

The Great Chicago Fire

The summer of 1871 was very dry, leaving the ground parched and the wooden city vulnerable. On Sunday evening, October 8, 1871, just after nine o'clock, a fire broke out in the barn behind the home of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary at 13 DeKoven Street. No one knows how the fire started, but fingers were pointed at the O'Leary's cow, who supposedly kicked over a lantern.



The Rush for Life Over the Randolph Street Bridge, 1871 (Harper's Weekly, from a sketch by John R. Chapin)

The firefighters, exhausted from fighting a large fire the day before, were sent at first to the wrong neighborhood. When they finally arrived at the O'Leary's, the fire was raging out of control. The blaze quickly spread east and north. Wooden houses, commercial and industrial buildings, and private mansions were all consumed in the blaze.



The Rush of Refugees through the Potter's Field toward Lincoln Park, 1871 (Harper's Weekly, from a sketch by Theodore R. Davis)

After two days, rain began to fall. On the morning of October 10, 1871, the fire died out, leaving complete devastation in the heart of the city. At least 300 people were dead, 100,000 people were homeless, and \$200 million worth of property was leveled. The fire was one of the most spectacular events of the nineteenth century, and it is recognized as a major event in the city's history.

The disaster caused an outbreak of looting and lawlessness. Companies of soldiers were summoned to Chicago and martial law (*rules put in place when there is a disaster that are enforced by the federal government*) was declared on October 11, ending three days of chaos. Martial law was lifted several weeks later.

Today, the Chicago Fire Department training academy is located on the site of the O'Leary property where the Great Chicago Fire started. In 1997, the Chicago City Council passed a resolution exonerating Catherine O'Leary, an Irish immigrant who died in 1895, and her cow.

<http://www.history.com/topics/great-chicago-fire>

A. What is another word or phrase for...

1. Extremely dry and thirsty

2. Law or proclamation passed by officials

3. Looking to blame someone

4. Totally tired and worn out

5. Huge homes

6. Stealing from businesses

7. Called in to help by an order from the governor

8. A burning fire

B. Match the vocabulary with the definition

| | |
|----------------|---|
| 1. vulnerable | <i>a. total lack of structure or control, anarchy</i> |
| 2. exonerating | <i>b. clearing one's name of suspicion</i> |
| 3. spread | <i>c. completely destroyed, flat</i> |
| 4. commercial | <i>d. related to factories and places of work</i> |
| 5. industrial | <i>e. weak and in danger</i> |
| 6. consumed | <i>f. eat up or destroy until nothing is left</i> |
| 7. devastation | <i>g. amazing and hard to believe</i> |
| 8. leveled | <i>h. to expand and multiply, get bigger</i> |
| 9. spectacular | <i>i. damage and destruction</i> |
| 10. chaos | <i>j. related to businesses, not homes</i> |

C. Answer the comprehension questions

- What season of which year did the Great Fire start?

- What mistake happened that allowed the fire to get out of control quickly?

- What were most of the buildings in the city made of?

- Many refugees (people who are running away from a place) escaped over a bridge. What was the name of the bridge?

- How many days did the fire rage?

- What helped it (*the fire*) burn out?

- Why do you think companies of soldiers were called in to keep order?

- Who was Catherine O'Leary?

- Do you think people in 1871 were more vulnerable to a large fire like this than if it happened today?

- What is a *sketch*?
