

Story of the Great Chicago Fire as Told by the Men Who Fought It.

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There was no "Chief" of the Fire Department in Chicago at the time of the big fire in 1871. The department was then controlled by a fire board, and that board elected the head of the Fire Department and called him Marshal. That office in 1871, and for some time before, was filled by Robert A. Williams.

He is still living, and, although in sight of the 70th year past, he looks as if he might make a few more runs with the machine without losing his wind. He lives at No. 641 West Adams street, surrounded by his devoted family, and his mind is as clear on the way in which he fought the great conflagration as if that event had occurred a few days ago. A reporter of THE TRIBUNE visited the ex-Marshals at his home and asked him to give his story of the fire over his own name. Without reference to notes or data of any sort he began, prefacing the story with a brief biography of himself.

Here is his story:

I came to Chicago in the spring of 1848. My first work in the department was as a runner in No. 5. You must recollect that the department was volunteer then. I used to be about the shop of No. 5, and when she went to a fire I went with her. Soon after that a new engine was bought, No. 6, and I joined her company. She was housed at the Kinzie street bridge until she was moved to her new house in the alley between Clinton and Jefferson streets, where No. 17 is now located. I was with No. 6 for several years, when I was made foreman of the company. It was while I was foreman of No. 5 that I was presented with a silver trumpet, which I have yet, and which was about the only thing my wife saved out of the building where we lived. She hadn't been out of the building two minutes when it fell in.

I was with No. 6 until 1858, when I laid off a year, and then I went back and staid until

the same block as the church, and they took fire. I ordered a stream there, but before it got to playing the mills went up. I never saw anything burn as quickly as these mills.

By that time the fire had eaten its way, with incredible rapidity, as far north as Harrison and Canal streets. Fourteen engines were in action. Swenie's engine was at Canal and Van Buren streets. At that moment the fire jumped the river at Van Buren street. The gas works and Conley's Patch, the latter a lot of frame shanties, stood in the track of that fire. The wind was behind the fire, in front of the fire was the sort of material to feed a flame.

The moment I saw the flames cross the river I ordered the boys to get to the South Side as fast as they could. I told Swenie, whose engine was nearest, to get over at once, and he answered, "Aye, aye, sir," and I jumped on a hose cart and drove to the Madison street bridge. Crossing that I drove south on Market street to Monroe. It was the most direct way to the fire. When I reached Market and Monroe streets Conley's Patch was in flames. The fire had leaped into the gas works. The scene looked devilish. I asked where Swenie's engine was and learned that he had lost it. The crumbling walls of a building near where I left him had fallen on his engine and it was seen no more. At such a moment in such a time you can imagine what the loss of an engine meant to me. In a few moments more two streams were playing on the fire in that section, one on Franklin street and one on a shed near by. In the loss of Swenie's engine I was also deprived of 800 feet of hose, and the disaster was greater than any one save myself could understand. The other engines of the department crossed the river at Van Buren street.

While giving some directions where I stood a police officer came to me and said the fire had reached the Oriental Building on La Salle street, between Washington and Madison streets. I sent an engine to Washington and La Salle, and another to Madison and La Salle. When I arrived I found that it was not the Oriental Building, but Jonathan Clark's shops near by that were on fire.

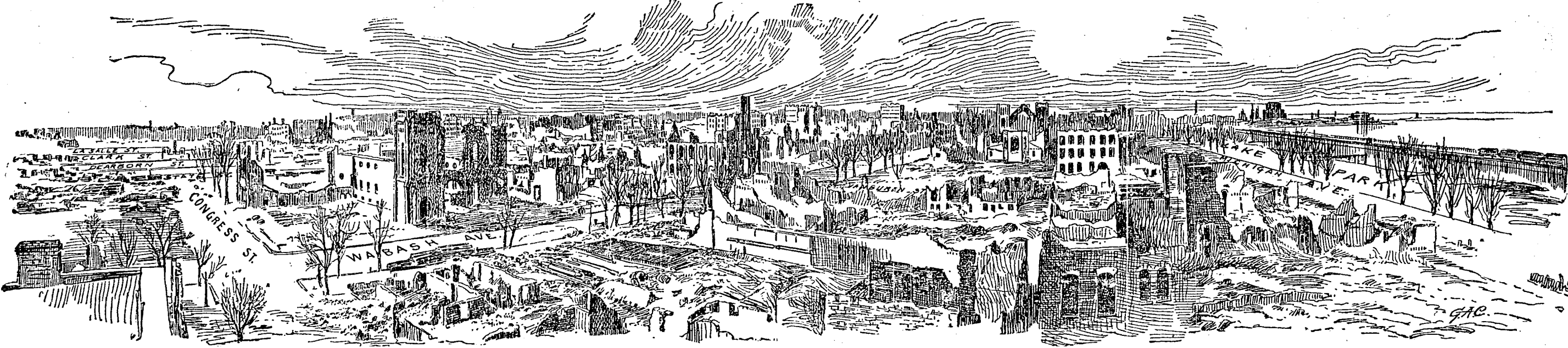
was there. My opinion is that much of the gas escaped through the sewers which emptied into the river, and the amount was so great that it ignited and that is what was burning on the river. Those who were here will remember that the cry was raised that the river was on fire. That was literally true. That fed the fire on the land.

Again: The explosion and ignition of the gas communicated with the pipes in the big buildings in the business center. I noticed frequently during the progress of the fire that in the big storehouses and hotels the first I saw of fire was in the basements. Very frequently a building would be ablaze below while upper stories and roof would be dark. Then the buildings would collapse in an instant. I am of the opinion that the gas was blazing in those basements early in the progress—that is to say, early after the fire was in the business center.

I want to say that before the fire, some months, maybe a year or more, I had almost begged the Fire Board to purchase floating engines (fire boats). If I had had two or three of those boats '71 I believe I could have saved a good deal of the city. During the entire progress of that fire I did not see a member of the Board of Fire Commissioners, nor did I hear from them in any way. I was left to fight the fire on my own judgment, with a crippled department. From Oct. 1, 1871, till the 8th the city had thirty-three fires and the department was worn and wasted by the time the great disaster confronted it. The water mains were small; the wind was a hurricane; the water-works were destroyed. Hydrants at home were exhausted, and the city, then largely wooden, was as dry as tinder.

I remained Marshal of the department two years after the fire of 1871.

ROBERT A. WILLIAMS.



RUINS OF THE CHICAGO FIRE OF OCT. 8-9, 1871—FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.

...first steamer on the West Side came—the Gibraltar Queen—and I was with her until 1860, when I resigned and went to the Rocky Mountains for my health. On my return U. P. Harris was Marshal, with three assistants, one in each division of the city. If there was a fire in the West Division and the Marshal was not on hand the assistant of that division took command, and so in other divisions.

In 1860 the Fire Board sent for me and offered to make me Assistant Marshal. The offer was made three times and finally accepted on the condition that if Harris died, or was removed or resigned, I was to succeed as Marshal. Three weeks after I was appointed Assistant Marshal Harris went away on a three weeks' leave of absence to New York.

The very afternoon Harris went away, and the night, too, there were nine fires in seven houses, one right after the other. There were twelve engines in the department. We were short on hose, and those nine fires tested the capacity of the department sorely. I was tired out and had met with an accident that day. As soon as I could do so after that I went to the Fire Board and showed them how easily the department might be crippled, and, after a good deal of persuasion, I succeeded in inducing the board to purchase 2,000 additional feet of hose. Harris resigned in April, 1868, and it was June of that year before I was made Marshal, in all that the word implied. They gave me two assistants.

The department consisted then of seventeen engines, but three were out of service being repaired. The night of the first fire, the one that preceded the big one, we had fourteen engines. They were all in service. These engines were out all night Saturday night, and at the time of the beginning of the big fire I still had two engines playing on the debris of Saturday night, and so at the beginning of the big fire I really had but twelve engines. Much of the hose was unfit for use, and I had been busy going about picking up sections of hose so as to make a line. I had before that asked repeatedly for more hose from the Fire Board, but could not get it. The department was in the worst possible condition to tackle the great fire which rolled over the city Sunday night. The men were exhausted and some of the engines were in bad condition. The supply of hose was inefficient.

This brings me to the fire which no one will ever forget, whether he ever saw it or simply heard of it.

Let me say one thing in the beginning of my account of that fire. I do not know whether the time lost in getting to the place where that fire began would have enabled us to control it or not if the fire had been properly located at the start. But I have always thought it might. The fires in those times were located from the tower of the City Hall by a watchman who was kept there. The watchman in the tower the Sunday night of the big fire was Mathias Shafer. He located the blaze at Canalport avenue and Halsted street, whereas the fire was on De Koven street, two miles away from the place where Shafer thought it was. The result was that three engines went to the place where Shafer located the blaze, and not one went to the place where it was eating its way rapidly, assisted by that gale of wind which had been blowing over the city like a sirocco from the southwest. The streets were not as well paved then as now, and valuable time was lost.

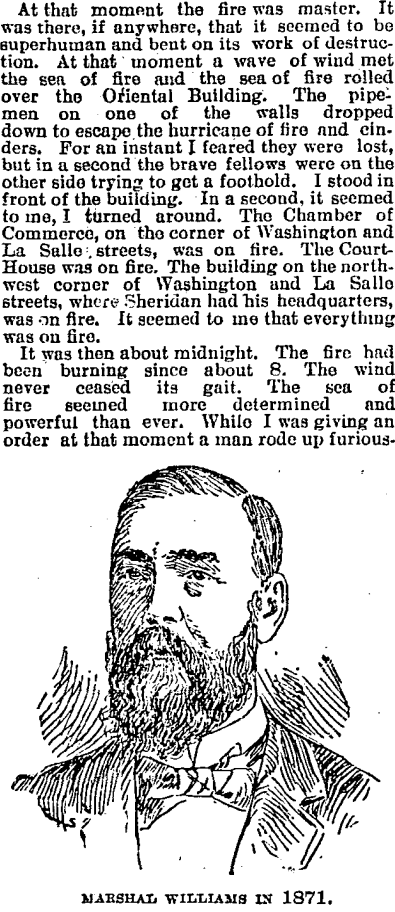
I was in bed in my hotel on Randolph street, between Fifth avenue and Franklin street, when my wagon came after me. As I jumped into the wagon I saw the light on the sky and it seemed to me that the fire was in about the same locality as the fire of the night before.

"Same old fire?" I said to my driver.

"No, sir; farther away," he answered, and pulled out for Canalport avenue and Halsted street. But we quickly saw the mistake. I jumped out of my wagon at the corner of Desplaines and Taylor streets, near the fire. By that time three engines under Assistant Benner, afterwards Chief, were playing on a row of buildings on Taylor street, which faced the south. As soon as I got out I sent men to turn in the proper alarm. The nearest box was four blocks.

Just then, quicker than I can describe, I saw the church on the southwest corner of Clinton and Mather streets on fire. I ordered one stream to play on the church, the other two to turn on the fire that was raging on De Koven street. The church went down, but the property about it was saved.

Batem's shingle mills, dry as powder, were in



MARSHAL WILLIAMS IN 1871.

ly where I was standing and said that the water-works on the North Side at the foot of Chicago avenue were on fire. I was convinced then that the fire was now under the control of incendiaries. It may not have been of incendiary origin, but the incendiary had a hand in it before it was over.

I knew if the water-works fell the department would be virtually powerless. I jumped into my wagon and drove to the water-works and found they were burning. I had heard there was some hose at the works and that was what we were needing. A good deal of the hose which was all right Saturday night was useless Sunday night. But the hose at the water-works was refused me.

I saw I could do nothing there and came back to the scene. I got out of my wagon at the old depot on Wells street and ordered two engines to the docks on the north side of the river, so as to get water from the river. I stationed the engines between two big elevators on the docks. But no sooner had the engines begun to work than the flames overcame the elevators, and the heat from them was so great that the engines were driven from their posts.

The engines then could only work along the river from the docks. That was the only place from which we could obtain water. But the streams were powerless to stay the progress of the fire. The engines could only keep the coal-yards and buildings adjacent wet down. The department couldn't maneuver. A line was formed on Van Buren street to head off the sea should it veer, but if it had done so the line would have been unavailable, for there was no water. An engine from Pittsburg arrived and I took her over the North avenue bridge to the West Side and staid there an hour. This was Monday night. Other engines had come, the first from Milwaukee, one from Bloomington, Ill., one from Detroit, and others from Pittsburg. But they did not get here until Monday, too late to be of service, except in the way of putting out the burning cinders, and of working along the docks. The fire stopped at the old cemetery on the lake shore, in the northeast section of the city. It had a clean sweep after it went into the North Division. Of course the wind had much to do in carrying that fire onward. Why, the men at the crib and his wife were kept busy sweeping the burning cinders and fagots from the roof of their lonely habitation. Those cinders and fagots were carried there by the wind.

I have been asked what, aside from the wind, gave the great conflagration such impetus. I have given the subject much attention and thought. When the fire reached the gas works and destroyed them there must have been some outlet for the gas that