

Mrs. O'Leary Cowed

Over 600 fires blazed in Chicago in 1870-71, some quite "great" and around twenty-seven the first week of October, 1871. Months of drought had seen only four inches of rain and none the weeks prior to October 8th. A city ordinance forbade the use of open flame candles or lamps where hay or straw was stored. Nevertheless, most fires began in barns.

A "great" fire near the property of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary the night of October 7th, had burned to the ground most buildings in a five-block area. Roughly half of Chicago's firemen fought this Saturday-night fire well into the night that became Sunday the 8th. It was typical to conclude "great" fires such as this one with a good drunk. Fatigued firemen lacking a night's sleep were unprepared for the infamous immediate fire.

Catherine O'Leary ran a business selling milk and owned five cows. Rumor, quickly turned into gospel, set forth that Mrs. O'Leary's cow started "The Great Fire" by kicking a lighted lantern in the O'Leary barn. But that night, the O'Learys had retired early, their neighbors had an Irish party, and Pegleg Sullivan, lingered outside the party listening to its fiddle music. It was he who pointed out the fire's location and yelled the "Fire!" alert.

The firehouse watchman on duty, ordered the fire-alarm operator, William Brown, to sound the alarm for Box 342 which was incorrect. Aware of his error, he ordered Brown to sound a corrected alarm but Brown decided that would cause confusion to firemen already rushing in the wrong direction. Yet his decision could well be the "cause" of the city's immense destruction. Prompt response had been credited for success in putting out the other 600 fires before they spread out of control. The spread of flames, starting in O'Leary's barn or not, could definitely have been contained had the response been correct and prompt. Brown was not cited for his conduct during Chicago's destruction, and seemingly not even questioned, though sightseers and reporters swarmed the site of the O'Leary barn for weeks.

Newspaper accounts of investigations regarding the causes circulated, indifferent to a photo which shows the O'Leary house quite untouched by fire. Reportedly no one interviewed Brown, Sullivan, or Mrs. O'Leary who had made a sworn statement supported by affidavits denying the charges. An official inquiry did verify that Mrs. O'Leary, her husband, and their three children were in bed when the flames first burst. Notwithstanding, the rumor, never substantiated by fact, spread throughout the world similar to an uncontrolled fire.

As years passed, Mrs. O'Leary continued to be tormented relentlessly by the press and meddlesome spectators. She and her family moved away from their home. Still, each year until her death, on the anniversary of the fire, reporters would besiege her house and attempt to get a statement from her. Though she never agreed to speak with them nor permit herself to be photographed, bogus interviews and pictures of her milking the supposed cow, appeared in numerous publications. Some wrote she was an Irish drunk who started the fire because she was taken off welfare, a program she never was on. As

written abuse of her and of journalistic truth prevailed, Mrs. O'Leary became a virtual recluse who died in shame in 1895.

In 1900, Michael Ahern confessed that he and two male co-reporters, James Haynie and John English, had concocted the "cow-kicking-over-the-lantern" hypothesis during their investigative reporting after they had seen a broken kerosene lamp in the O'Leary barn.

In 1997, a resolution of the Chicago City Council, acquitted Mrs. O'Leary and her cow from the cause of The Great Fire. Albeit neither the men responsible nor the reporters who altered the news, have been duly accused... yet. But accusations can loom until the cows come home.

Sources: *City of the Century*, Donald L. Miller; *The Great Fire: Chicago 1871*, Herman Kogan and Robert Cromie; *Chicago and the Great Conflagration*, Elias Colbert and Everett Chamberlin; *Smoldering City*, Karen Sawislak.