

FYR BALL

Ephraim, Wisconsin



AT DUSK, this year's Fyr Bal Chieftain arrives by boat in Eagle Harbor, flanked by boys in Viking horns. A procession follows, trekking from the docks in the tiny village of Ephraim, Wisconsin, up the shoreline, where a crowd rings a tall lumber teepee. The Chieftain raises a torch to the pyre, and almost instantly, flames climb more than 20 feet, lashing into the darkening sky.

The combustion sets off a chain reaction. Along the shore, citizens begin lighting their own bonfires. Within minutes, the coast is a glowing horseshoe. Even the sky sparkles with fireworks launched from a distant barge.

Fyr Bal (pronounced fear ball) pays homage to the village's roots. Centuries ago, Scandinavian fire festivals celebrated the end of winter and the return of longer,

sunnier days. For 55 years, Ephraim's version of the solstice tradition has preserved the flame, without the human or animal sacrifices. As the timber disintegrates into ash, legend says, so goes the winter witch.

Ephraim's official population is only 288. Fyr Bal visitors swell that number beyond 2,500. But this is Door County, one of Wisconsin's busiest tourist hubs. By July, cars will crowd the streets, and out-of-towners will clamor for cherry pie. So in a way, the festival (scheduled for June 15 this year) marks one last moment of relative peace. As night closes in, the entire village is illuminated by the flickering glow. The reflection even seems to set the water aflame around a handful of boaters and kayakers, drifting quietly toward the promise of warmth ahead.