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The Great CHICAGO FIRE

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HISTORY



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A terror-stricken mob jams the Randolph Street Bridge, with the fire literally hot on their heels. *Public domain*

THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE

DON HOLLWAY TAKES A BURNING LOOK AT THE CONFLAGRATION THAT DESTROYED, AND GAVE REBIRTH TO, AMERICA'S SECOND CITY

Mrs. O'Leary's milk cow gets all the blame, but it would only have been cruel irony for the meatpacking capital of the United States to be destroyed by an ornery heifer. In fact, a calf saved the one supposed witness to the disaster's spark from a fiery death. No one is sure how it started, but nobody forgets how it ended: the 1871 Great Chicago Fire.

TINDERBOX CITY

The wonder is that the boomtown of the Midwest, then less than 40 years old, had not gone up in flames already. Its most elegant buildings – the Chamber of Commerce, opera houses and theaters, hotels

and the Cook County Courthouse – were literally a façade, a magnificent front for what was really nothing more than a clapboard cowboy town with 55 miles of wood-paved streets and over 650 miles of plank walkways. The *Chicago Tribune*, regarding its building at Dearborn and Madison as fireproof, warned of the city's “miles of fire traps, pleasing to the eye, looking substantial, but all sham and shingle.”

In 1870, Chicago had suffered almost 600 fires, and in the drought-stricken summer of 1871, with only 2½ inches of rain after July, even more. Up to seven times a day, the bell in the courthouse tower rang out fire alarms. On Saturday night, October 7th, a blaze broke out in a lumber mill

on Canal Street, in a working-class West Side neighborhood. Though fought by all 29 of the city fire companies, in 16 hours, it put four of them out of action, consumed four square blocks and caused \$750,000 in damage. The last of the firemen had only returned to the station the following evening when they were called to another blaze, just blocks from the first, at 137 DeKoven Street, near Jefferson.

FLASHPOINT

In the section of the city then called “The West Division”, to the west of the South Branch of the Chicago River, Irish immigrants Patrick and Catherine O’Leary and their five children had gone to bed early. Both parents worked, Patrick as a laborer and Catherine as a milkmaid, enabling them to build an addition on their cottage, rent out the front and build a barn out back for their five cows, a calf and a horse. “I had two tons of coal and two tons of hay [in the barn and adjoining shed],” Catherine would later testify. “I had everything that I wanted in for the winter.”

The evening was unseasonably warm, with a hot, dry wind gusting in off the prairie. Daniel Sullivan, a one-legged wagoner who lived across and down DeKoven, later testified he was sitting in front of his own neigh-



Panicked lodgers toss their belongings from windows as the fire bears down Dearborn St. toward the Tremont Hotel. *Public domain*

bor’s house when he saw flames coming out of the O’Leary barn. In his deposition, signed with an “X”, he swore he shouted the alarm, ran to the barn and tried to get the animals out, but got his peg leg caught in the floor and only escaped by hanging onto the neck of a bolting calf. By the time the O’Learys awoke, their barn was already engulfed.

ALARM

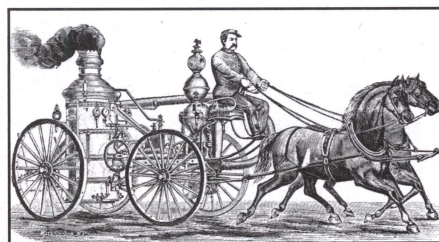
A mile and a half away, 100 feet up in the courthouse tower cupola, a watchman saw smoke rising from the West Division. He dismissed it as still-smoldering embers from the Saturday night fire, which by ill luck was in the same line of sight. Within moments, however, he saw flames

leaping skyward and ordered an alarm call sent, but to the wrong location, a mile from the O’Leary barn. When he realized the mistake, his young assistant declined to send the correct signal, to avoid confusing firefighters. One of the first firemen on the scene described it as “a nasty fire, but not a particularly bad one, and with the help of two more engines, we could have knocked it cold.”

FUEL FOR THE FIRE

By then, the heat was already so intense that the few engines on hand could not throw enough water to stop the fire. “Turn in a second alarm!” Chief Fire Marshal Robert A. Williams told his men. “This is going to spread!”

The fire quickly leaped Taylor



Old-time fire engines burned coal to create steam pressure, and were themselves a source of flying embers as they raced through the streets. *Public domain*

The O’Leary home at 137 DeKoven St., Chicago. The fire broke out in the barn to the left. *Public domain*

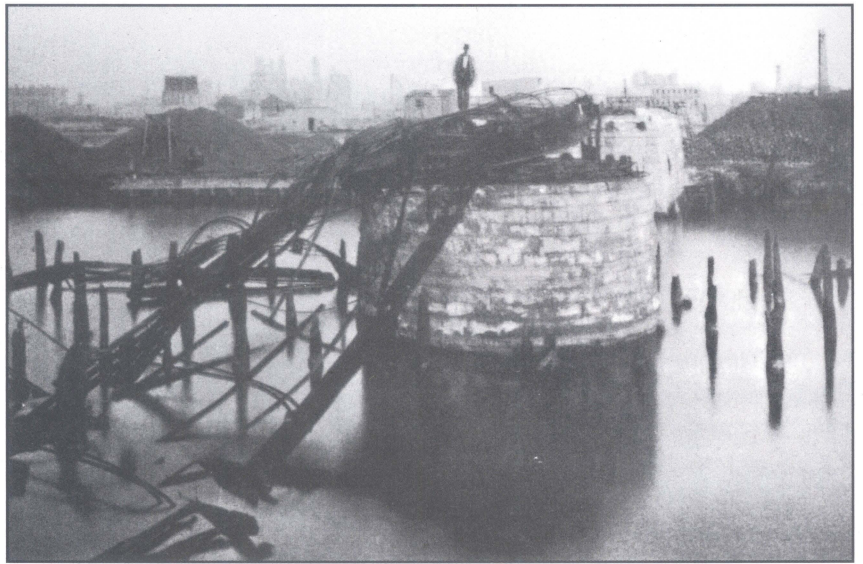
Street and, propelled by the prairie wind, advanced on two fronts, north up Jefferson and east toward Lake Michigan, through the wooden heart of the West Division. Reporter Joseph Chamberlin of the *Evening Post* described the shantytown as “thickly studded with one-story frame dwellings, cow stables, pigsties, corncribs, sheds innumerable, every wretched building within four feet of its neighbor, and everything of wood – not a brick or a stone in the whole area.... Nothing could stop that conflagration there. It must sweep on until it reached a broad street, and then, everybody said, it would burn itself out.”

EVERYTHING IN ITS PATH

So far, the fire had fed on the prairie wind out of the south. Now it began to breathe on its own, its hot updraft drawing in fresh air underneath with increasing force. The sucking flames rose hundreds of feet, raining embers blocks away. Firefighters trying to contain the blaze found it breaking out behind them and were forced to flee. By 10:30PM, the fire was out of control.

Across the river in the heart of the city, Chicagoans leaning from their windows and gathering on street corners could smell smoke and see the ominous glow in the southwest. Visiting New York State Assemblyman Alexander Frear was told, “It must be a damn big fire this time; you can’t put out a high wind with water.” He recalled the hot breeze rising, the streets beginning to fill with concerned citizens and, not long afterward, embers drifting down like glowing snowflakes. “All I could distinctly hear was ‘burning on both sides of the river.’”

Not even the South Branch of the Chicago River had held back



TOP: The twisted, melted girders of the Van Buren Street Bridge lie in the South Branch of the Chicago River. Burned and fallen bridges blocked boat traffic from escape. *Public domain* BOTTOM: Hundreds of Chicagoans trapped on the Government Pier used water from Lake Michigan to keep the flames at bay. *Public domain*

the blaze. When the warehouses, lumberyards and coal yards along its bank blazed up, cinders lofted across the water, and at about 11:30PM, fire broke out in the South Side, with nothing between it and downtown Chicago.

HEART OF THE CITY

When the fire advanced between the river and the lake into downtown, the formerly empty streets filled with terrified citizens. The financial district on LaSalle Street, the market district on State, the department stores, grand hotels, theaters and opera houses, all went up one after another.

Panicked throngs choked the Van Buren, Madison and Randolph Street bridges, seeking escape to the west – at least, until the bridges caught fire and dropped into the river, trapping riverboats until they, too, caught fire.

FIRESTORM

Within hours, some 20 blocks – 500 buildings – were burning at once. The *Tribune* building withstood the flames better than most, but not forever, “...fire-proof,” as one citizen put it, “until the date of its destruction.” At about 2:30AM, the courthouse tower collapsed, the five-ton bell



In this 1872 lithograph, the firestorm destroys Chicago and even sets ships in the river and along the waterfront alight with drifting embers. *Public domain*

falling to earth with a clang said to be heard a mile away, tolling the death of a city.

"Nobody endeavored to stay the flames now. A mob of men and women, all screaming and shouting, ran about wildly," wrote Frear, remembering "...some of the strangest and saddest scenes it has ever been my misfortune to witness. I saw a woman kneeling in the street with a crucifix held up before her and the skirt of her dress burning while she prayed. We had barely passed when a runaway truck dashed her to the ground.... Then ensued a scene that was beyond description."

The fire ate across the State Street bridge, over the Main Stem of the river into the North Side, advancing on a front fifteen blocks or more across. The luxurious mansions of the residential district withstood destruction no better than shantytown shacks. As the fire drove rich and poor alike before it, civility and civilization broke down. Surging crowds of people, horses, and wagons filled with last worldly possessions fled before the wall of flame. Thieves and looters smashed their way into deserted storefronts and homes to grab what they could, fight over their loot in the streets and ultimately leave it, lest it drag them down before the fire. Stories would later circulate of vigilante

justice, of accused arsonists hung from lampposts and left to burn. Hundreds of people crowded onto the Government Pier or waded up to their necks into Lake Michigan, where they could do nothing, but watch the waterfront be consumed.

The last chance for the city came in the early hours. *Tribune* editor Thomas White remembered, "The city Waterworks, with their four great pumping engines, were in a straight line with the fire and wind...priceless machinery covered by a wooden roof."



One of the first priorities for banks and businesses after the fire was to dig through the rubble, recover their safes and learn if they really were fireproof. Some of Gen. Phil Sheridan's troops guard the strongbox at right. *Public domain*

At about three in the morning, the water mains lost pressure. Chicago was doomed.

The wind, roaring in at the foot of the fire, whirled upward into a white-hot tornado. Hurricane-force winds tore the roofs off houses and flung burning furniture hundreds of feet. The city became a huge furnace, hot enough at the core to melt glass and pig iron like candle wax, split granite building blocks, and crumble limestone and marble to dust.

DAWN OF DESTRUCTION

Throughout the night, the firestorm marched inexorably north. At six o'clock Monday morning, Mayor Robert B. Morrison sent telegrams to neighboring cities: CHICAGO IS IN FLAMES. SEND YOUR WHOLE DEPARTMENT TO HELP US. Entire fire companies from as far away as Milwaukee and Pittsburgh entrained for Chicago, knowing they could not arrive in time.

The sun rising over Lake Michigan barely showed through the pall of smoke rising from hun-



LEFT: Amid the desolation, an enterprising businessman takes advantage of a hungry public by rolling his lunch wagon into town. The street was more crowded than it looks; the ghostly figures on the walks are pedestrians rendered semi-visible by the time-lapse effect of slow 1870s photographic exposure. *Public domain* RIGHT: One of the first businesses to spring up in the ruins was a thriving trade in surviving household goods and "fire relics": bits of glass and iron melted into fantastic shapes by the fire, highly sought as souvenirs by both visitors and natives. *Public domain*



dreds of square blocks of obliterated city, a path of destruction eventually a mile across. Publisher Alfred Sewell would remember it as "a horrible scene.... Heaps of ruins, and here and there, a standing wall, as far as the eye could reach, and far beyond, for a stretch of four miles...one vast scene of desolation."

North of the river, there was nothing to stop the Great Chicago Fire from burning all the way to Lake Superior, and all day Monday, it did just that. Those who could, escaped to the west. That evening, those who couldn't — some 30,000 refugees with nowhere else to go — crowded into 230-acre lakeside Lincoln Park, trapped with their backs to the water.

GRAVEYARD

Until recently, part of Lincoln Park had been a city cemetery. As the great fire closed in on the packed refugees, it appeared about to become a graveyard again; once its trees and dry grass and wooden grave markers took light, everyone in it would be dead.

It's said that a Methodist congregation knelt together to pray. Perhaps they did more than

anyone else to halt the fire, for at about 11PM, a miracle occurred. Out of the darkness and smoke, which had so far precipitated nothing but embers and cinders, fell rain. From a drizzle, it grew, and by 3AM Tuesday, it had grown into a steady downfall, putting an end to both the drought and the fire.

PHOENIX OF THE MIDWEST

Isolated spots would continue to burn for days, but with fire crews arriving hourly, the holocaust was

contained. By then, 17,500 buildings and nearly 75 miles of street were gone. Almost 100,000 people were homeless. About 120 bodies were collected in a makeshift morgue in a former stable; a like number were never found, lost in the lake or rivers or utterly cremated, their ashes scattered to the winds. The living immediately went to work rebuilding their city and their lives. Gen. Philip Sheridan brought in army troops to quell looting and assist in reconstruction. Food and supplies arrived by train from across the



The Chicago Water Tower (left) and Chicago Avenue Pumping Station rise above the destruction near Pine St., near North Michigan Ave. The water tower still stands as a city landmark. *Public domain*

country. Tent cities and shantytowns sprang up on the ruins, but only temporarily. By the end of the year, downtown Chicago was a city of 8,000 new buildings, with 500 of stone and fireproof brick. Like a phoenix, the city arose from its own ashes.

BLAME

The fire had not yet burned out when the *Evening Journal* ran a limited edition claiming Catherine O'Leary's cow had kicked over a lantern while being milked. Through repeated retellings, fiction became fact. Incredibly, the O'Leary home, to the south of their barn, was saved as the fire blew northward, but when Patrick and Catherine sold the property in 1879, the house was demolished. On their former lot now stands the Chicago Fire Academy, with a cross on a first-floor hallway marking the actual

location of the infamous barn. The fact that Pegleg Sullivan was first on the scene has led many historians to implicate him in the fire, however accidentally. An investigation by the Board of Police and Fire Commissioners never determined the exact cause of the fire, possibly being more concerned with repairing the reputation of the fire department itself. In 1997, the Chicago City Council voted to exonerate Catherine O'Leary of all guilt in the matter. The real cause of the blaze was never determined. In fact, several great fires sprang up around Lake Michigan that same day, among them the Great Peshtigo Fire north of Green Bay, Wisconsin, which burned an area twice the size of Rhode Island and killed up to 2,500 people. That's the most deaths by fire in United States history, but is still overshadowed by the Great Chicago Fire. *LM*

FURTHER READING

The Great Chicago Fire, edited by David Lowe.

Great Disasters: Dramatic True Stories of Nature's Awesome Powers. Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 1989. ISBN 089577321X

Lowe, David, and Mabel McIlvaine. The Great Chicago Fire: In Eyewitness Accounts and 70 Contemporary Photographs and Illustrations. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1979. ISBN 0486237710

Murphy, Jim. The Great Fire. New York: Scholastic, 1995. ISBN 0590472674

Frequent contributor **DON HOLLWAY** recently wrote in our pages about WWI figures Manfred von Richthofen and Mata Hari. His article on the history of the guitar will appear in a future issue.

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