behind stumps, wood scraps, sawdust and branches to dry under the sun. Farmers who wanted to clear the land of this debris found the simplest method was to set fires and attempt to contain them. This method proved disastrous on Sept. 5, 1881, when conditions were too dry and strong southwesterly winds spread fires across the thumb. Many survivors reported that the entire region was so overcome by smoke that it was difficult to breathe. The fire made refugees out of the thumb residents, who hastily retreated to the safety of Lake Huron. The fires raged on for three days until they were doused by a heavy rain.

They claimed anywhere from 125 to nearly 300 lives and burned more than a million acres of land in Huron and Sanilac counties. The bodies of a family of seven were found suffocated in a well where they had sought refuge. Newspapers reported that the villages of Anderson, Carson, Tyre, Richmondville, Charleston and Sanilac were destroyed. When news of the destruction reached the east coast, Clara Barton, famous for her humanitarian work during the Civil War, organized an aid campaign for the 15,000 people left homeless. They became the first people helped by a fledgling organization, the American Red Cross.