

Shortages in home supplies and accessories

Phil Egan - October 2020

“Late one night, when we were all in bed, Mrs. O’Leary lit a lantern in her shed, Her cow knocked it over, then winked her eye and said, ‘There’ll be a hot time in the old town tonight.’”

- Song Lyric

For the past several years, I have been an avid viewer of the NBC television action-drama titled Chicago Fire. The program follows the lives and activities of the firefighters and paramedics of Firehouse 51 of the Chicago Fire Department.

Chicago, of course, is a city that has had more than a passing experience with serious fire.

A recent episode featured a wedding. The venue was described as the “Church of the Firefighters.” I wondered whether the expression had any foundation in truth.

Did it ever.

When built in 1857, Holy Family Church was constructed on what was then the southern outskirts of the city. Its congregation was heavily Irish Catholic. Catherine and Patrick O’Leary, who lived at De Koven and Jefferson streets, were parishioners.

Today, the site of the O’Leary home where the Great Chicago Fire was said to have begun, is - fittingly - the home of the Chicago Fire Academy.

Whatever the cause, the disaster that unfolded late on the night of October 8, 1871, was the culmination of a severe drought across the entire Midwest. On what became known as “The Night America Burned,” a spark ignited on the O’Leary property and, driven by gale force winds, spread like the wildfire it would become.

In Chicago alone, the fire killed 300, made 100,000 people homeless, and destroyed 17,500 buildings.

In the south end of the city, hundreds streamed into Holy Family Church to seek shelter. A member of the Jesuit order that had founded the church prayed to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, asking her to spare the church, and vowing to light seven candles in front of her statue in Holy Family’s eastern transept if Holy Family was spared destruction.

Holy Family Church was one of only a handful of buildings that survived the Great Chicago Fire. Seven candles burn in front of the side altar to the Virgin to this day.

The Chicago Fire is well-known, but it was hardly the only horror on that night. In northeastern Wisconsin, a massive forest fire incinerated two towns and killed 2,500 – making the “Peshtigo Fire” the nation’s deadliest.

Meanwhile, across the St. Clair River in Michigan, the cities of Holland and Manistee became raging infernos. More than 200 people would die in what became known as “The Great Michigan Fire” – including fifty in Port Huron.

It all happened during that long, awful night of October 8-9, 1871.

Four and five years earlier, Sarnia had suffered its own calamities with huge fires in the town’s commercial core, but the town was not immune to the havoc on that particular night. Fierce fires burned in the woods and swamp lands that surrounded Sarnia, and thick smoke drifted in the air.

On the St. Clair River, smoke from fires burning on both shores caused the tug Sea Gull to collide with a schooner beating downriver against a south wind. On the Reserve, homes were burning. It was truly a night of international destruction.

In 1919, Fire Prevention Week was declared in Canada – to run from Sunday to Saturday in the week that included October 9. The purpose was to commemorate both the Great Chicago Fire and the blaze that destroyed the centre block of the parliament buildings in Ottawa on February 3, 1916.

The theme of the fire safety warning in 2020 is “Serve up fire safety in the kitchen” – a reminder that nearly 50% of all Canadian fires and fire fatalities are the result of careless or unattended cooking.

Be alert! Keep a fire extinguisher nearby. Pay attention when you have something in or on the oven.

Don’t let your family become part of a “hot time” in this old town tonight.

