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Did the Cow Do It?

A New Look at the Cause of the Great Chicago Fire

by Richard F. Bales

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"One dark night, when people were in bed,

Mrs. O' Leary lit a lantern in her shed,

The cow kicked it over, winked its eye, and said,

There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight."

What do we know about the Great Chicago Fire?

Historians agree that on Sunday evening, October 8, 1871, the Chicago Fire did indeed start in the barn of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick and Catherine O'Leary. While the blaze ironically spared the O'Leary home, located on the city's West Side at 137 De Koven Street, much of the rest of Chicago was not so fortunate. Before the fire died out in the early morning of Tuesday, October 10, it had cut a swath through Chicago approximately three and one-third square miles in size. Property valued at $192,000,000 was destroyed, 100,000 people were left homeless, and 300 people lost their lives.

In November and December of 1871 the Board of Police and Fire Commissioners held an inquiry. The purpose of this investigation was to determine, among other things, the cause of the fire. The board interviewed fifty people, including Mr. and Mrs. O'Leary. A shorthand reporter took down over 1100 pages of handwritten testimony. Despite all this, the board members failed to ascertain the fire's cause, stating merely in their report that "whether it originated from a spark blown from a chimney on that windy night, or was set on fire by human agency, we are unable to determine."

So did Mrs. O'Leary and her cow cause the fire, or is this merely a nineteenth-century urban legend? An analysis of the original transcripts of this inquiry, 1871 Chicago real estate records, and other period source materials provide powerful evidence that the

latter may be the case. Furthermore, these same records provide a fascinating theory as to who really did cause the fire.

Learn More About the Great Chicago Fire:

- Read about the exoneration of **Mrs. O'Leary**.
- Was **Daniel "Peg Leg" Sullivan** the real culprit?
- Was **Dennis Regan** an accomplice?
- Did Sullivan lie during the inquiry? Examine the **diagram** of the O'Leary property and surrounding area.
- Look at a photograph of the **O'Leary house**.
- Read Mrs. O'Leary's actual **testimony** before the Board of Police and Fire Commissioners.
- See how 19th century artists portrayed **Mrs. O'Leary**.
- See the firemen fighting the **fire** at the O'Leary barn.
- See the possible **cause** of the fire.
- To read more about the Chicago Fire, see the **suggested reading list**.
- Learn more about the **author**.
- Read about **my new book on the cause of the fire**.

Site designed and maintained by Michael Bales

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www.greatchicagofire.org

THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE & THE WEB OF MEMORY

SEARCH

The Great Chicago Fire

The Web of Memory

The Great Chicago Fire & the Web of Memory consists of two main parts. The first part, titled The Great Chicago Fire, includes five chronologically organized sections that together present a history of the fire. The sections of the second part, The Web of Memory, examine six ways in which the fire has been remembered: eyewitness accounts, contemporary journalism and illustrations, imaginative forms such as literature and art, the legend of Mrs. O'Leary and her cow, fire souvenirs of many different kinds, and formal commemorations and exhibitions. Each of the sections has three integrated components: thematic galleries of images, a library of texts, and an interpretive essay.

The Great Chicago Fire & the Web of Memory also contains a Touring the Fire section that revisits the history of fifty-four different sites in Chicago today, called Landmarks, that have a connection to the fire. Individual Landmarks are organized into tours that are arranged geographically. In addition, there is an 1871 Timeline that recalls events in Chicago life during the year of the fire.

(http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/chicago-fire/id469281174?ls=1&mt=8)

Available on App Sto

Throughout the site there are several interactive features. Virtually every image can be enlarged greatly for more detailed viewing. There are also three-dimensional images (a red/blue anaglyph viewer is required) in the Media Event section, and two fire songs performed by soprano Patrice Michaels in the Fanning the Flames section. Both of these, as well as the Timeline, are among the Special Features.

Almost all of the images here can be purchased from the Chicago History Museum. For more information, go to http://chicagohistory.org/research/rightsreproductions (http://chicagohistory.org/research/rightsreproductions) or send an e-mail to RightsRepro@chicagohistory.org (mailto:RightsRepro@chicagohistory.org). Please be prepared to identify items by their ichi number, which is indicated in the images that are available for sale. The artifacts and texts included here represent only a small fraction of the Chicago History Museum's holdings relating to the fire.

www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/chicago/peopleevents/e_fire.html

People & Events: The Great Fire of 1871

In the hundred days before October 8, 1871, not much more than an inch of rain had fallen in Chicago. The city at that time was built of wood, and not just the buildings. The roads and sidewalks were essentially planks laid down over mud, all having dried out over a parched summer. As autumn turned, dry leaves covered brown lawns. In preparation for winter, hay was stockpiled for the animals, and wood and kerosene were on-hand for heating and cooking.

"The absence of rain for three weeks [has] left everything in so flammable a condition that a spark might set a fire which would seep from end to end of the city," reported the *Chicago Tribune* in the Sunday edition.

A strong, steady wind was blowing off the prairie from the Southwest.

All that was needed was a spark.

The volunteer fire department had been replaced in 1858 by a full-time professional corps. The new fire department requested new hydrants, larger water mains, more men, two fireboats to patrol the river, spanned by wooden bridges. Another recommendation was for a building inspection department that would point out the many four- or five-story business buildings that were shoddily constructed "firetraps," according to the *Tribune*. The city refused all of these requests, fearing that higher taxes would restrict the growth of business.

The 185 firefighters in the city battled blazes every day in October 1871, culminating, they thought, in a 17-hour battle to control a fire that burned four city blocks. That fire began on Saturday, October 7, and the fire department did not rest until Sunday morning.

The success of the fire department was predicated on their ability to spot a fire quickly and control it before it spread. On October 8, at about 9 pm, the watchman on duty saw a fire on the west side of the city. The alarm went out, locating the fire on a grid. As he continued to watch, however, he realized that he had mislocated the blaze by about a mile.

The exhausted defenses of the city were coalescing around the wrong location.

On the evening of October 8, 1871, at 137 De Koven Street on Chicago's West Side, a neighbor of Catherine O'Leary saw flames licking up from the O'Leary cow barn.

Within an hour, a block of poor shanties was destroyed and the fire, carried by the wind, began to move north and east, toward downtown. As factories and warehouses caught fire, they fueled ever higher flames. The heat increased and rose, forcing cooler air down. Then, the superheated columns of air began to give themselves spin and create what former mayor William Ogden described as "the fiercest Tornado of Wind ever known to blow here." Although the atmospheric wind was only about 30 miles an hour, these whirling columns of fire blew much faster, ripping the roofs off buildings and flinging them hundreds of yards into the air.

Chunks of flaming debris were spewed across the Chicago River and by midnight, the South Side was in flames. Just a few hours later, another chunk of flaming wood was tossed across the river and landed on a kerosene tanker on the North Side. The residential, wood-constructed North Side was doomed.

Wood burned, stone was reduced to dust or collapsed and crumbled into rubble. Even iron and steel melted. The Palmer House destroyed before officially opening; Marshall Field's store blackened; the McCormick Reaper Works consumed, Ogden's rail yards and lumberyards tinder before the mighty holocaust. A hundred thousand were left homeless.

Trees exploded. Crazed horses flailed wildly, dogs ran around in circles, rats fled out of the wooden sidewalks and were crushed by the stampede of humans. Pigeons were sucked into the whirls of flame.

People fled. The prison was unlocked so that the criminals might survive the night. The rich hired carriage drivers to spirit away their belongings; if they were lucky, they found the drivers and their possessions again. The poor grabbed

one or two precious items and -- as often as not -- abandoned them as they frantically sought shelter.

The heat seared through their backs as they ran, roasted their lungs as they tried to draw breath, and seemed to leap ahead, blocking every avenue of escape. Eventually, much of the population found itself at the lake, or in the lake, wading up to waist height to escape the heat and sparks. At the lake that night, factory workers and prostitutes, butchers and merchants, industrialists and the working poor were united in their misfortune.

The *New York Tribune* reported, "Since yesterday, Chicago has gained another title to prominence. Unequalled before in enterprise and good fortune, she is now unapproachable in calamity."

On the morning of the tenth, rain finally began to fall and the flames were at last extinguished. At least three hundred people -- one in a thousand -- were dead. Over 70,000 buildings and 73 miles of streets were destroyed.

Almost as soon as the ashes settled, and families were reunited, the power brokers of Chicago went back to work, rebuilding their city. State Street was cleared for Potter Palmer's new city plan, and there were plenty of opportunities for architects like Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, Daniel Burnham and John Root, and William Le Baron Jenney to build the first city of skyscrapers.

Although the city ignored all of the fire department's warnings or recommendations, and even though downtown Chicago was revealed to be a Potemkin village with façades just one brick thick, and though the industrialists had polluted the river with so much grease and oil that it caught fire, the blame for the disaster was pointed squarely at a poor, Irish woman, a newcomer to the city. The rumor that Catherine O'Leary's cow had knocked over a lamp in her barn was invented by reporters who later admitted to their slander. It was too late for Catherine O'Leary, however. She became a recluse, leaving her home only when she had to, until her death in 1895.

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