



MONTGOMERY MESSENGER

The Newsletter of the Residents of Montgomery Place Retirement Community
5550 South Shore Drive, Chicago, Illinois, 60637

October 2018, Vol. 28, No. 10

www.montgomeryplace.org/category/news/messenger/

CHICAGO'S GREAT FIRES: 1871 AND 1874

As a youngster, I knew there had been a fire in Chicago. At least, I knew the children's song that went:

One dark night when we were all abed
Old Mother Leary lit a lantern in the shed
And when her cow kicked it over
She winked her eye and said
"There'll be a hot time in the old town
tonight!"
FIRE, FIRE, FIRE!

Who Mother Leary was, or why we celebrated her, wasn't very clear. Here is what happened:

The summer of 1871 was hot and very dry. Only one inch of rain had fallen between July and October. The new metropolis of Chicago was mostly made of wood, with wooden sidewalks and sawdust-strewn streets. The city of 300,000 had 17 horse-drawn steam fire engines and 185 firemen. By October 7 there had been several major fires and both men and equipment were exhausted.

At approximately 9 p.m. on October 8, a fire broke out (probably) in a barn owned by Catherine O'Leary (aka Cate, the Mother Leary of the lyrics) at 137 DeKoven Street, the site of the present-day Fire Academy. It was soon rumored that the alleged accident happened because Mrs. O'Leary was drunk. A *Chicago Tribune* reporter later claimed he and two colleagues had made up the cow story: an early example of fake news.

Mrs. O'Leary was the logical scapegoat for those looking for someone to blame: a Catholic woman and an Irish immigrant. She and her heirs continued to try to correct the record. She was eventually exonerated in 1997 by the city's Committee on Police and Fire.

Someone turned in an alarm, but the dispatcher mistakenly located it a mile away from the fire. By the time the mistake was corrected, there was a raging fire on the west side of the Chicago River. By about 11:30 p.m., burning embers had crossed the river and a roaring wind swept the fire north.

The courthouse, bounded by Randolph, Clark, Washington, and LaSalle, caught fire, and its cupola collapsed at 2:30 a.m. on October 9. Flaming debris blowing across the north branch of the Chicago River ignited a railroad tank car containing kerosene, and the fire continued north. The city's waterworks building caught fire and the water mains dried up, leaving the fire to burn unchecked.

Late on the 9th, a light rain fell, and either because of that or just because everything burnable had been consumed, the fire petered out. An area from approximately 22nd Street on the south to Fullerton on the north, and from Halsted Street on the west to Lake Michigan on the east, had burned. About 300 people had died and 100,000 of the total population of 300,000 were homeless.

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