William L. Rogers
Writer/Photographer

Measuring The Loss: Legacy of the Tower Complex Fires
By William L. Rogers

The Soudan Fire Tower rises seventy feet above a rocky knob just south of Minnesota Highway 1.

Despite the wet spring of 1992, warm days and high winds succeed in drying loose grasses and low brush across the Arrowhead. The aspen trunks are wet with the gold and green of spring, but the balsam's dry, gray bark peels away like paper birch.

Eleven miles southwest, a sixty-foot aspen yields to 50mph winds and leans into the power lines. Within minutes, red-hot cinders fall to the dry grass under the lines.

Three miles East, another stretch of wind-dried grass takes flame along Saari Road. Fanned by the steady winds, two more plumes are added to the Soudan Tower report.

Crews already working a lightning fire between Tower and Ely are notified and volunteers called out.

By two o'clock, a forest steward's nightmare is well under way. The dry grasses are consumed instantly. But not before the balsam bark ignites and sends the flames into their thirty foot canopy. The balsam's high volatility creates a rolling inferno in the wind and generates enough heat to roast the newly emerging aspen buds twenty feet overhead.

For seven hours the wind pushes the infernos northeast, searing the surface of the damp soil and blackening everything in its path.

At the height of the blaze, the 300 firefighters include volunteers, DNR crews, and US Forest Service teams from Montana, Northeast Minnesota and Northern Wisconsin. All working to contain the windblown nightmare.

At sunset, a cool front crawls in from the northwest and rain begins to fall allowing firefighters to contain it with breaks.

Over the next twenty-six hours, two full inches of rain have fallen, the flames are gone, and the devastation overwhelms a community of stewards.

One of those is Leroy Lempia. Leroy manages eighty acres of what was once aspen, jackpine, black spruce, poplar and balsam.

"It was Mother's Day, Sunday. I was in town to take my wife to lunch," Leroy remembers. "The first I heard of it was when I called my wife at work and they told me there was a fire at my place. She'd already gone out to help."

"When I got there, there was a small pumper watering down the roof and trees by the house," Leroy said. "The fire burned up to the edge of our yard and then went right around us. The heat crystallized the curtains in the house, but it didn't burn."

The high winds pushed the fire through the grass so fast that many houses with yards or fields never got hot enough to burn. Those with trees close to the house were not so lucky.

Walking through Leroy's eighty acres, he talks about how the fire raced through the balsam and killed the aspen. This isn't an easy walk, he doesn't come up here much anymore. The salvagers have taken most everything mature enough to be of any value. All that's left are tall, thin aspen and the blackened balsam trunks with sheets of bark peeling in the wind.

The first year was clean-up time. The Tower Complex community was busy with salvage of 7,400 acres of burned timber. Last year, with the help of the USDA agriculture conservation program, Leroy planted 4,000 black spruce and Norway pine. He will plant 2000 more this year.

"I don't expect to see much green up here for a few years," says Leroy. "There'll be some ground cover and spruce, but it's going to be a while before things really get going. After the harvesters and windfall, I guess I'll be left with 80 acres of black spikes."

William L. Rogers
Writer/Photographer

Regeneration is a slow but positive process. In the 18 years since the nearby 1976 fire, aspen have grown to 25 feet and jackpine are thick and healthy. But the personal loss from the fire overwhelms the monetary loss and replanting efforts.

The Lempia family has nutured this forest for 45 years, but Leroy admits, "I don't expect to see things back like they were in my lifetime."

Leroy is still measuring the loss. "The roar of the wind in those tall pines is something you just don't hear anymore."