Great Chicago Fire of 1871 - Raging Inferno

Chicago's city streets and sidewalks were mostly made of wood, just like so much else throughout the city. On the evening of October 8, 1871, those roads and walks were dried-out because of a significant drought.

Everything in the city was dry, and the grass was brown. Mounds of hay (for the animals) plus wood and kerosene (for the city's residents) were stockpiled (for the coming winter).

On the day of the Great Fire, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article about a blaze which had occurred the night before. Included in that story were these words:

> *For days past, alarm has followed alarm, but the comparatively trifling losses have familiarized us to the pealing of the Court House bell, and we had forgotten that the absence of rain for three weeks had left everything in so dry and flammable a condition that a spark might start a fire which would sweep from end to end of the city.* (October 8, 1871 Chicago Tribune article, quoted at page 21 of *The Great Chicago Fire and the Myth of Mrs. O'Leary's Cow*, by Richard F. Bales.)

The newly professional fire department - which employed 185 workers - had warned the city to take better fire precautions, but those recommendations weren't followed.

Although they must have known better, industrialists had polluted the Chicago River with fire-catching materials (like oil and grease) in 1871, but no one had done anything about it (before the night of October 8th).

The spark, which the *Tribune* writer had worried about earlier in the day, set the at-risk city on fire at about 9:32 PM on October 8th.

By the time it had burned out:

- 2,310 acres were burned
- 20,500 homes were lost
- 110,000 people (or thereabouts) were homeless
- 30,000 individuals (or so) left the city
- 55,000 people (at least) received their food from charities

The first house which burned belonged to someone named Mrs. Scully. The last house which burned belonged to Dr. Dyer.

This clip - from a 1937 film entitled "In Old Chicago" - recreates the fire as it raged during the night of October 8-9, 1871. Setting aside the fictional back story - about the O'Leary family - the film atttempts to portray what likely happened as a massive, unrestrained fire caused a holocaust in Chicago.

NOTE: At 10:42, into the clip, fire jumps the Chicago River.
At 11:20, into the clip, people are fleeing to the Lake Michigan shore.
At 13:15, into the clip, Chicagoans are taking refuge in the Lake.

Credits:

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