AWESOME stories

# SHOCKED CITIZENS




0. SHOCKED CITIZENS - Story Preface

1. FIRE!

2. 19TH CENTURY FIREFIGHTING

3. WAS IT REALLY THE COW?

4. FIRE IN PESHTIGO: A COINCIDENCE?

5. DEATH IN PESHTIGO

6. PESHTIGO SURVIVORS

7. CHICAGO IN 1871

8. CAUSE AND ORIGIN

9. CHICAGO BURNS

10. A DEVASTATED CITY

**11. SHOCKED CITIZENS**

12. CIVIL RESTRICTIONS

13. HOLLAND BURNS


Chicago's sidewalks, and many of its homes, were made of wood in 1871. When the Great Fire broke out, on the evening of October 8, those wooden homes and walks were at particular risk due to very dry and windy conditions that Sunday night.

Marshall Philyaw provides his artistic interpretation of how the scene may have appeared at the O'Leary barn (located on DeKoven Street) when firefighters arrived on the scene. Among the events depicted in this drawing are Mr. McLaughlin with his fiddle; neighbors trying to put-out the flames with buckets of water; firemen ripping-out the sidewalk's wooden slats to use as fuel for the fire-fighting steam engines.

The stiff, relentless wind pushed the greedy flames from south to north. Goodsell's eyewitness account continues, at page 17:

> *The scene was rendered still more appalling by the fact that during the earlier stages of the fire, thousands of the able-bodied men had rushed to the south side to witness the fire there, not then dreaming that it would reach their own homes. Before the fire on the south side, these fathers, brothers and sons, were gradually driven across the river, until the rapidity of the progress of the flames convinced them that their own families were in danger. Being at last convinced, they rushed in frantic haste to save what little they could.*

What they had not saved was their own energy:

> *But they arrived at their homes, most of them, in an exhausted condition. They did their best, but the best was but little. All that many could do was to aid in saving the lives of their wives and children. With their all, standing in their houses, many attempted impossible things, and rushed into burning buildings never to come out alive; for the wind rushed on in horrible fury, and seemed to envelop three or four houses at once in one fell swoop.* (Goodsell, page 17.)

Man, no matter how willing, is never a match against the unleashed fury of the "elements."

Soon after the fire, total property damage was estimated at $150 million. Loss of life, while terrible, could have been much worse.

> *The loss of life, while smaller than could have been predicted in such an extended and such a rapid fire, can yet never be fully estimated. There have been charred remains at the morgue which were almost unrecognizable as human bodies, and as the ruins are lying from two to ten feet deep in places, it is impossible to say how many have been buried under them. The fact that but few of those who are prominently known are missing, must not lead any to believe that there have not been many lost who would be missed only by an exceedingly small circle of friends, too obscure themselves to attract much attention.* (Goodell, page 25.)

When all was said and counted, the death toll was about 300.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/SHOCKED-CITIZENS-Great-Fire-of-1871

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/SHOCKED-CITIZENS-Great-Fire-of-1871

## Questions 2 Ponder

### What Draws People to Witness a Massive Fire?

In his eyewitness account of Chicago's Great Fire of 1871, James Goodsell tells us that "thousands of the able-bodied men" went to the south side of Chicago - where the fire had started. Why did they go there?

Would it be reasonable, for those witnesses, to expect that the spreading fire would not "jump" the river, to reach the north side of the city?

What happened when those men became victims instead of witnesses?

What causes victims of events, like massive fires, to attempt heroic deeds to help others, such as their family members?

## Media Stream



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Great Chicago Fire of 1871 - Beginning Scenes
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