

Chicago's Long Game of Disastrous Telephone

When we are learning about history, we've all heard of the mention of the Great Chicago Fire. But do you know how huge it really was and how it started? Most of all do you know how it all could have been prevented?

The Chicago Fire has a huge name in history for burning down tons of buildings and the killing of hundreds of people. It all started on October 8th, 1871 in Mrs. Catherine O'Leary's barn, still to this day the exact cause is to be unknown, but it is guessed to be caused by a lantern falling over during drinking and a game of cards. Back then it was all blamed on Mrs. O'Leary because it was easy to believe. The reporter admitted to making up the whole story, which he had made up to not bring a bad mark on the men's reputations. But it is still undetermined of what really started the fire.

Once the fire started it raced on to the town and that's when the long game of "telephone" began. The game "Telephone" also known as "Chinese whispers" is an internationally popular children's game where Players form a line or circle, and the first player comes up with a message and whispers it to the ear of the second person in the line, the goal is to get the message correctly received to the last person. When there is a fire every second counts, especially when your whole town is made of wood. One of O'leary's neighbors had seen the fire and ran to the nearby drug store to alarm the fire department, but to their surprise the alarm box was locked and asked to open, the owner refused by saying "It wasn't worth the trouble, he had already seen the fire trucks go by." But He was wrong, no fire truck was on its way.

During this time a watchman was on duty and saw the fire but assumed that the smoke was just from a fire from yesterday, soon later he saw the raging flames and sounded the alarm. Not only was the fire being put off for a while, the watchman had sent the firefighters to the wrong destination. After realizing he had made the mistake he had told his assistant to cancel the old alarm and to send a new one to the correct location. But his assistant did not do so thinking it would cause confusion. Once the firefighters arrived they were already tired from a long shift from yesterday and not having the most powerful engines they were having a difficult time putting the fire out.

As they tried to fight the fire many of the residents were grabbing all their belongings, from the most necessary items to the silliest of things. Some buried their stuff hoping it would not burn. Many were rushing to leave, paying just to ride in someone's wagon. While the frantic rush to grab their belongings lots of folks watched the blazing flames spread thinking of what a show it put on, as if it were just an act. Many gave their lives to rescue important documents, freight train cars, and others. People rushed to the river, but soon the river itself caught fire.

The whole city around them was drenched in flames and smoke. Even the hoses the firemen were using caught fire. The buildings that claimed to be fireproof were now smoldering in scorching flames. Then finally the miracle had come, it started to rain, the flames slowly went down. Within hours the fire was almost out, small pockets of fire still burned, but the crisis that lasted over twenty-four hours was now over.

The fire destroyed 17,500 buildings, 73 miles of street. Ninety thousand people—one in three Chicago residents—were left homeless by the fire. While only 120 bodies were recovered, it is believed that 300 people died in the blaze. Yet without this horrendous fire we would not have the knowledge of fire as we do today. The fire department made demands to ban the construction of wooden buildings within the city limits, reorganize the fire department leadership style, and began to fireproof their equipment.¹ I'm thankful for history like this, that we can learn from and move forward with the knowledge of our mistakes.

¹ <https://connectedfire.com/index.php/blog/2017/04/19/impact-of-the-chicago-fire-of-1874>