

REPORTER OF 1871 FIRE DESCRIBES BLAZE OF TODAY

**Michael Ahern, Only Surviving
Writer of Great Disaster, 'Cov-
ers' Story for 'Tribune.'**

EXONERATES COW AS CAUSE

**Says Milk Thieves Dropped Lamp
In Stable; Mrs. O'Leary
Was Asleep.**

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY TONIGHT

Tonight begins the 40th anniversary of the great Chicago fire, which started Sunday night, October 8, 1871. Michael Ahern, the only living police reporter who "covered the story," celebrated the event by covering a fire for "The Chicago Tribune" last night. His story of last night's fire and his reminiscences of the great conflagration follow:

BY MICHAEL AHERN.

[Historian of the Fire Veterans of '71.]

Last night's blaze at 700-8 West Harrison street was within a few blocks of the starting point of the great fire of forty years ago.

I was in THE TRIBUNE office at 8:30 o'clock when the fire bell tapped off the box, 294. A taxicab was waiting for me in front of the building, and before I knew it I was whisked across the river. I arrived at the fire a few seconds behind Second Assistant Marshal Patrick Donahoe, whose quarters are at No. 5's house, Van Buren and Jefferson streets.

The fire was in a building occupied by Marshall Field & Co. as a mattress manufactory. The east half of the structure is only one story high, and the other part of the building is two stories.

Blaze Gets Good Start.

The fire started from an unknown cause among bales of excelsior in the rear of the building. It was going good before the arrival of the firemen.

Engine companies 5, 7, 10, and 17 responded to the alarm. Hook and ladder trucks 1 and 2 also answered the call. Marshal Donahoe was first at the scene.

Engine company No. 5 was close behind him. It was this company, whose engine being disabled, was one of the causes that was so disastrous in the great fire of '71. Engine No. 17, from West Lake street, near Canal, closely followed No. 5. If the right location had been given for the great fire by the watchman in the courthouse tower, No. 17 would have been on the ground fifteen minutes before its tardy arrival.

After laying its hose and getting up steam No. 17 did not work on the fire last night, as its assistance was not needed.

Several firemen of engine companies 5 and 7 narrowly escaped serious injury by the falling of a heavy door in front of the building.

Firemen Escape Falling Door.

A stream was being directed on the fire from the rear when Marshal Donahoe, leading a dozen men, started to enter the building in front.

The stream from the rear hit the door, weighing about a ton, and dislodged it from the rollers at the top.

Marshal Donahoe saw the door sway, and he called to his men to "fall back." They just managed to get out from under the ponderous door when it fell out on the sidewalk where they had stood.

The damage caused by the fire was about \$2,500.

AHERN TELLS OF BIG FIRE.

Being one of the three night police reporters who helped to "cover" the great Chicago fire these reminiscences on the fortieth anniversary may interest older, as well as the newer, residents of the city.

"Johnny" English was THE TRIBUNE police and fire reporter, and "Jim" Haynie performed the same duties for the Times. I was out for the Republican. Both of my confreres, I believe, are dead.

I will preface my narrative with a brief reference to the Saturday night fire of Oct. 7. This fire started about 10:30 o'clock in the planing mill of Lull & Holmes on Canal street, near Adams. It wiped out everything from Clinton street to the river and from Adams to Van Buren street. The loss was nearly \$1,000,000.

Every piece of fire fighting apparatus in the department was pressed into service and all that kept the entire west side from burning up was the strenuous work of firemen. Some companies did not return to their homes until late Sunday afternoon. The department was exhausted from its long hard battle and some engines were disabled.

Sees Glow in Sky.

This was the condition of things when the alarm was given for the fire of Sunday night, Oct. 8. I had written, or rather assisted in the writing, of the Saturday night fire and was fagged out when I got home about noon. I slept a few hours and in the evening went to call on friends at Twelfth and Waller streets, after I had looked in at the old Twelfth street station to see if anything was doing.

Between 9:30 and 10 o'clock my attention was called to a red glow in the sky east of Halsted street and north of Twelfth. I went there and found several cottages and sheds burning on the north side of De Koven street. The first fireman I saw was "Bill" Musham, who later became chief of the department. At that time he was foreman of No. 6, known as the "Little Giant," which was named in honor of Stephen A. Douglas.

Musham's company was the first to arrive at the fire, and the first to throw a stream. "Jack" Campton, who also became fire chief in later years, was a pipeman on No. 6. He and Musham were holding the nozzle and

directing a stream on the fire when I arrived.

Fire Has Small Beginning.

Thinking it would be only a small blaze compared with the previous night's fire, I did not think it worth while taking any notes. Musham had told me that the fire started in the cow stable of Patrick O'Leary, who resided at 137 De Koven street. "Big Jim" O'Leary, the stockyards saloonkeeper, is a son of the family.

It will be necessary for me to digress that I may relate what occurred before the "Little Giant" company reached the fire. In those days there were towers in the engine houses, and the firemen took turns at watching for a blaze. There also was a watchman in the cupola of the courthouse at Washington and Clark streets. From this eyrie he scanned the city for fires.

Mathias Schaeffer was on duty in the courthouse tower. "Bill" Brown was night operator.

Quite a while before Brown got the word from Schaeffer that there was a fire Brown himself had seen a glow in the southwest part of the city, but thought it was from the ruins of the Saturday night fire.

Misjudges Location of Fire.

The fire had been burning almost half an hour before Schaeffer sighted it. There was a haze in the sky from the fire of the previous night and Schaeffer's vision was obscured. He judged the blaze was in the vicinity of Canalport avenue and Halsted street, actually a mile beyond it. He notified Brown of the location and box 342 was sounded.

No box was pulled as the first alarm for the great fire. Although a druggist at Twelfth and Canal streets tried to turn in two alarms from the box at that corner, neither of them registered at fire alarm headquarters.

The man in the tower of No. 6 house on Maxwell street, near Canal, sighted the fire about the same time Schaeffer did. He ran down the stairs and shouted to Foreman Musham to "hitch up." Being within a few blocks of Jefferson and De Koven streets he was able to give the right location. The "Little Giant" company, only half manned, sped away while the bell in the house was striking 3-4-2.

This accounts for No. 6 being first in. Other companies were as near or nearer the fire, but they went out of their way to reach Canalport avenue and Halsted street. On arrival there they found no fire.

Error Makes Fire Possible.

If the right location had been given by Schaeffer there would have been no huge conflagration and consequently no anniversary today. Two of the best steamers in the department, the R. A. Williams and the J. B. Rice would have responded on the first alarm if the proper location had been sounded. As it was, Canalport avenue and Halsted street was outside their district and they did not get under way to the fire until a second alarm, giving the right location, called them out.

In fire fighting the matter of a few seconds often means enormous loss. This was true of the great fire of '71.

The day after Chicago was laid in ashes "Bill" Musham told me that if there had been no fire on Saturday night, which crippled the department, and if Schaeffer had not misjudged the location the "big" fire, as it is called, would not have occurred.

Engine company No. 5, whose house was at Jefferson and Van Buren streets, was the second company in. Instead of going south in Jefferson street directly to the fire, as it would if it had been given the right location, it went west in Van Buren street to Halsted. At Taylor and Halsted streets the driver saw the flames and drove to a plug. Hose was quickly laid, but after working a few minutes the engine broke down and was out of service for an hour or more.

Firemen Exhausted Previous Night.

In addition to these handicaps not more than half of the fire fighting brigade was in physical condition, as a result of the terrible battle waged the previous night.

I will now proceed with my story.

"Bob" Williams, chief of the department was early on the ground. Within a short time after his arrival he called out every company in the service. The department consisted of seventeen steamers, fifty-four hose carts, and three or four hook and ladder trucks.

The Bateham shingle mill and box factory, the Frank Mayer Furniture company, and the Roelle Furniture company provided highly combustible material for the flames to feed on, and in an incredibly short time the fire had reached the west bank of the river.

A terrific southwest wind carried brands for blocks, and these torches ignited the roofs of buildings on which they fell. Coal and lumber yards lined both sides of the river, and the wind carried burning boards across the stream.

South Side Stables Catch Fire.

Shortly before midnight the fire crossed the river between Van Buren and Adams streets. The first building to be attacked on the south side of the city was Frank Parmelee's stables. At this time every piece of apparatus was on the west side. Chief Williams ordered several companies to the south side in an attempt to stay the spreading fire.

The progress of the fire was terrific. Everything in its course was swept away. Burning sticks were carried to the courthouse from the west side, more than a mile distant. Watchman Schaeffer extinguished several incipient blazes in the courthouse tower.

The flames swept east toward Michigan avenue, and there were a dozen fires burning at the same time. The fire extended south to Taylor and Wells streets, destroying the old bridewell, but it was halted at Harrison street and Wabash avenue. Buildings were blown up with gunpowder in an effort to save the business district, but the fire traveled on relentlessly.

Before 1 o'clock in the morning it was apparent that the city was doomed. Business blocks, theaters, hotels, newspaper offices, and public buildings all went down in the blazing mass.

"The Tribune" Building Last to Burn.

One of the last structures in the business section to go down in the onslaught of fire was THE TRIBUNE building. Structures all around it were destroyed early in the morning, but THE TRIBUNE building stood like a sentinel until the middle of the forenoon.

The area burned over, including streets, was about 2,200 acres. The north side was the greatest sufferer. An area covering nearly 1,500 acres was destroyed on this side of the city. Five hundred acres of buildings went down in the flames on the south side, and about 200 acres on the west side.

There were 13,300 buildings destroyed on the north side, 3,650 on the south side, and about 500 on the west side. Most of the latter were frame cottages. One hundred thousand persons were made homeless, and the total loss was \$200,000,000. About 300 lives were lost.

In conclusion I want to say a word as to the probable origin of the fire. It was not started by a cow kicking over a lamp while Mrs. O'Leary was milking the animal.

The O'Learys were all in bed when the fire started. Mrs. O'Leary had milked her cows—she owned five—more than three hours before the fire was discovered. I knew Mrs. O'Leary well. She was a truthful woman. A few days after the fire I interviewed her regarding the story of the cow and the lamp. She branded it as a fabrication.

But I have more than her word for it. Dennis Sullivan, a neighbor of the O'Learys, told me that he discovered the fire, and in the official inquiry that followed to find the cause, he so testified. Sullivan said the O'Learys were in bed when he knocked at the door and awakened them. Dennis Rogan, who resided at 112 De Koven street, also told me that the O'Learys were in bed when the fire started.

It is true that the fire started in the O'Leary cowshed, and I have my reason for believing

that some one went there to oiler milk from one of the cows.

There was a social gathering in the neighborhood that night in honor of the arrival of a young man from Ireland. One of those present told me in after years that two women of the party went to the O'Leary shed to get some milk for punch. One woman held a lighted lamp while the other milked the cow. They thought they heard some one coming, and in their haste to escape the lamp was dropped, setting fire to the place. That, I believe, is the true cause of the fire.