



The Deadly Night of October 8, 1871: The Great Chicago Fire and the Peshtigo Fire

Charles River Editors

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It had taken about 40 years for Chicago to grow from a small settlement of about 300 people into a thriving metropolis with a population of 300,000, but in just two days in 1871, much of that progress was burned to the ground. In arguably the most famous fire in American history, a blaze in the southwestern section of Chicago began to burn out of control on the night of October 8, 1871. Thanks to The Chicago Tribune, the fire has been apocryphally credited to a cow kicking over a lantern in Mrs. Catherine O'Leary's barn, and though that was not true, the rumor dogged Mrs. O'Leary to the grave.

Of course, the cause of the fire didn't matter terribly much to the people who lost their lives or their property in the blaze. Thanks to dry conditions, wind, and wooden buildings, firefighters were never actually able to stop the fire, which burned itself out only after it spent nearly two whole days incinerating several square miles of Chicago. By the time rain mercifully helped to put the fire out, the Great Chicago Fire had already killed an estimated 300 people, destroyed an estimated 17,500 buildings, and left nearly 100,000 people (1/3 of the population) homeless.

Mrs. O'Leary and her barn remain a part of lore, but it also speaks to Chicago's ability to rebuild that it's almost impossible to envision a farm in downtown Chicago today. Chicago suffered a wide swath of destruction, but it had rebuilt itself within 20 years in order to host the World's Fair, evidence that it was back and bigger and better than ever. Along with that, Chicago has maintained its status as the region's biggest city and one of the most important in America.

Due to the publicity generated by a fire that reduced most of a major American city to ash, the Peshtigo Fire of 1871 might fairly be called America's forgotten disaster. Overshadowed by the much better covered and publicized Great Chicago Fire that occurred on the same evening, the fire that started in the Wisconsin logging town of Peshtigo generated a firestorm unlike anything in American history. In addition to destroying a wide swath of land, it killed at least 1,500 people and possibly as many as 2,500, several times more than the number of casualties in Chicago. While people marveled at the fact that the Great Chicago Fire managed to jump a river, the Peshtigo fire was so intense that it was able to jump several miles across Green Bay. While wondering aloud about the way in which the Peshtigo fire has been overlooked, Bill Lutz noted, "Fires are normally very fascinating to people, but people seem resistant to Peshtigo. Maybe Peshtigo is on such a large scale that people can't comprehend it."

Ironically, while Peshtigo is widely forgotten, the fire there is often cited as proof that the Great Chicago Fire was caused by natural phenomena, such as a comet or meteor shower. Those advocating such a theory think it's too coincidental that such disastrous fires were sparked in the same region on the same night, and they point to other fires across the Midwest. Of course, as with the Great Chicago Fire, contemporaries of the Peshtigo fire faulted human error and didn't necessarily link the two fires, if only because fires were a common problem in both Peshtigo and Chicago during the 19th century.

The Deadly Night of October 8, 1871 chronicles the story of two of America's deadliest fires. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Great Chicago Fire and the Peshtigo fire like never before, in no time at all.

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