

Kin of O'Leary Absolves Cow in Fire of 1871

On the eve of the anniversary of the great Chicago fire the sole survivor of the household where, as legend has it, a cow kicked over a lamp to start the conflagration was found in the garden of a bungalow at 7733 Luella avenue. She is Mrs. James R. Ledwell, formerly Catherine O'Leary and now an alert and vigorous grandmother of 67 years.

Sixty-two years ago tonight Mrs. Ledwell was routed from sleep to watch, through smarting eyes, flames gorge themselves on the family possessions. The fire spread rapidly throughout the area, parched by drought, to engulf the city. Chicago burned for two nights and a day and ruins smoldered for weeks.

Yesterday Mrs. Ledwell grudgingly broke a long silence to tell for the first time what happened at what is now 558 De Koven street. For years the O'Learys were extremely sensitive about the fire in the conviction it had put a curse upon them. Mrs. Ledwell is no exception to the family tradition.

"The True Sole Survivor."

She was persuaded to tell her story only to "give the lie" to tales of what she termed a crop of fictitious O'Learys. As she vehemently denied the legend she proudly declared, "I am the true sole survivor and you can print that."

The fire is a taboo subject in the Ledwell home. There will be no mention of it tonight, she asserted with emphasis. A son added that he was recently ordered out of the home for singing "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

"It was a Sunday night," said Mrs. Ledwell. "Mother had put me to bed with the other four children at 8 o'clock. She went to bed, too, and father followed a half hour later. It was a hot night and the sun had been blistering for weeks."

Revelry at McLaughlins'.

The father, Patrick O'Leary, had rented the two front rooms of the home to Patrick McLaughlin, a fiddler, who was in great demand "at christenings and weddings," said Mrs. Ledwell. There was dancing and singing in the McLaughlin quarters as he scraped his fiddle in honor of the arrival of his wife's cousin from Ireland.

"At 9:30 there was a pounding and bellowing at the back door and we were all dragged from bed," she continued. "It was Denis Sullivan, the one legged drayman from next door, who discovered the fire. That's the first we knew of the fire."

"No one had been up. I know mother didn't milk the cow after 5 o'clock. And the McLaughlins didn't. Anyhow, there were five cows and a horse and a wagon in the barn, and if any of them kicked over the lamp, if there was a lamp—and there wasn't—none can tell which of them did it, though some would blame the best milker."

Peg Legged Man Barely Escapes.

Sullivan, Mrs. Ledwell explained, saw the shed afire as he was about to go to bed. He roared out an alarm—"and he had hearty lungs"—and dashed for the barn to save the horse and cows. His peg leg caught in the loose planking and he was "lucky to make way with his life safely and a burned calf."

"Father always said if he had been awakened sooner he would have saved the cow," she said. "As it was, we lost everything. I don't like to talk about it. I can see the burning yet and the rushing about and the weeping and the rest."

"And that's the truth of what happened. Even though I was only 5 years old, I can remember it like yesterday and then it was talked about at home because of the lie of the cow which followed us about wherever we went. And now I'm discovered."

"Well, my father wouldn't have told you anything. He was a great one

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COW BLAMELESS IN FIRE OF 1871, AN O'LEARY SAYS

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for going after reporters. For the first few years they bothered him. He would throw them out of the house. After a while they never came any more."

Cigar Butt Theory Held Possible.

O'Leary died 89 years ago. His wife followed him to the grave a year later. Four of the five O'Leary children are also dead.

The report that Mrs. McLaughlin went to milk the cow to make punch or oyster stew and left the lamp in the shed for the animal to vent its wrath upon because of the second milking was labeled untrue by Mrs. Ledwell. She held possible another theory of the origin of the blaze. It is that young bloods of the neighborhood, who were in the habit of "rushing the can," or drinking beer, in the loft of the shed after the O'Learys retired, carelessly tossed a cigar butt into the hay.

Mrs. Rose O'Connell of 6404 South Artesian avenue, who was a neighbor of the O'Learys 17 years after the fire, yesterday offered another theory. She insists she overheard O'Leary give the true story of the origin and that is that the milking was done by "Peg-leg" Sullivan, who gave the alarm. Mrs. Ledwell refused to discuss the theory.

Tells How House Was Saved.

At 2121 Hudson avenue stands a frame house which is the only one in that neighborhood which withstood the fire. Mrs. J. J. Kirschten, who with her husband, a retired postal clerk, has lived there 21 years, said the widow of a Mr. Bellinger, who occupied the house in 1871, had told her the structure was saved with water, not with cider, as records of the Chicago Historical society show.