



Catherine O'Leary - who was born in Ireland but later came to America - lived in Chicago with her husband, Patrick. The O'Learys had five children.

Poor, but hardworking, these Irish immigrants owned six cows and a horse which lived in a barn on their property, located at 137 DeKoven Street.

On the 8th of October, 1871, the barn contained straw and coal. The O'Learys were ready for the coming winter, with provisions stored-up in the barn.

Around 9 PM - on the evening of October 8th - a fire started in the O'Leary barn. Because of very dry and windy conditions, the fire began to quickly spread. It moved, ever steadily over a 30-hour period, toward the Lincoln Park area of the city.

Patrick and Cate lost their barn, but their two cottages survived.

Soon after, a journalist - Michael Ahern - reportedly wrote a story about the start of the blaze which had massively damaged Chicago and its residents. Although he didn't directly name Cate O'Leary, in his article, Ahern's words initiated a publicity blaze against her.

Mrs. O'Leary testified that she and her family were inside their home when the fire started. They were up early every morning - she, to milk the cows, and Patrick, to work as a laborer.

It didn't matter what Cate said. People, everywhere, believed that she and her cow had started the "Great Fire." Her reputation was forever tainted because of the bad publicity, very nasty stories and ongoing caricatures published - then widely circulated - about her.

Credits:

Image, depicting a lithograph by Kellogg & Buckeley - circa 1872 - shows the alleged cause of Chicago's Great Fire of 1871. Image online, courtesy Chicago Historical Society.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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