



0. WAS IT REALLY THE COW? - Story Preface

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3. WAS IT REALLY THE COW?

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C.C. Hine authored *Mrs. Leary's Cow A Legend of Chicago* in 1872. Published in Watertown, New York, by The Black River Insurance Company, the work contains this image of Catherine O'Leary and her cow, Daisy. The drawing is accompanied by this description: "THIS is the Cow, at the Leary back gate, Where she stood on the night of October the 8." Illustration online via The Project Gutenberg.

Patrick and Catherine O'Leary, with their five children, lived at 137 DeKoven Street (on the southwest side, near today's location of the Chicago Fire Academy). Mrs. O'Leary's five cows - which she used for her neighborhood milk business - were kept in the barn behind the O'Leary home.

Literally overnight, Cate and her cow Daisy became infamous as the ignition source for Chicago's business-leveling disaster.

Unlike decades later - when Daisy became the source of newspaper humor - contemporary writers weren't kind to Cate or her cow. Most folks thought the cow did it. Even in the last half of the 20th century, people *still* associated the Chicago fire with a kicked-over lantern in the O'Leary barn.

But ... consider these facts:

- In 1871, the Midwest had experienced a particularly dry summer and early fall. With drought conditions prevailing throughout the region, brush fires had been the norm not the exception.
- Peshtigo - a Wisconsin town 260 miles north of Chicago - began to burn at precisely the same time (around 9 p.m.) as fire started to ravage Chicago. Twelve hundred people died and 1.2 million acres were incinerated.
- Across Lake Michigan - on the same day - Holland was destroyed in two hours.
- Hungry flames also overwhelmed Manistee, about 115 miles north of Holland.
- Portions of the entire central section of Michigan, from the shore of Lake Huron to the shore of Lake Michigan, were ablaze. About 200 people died there and 2 million acres were laid waste.
- All of these fires happened at about **the same time**.

Could it be that Daisy really didn't do it?

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

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WAS-IT-REALY-THE-COW-Great-Fire-of-1871>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WAS-IT-REALY-THE-COW-Great-Fire-of-1871>

Questions 2 Ponder

Who Is Responsible When Publicized Facts are Wrong?

Facts, and other evidence, are important to consider whenever we try to determine why something has happened. At the time of the Chicago fire, in 1871, many people blamed Mrs. O'Leary and her cow.

Do you think those individuals - including the press reporters who broke the O'Leary story - considered all the facts? Explain your answer.

If they did not consider all the facts, and thereby harmed Mrs. O'Leary's reputation, do you think reporters or their employers should be held responsible? Why, or why not?

What could (or should) have the reporters done differently?

Can you think of a 21st-century situation where the media published "facts" before reporters had the "evidence" to support those facts? What consequences flowed from such actions? In that situation, was anyone held accountable for publishing "misinformation" or misleading news reports?

Media Stream



Chicago Homestead with Cows

Image of Chicago homestead, circa 1870, online courtesy [Chicago History Museum](#).

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Chicago-Homestead-with-Cows>



O'Leary Home - Time of Great Fire

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/O-Leary-Home-Time-of-Great-Fire>



Chicago Fire - Detail of Burnt District

Page from [The Doomed City! Chicago During an Appalling Ordeal! : The Fire Demon's Carnival : The Conflagrations in the West, South and North divisions : Graphic Sketches from the Scene of the Disaster](#), published by the Michigan News Company (1871). Online, courtesy Archive.org.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Chicago-Fire-Detail-of-Burnt-District>



Peshtigo - Wooded Areas Burned

Image of Peshtigo burning, online courtesy Peshtigo Fire Museum.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Peshtigo-Wooded-Areas-Burned>



Holland and Chicago - Map Locator

Map depicting the locations of Holland and Chicago, online courtesy Holland.org.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Holland-and-Chicago-Map-Locator>



Map Depicting the Path of the 1871 Fires

Map of fires, during 8-9 October 1871, online courtesy MSU.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Map-Depicting-the-Path-of-the-1871-Fires>



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