

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Nebraska Prairie Fire	Incident Date & Time: 01/27/1865
Incident Location: Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado south of the Platte River	Incident Size: Unknown
Types of resources involved: Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux Indian tribes, the U.S. Army, local territorial militia units, and civilian pioneers	# of Fatalities/injuries: Unknown
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: ➤ Fire is historically significant	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>The first settlers of Nebraska found a vast expanse of bluestem grass, which could be highly flammable. The danger was greatest during the late autumn of a dry season before the winter's snows or after the snow melted during a dry spring.</p> <p>The prairie fire was the idea of General Robert B. Mitchell, military commander for the District of Nebraska. Indians had sacked Julesburg, Colorado early in January of 1865 as retaliation for the horrific Sand Creek Massacre, which occurred in Colorado during November of 1864. A military expedition lasting from January 15 to January 21 failed to bring the perpetrators to battle. Frustrated by the militia's inability to catch the elusive warriors, Mitchell requested that every ranch and military outpost along the Platte River from Fort Kearny to Denver set the prairie ablaze at sundown on January 27.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>An account of the fire appears in Eugene F. Ware's book, <i>The Indian War of 1864</i>. According to Ware who was a Captain in the U.S. Army, "<i>The order was fully carried out. The country was fired for three hundred miles.</i>" Driven by a strong northwest wind, the scattered fires soon joined in a great conflagration. As Ware recalled, "<i>They rolled as a vast confluent sheet of flame to the south.</i>" From Fort Cottonwood (later Fort McPherson) Ware rode out to watch the impressive scene. Three days later the fire was still burning along the banks of the Arkansas River in Kansas and Colorado, and the flames reached the Texas Panhandle in some places. The entire section of Nebraska that lay south of the Platte River and west of Fort Kearny, along with much of the region to the south, was left blackened and desolate. The Indians managed to survive the fire itself, but the destruction of the grasslands drove away the game and met the goal of making the region temporarily unusable for the nomadic tribesmen.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>The dry vast expanse fine fuels, the multiple and concurrent points of ignition, combined with continuous strong northwest winds pushed the fire steadily to the southeast. While it would have burnt spots and fingers rather than blackening the entire area, the expanse of territory this fire impacted is almost unimaginable today.</p>	
Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:	
Not applicable	
Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:	
<p>The use of fire as a tool of war was not new to the U.S. Army or the Indians, this wouldn't be the first or the last documented weaponization of fire in the American West. All of the combatants on the west's high plains and prairies used fire on occasion as a tactical or strategic weapon. For all of those who fought in the American West in the 19th century, fire could be used to aid attacks or retreats, to screen movements, to create confusion and to eliminate crucial grazing grounds for both horse and buffalo.</p>	
Links to more information on this incident:	
<p>https://history.nebraska.gov/publications_section/prairie-fires/</p> <p>Book: ➤ The Indian War of 1864 ~ by Eugene F. Ware</p>	
This summary page was proudly provided by: Jim Cook & Kurt La Rue	October 2023

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Estimation of the the Nebraska Prairie Fire based on the first hand account of Eugene F. Ware

