

Excerpt from

# The Great Fire



by *Jim Murphy*

1 Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn. The city boasted having 59,500 buildings, many of them—such as the Courthouse and the Tribune Building—large and ornately decorated. The trouble was that about two-thirds of all these structures were made entirely of wood. Many of the remaining buildings (even the ones proclaimed to be “fireproof”) looked solid, but were actually jerry-built affairs; the stone or brick exteriors hid wooden frames and floors, all topped with highly flammable tar or shingle roofs. It was also a common practice to disguise wood as another kind of building material. The fancy exterior decorations on just about every building were carved from wood, then painted to look like stone or marble. Most churches had steeples that appeared to be solid from the street, but a closer inspection would reveal a wooden framework covered with cleverly painted copper or tin.

2 The situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts. Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses—all made of fast-burning wood, naturally. Because middle-class city dwellers Patrick and Catherine O’Leary both worked, they were able to put a large addition on their cottage despite a lot size of just 25 by 100 feet. Interspersed in residential areas like the O’Learys’ were a variety of businesses: paint factories, lumberyards, distilleries, gasworks, mills, furniture manufacturers, warehouse, and coal distributors.

3 Wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards. Stately stone and brick homes had wood interiors, and stood side-by-side with smaller wood-frame houses. Wooden stables and other storage buildings were common, and trees lined the streets and filled the yards.

4 The links between richer and poorer sections went beyond the materials used for construction or the way buildings were crammed together. Chicago had been built largely on soggy marshland that flooded every time it rained. As the years passed and the town developed, a quick solution to the water and mud problem was needed. The answer was to make the roads and sidewalks out of wood and elevate them above the waterline, in some places by several feet. On the day the fire started, over 55 miles of pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of city in a highly combustible knot.

5 Fires were common in all cities back then, and Chicago was no exception. In 1863 there had been 186 reported fires in Chicago; the number had risen to 515 by 1868. Records for 1870 indicate that fire fighting companies responded to nearly 600

alarms. The next year saw even more fires spring up, mainly because the summer had been unusually dry. Between July and October, only a few scattered showers had taken place and these did not produce much water at all. Trees drooped in the unrelenting summer sun; grass and leaves dried out. By October, as many as six fires were breaking out every day. On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control. What made Sunday the eighth different and particularly dangerous was the steady wind blowing in from the southwest.

- 6 It was this gusty, swirling wind that drove the flames from the O'Learys' barn into neighboring yards. To the east, a fence and shed went up in flames; to the west, a barn smoldered for a few minutes, then flared up into a thousand yellow-orange fingers. Neighbor Dennis Rogan had heard shouts about fire and returned. He forced open the door to the O'Learys' house and called them to wake up.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**QUIZ**  
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*Directions: Circle the best answer.*

1. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of the text?
  - a. Don't use wood for any buildings in a city.
  - b. Winds can spread fires quickly and help fuel a major disaster.
  - c. A city with mostly wooden structures can quickly go up in flames.
  - d. Fires can quickly get out of control.
  
2. The word smoldered in the last paragraph means
  - a. grew angry.
  - b. exploded.
  - c. burned without a flame.
  - d. burned brightly.
  
3. Builders disguised wooden buildings by covering the wood with material that looked like stone, marble, copper, or tin because
  - a. they wanted to save money.
  - b. they enjoyed fooling the public.
  - c. wood was available and less costly than stone or marble.
  - d. Both *a* and *c* are logical inferences.
  
4. Why does Jim Murphy include the detail that Chicago was built on marshland?
  - a. to show how resourceful the city's founders were
  - b. to help readers understand why roads and sidewalks were made of wood
  - c. to suggest there was enough water to put out a big fire
  - d. to prove Chicago should never have been built
  
5. Why does Murphy give background about the frequency of fires in other cities and in Chicago in 1870 and 1871?
  - a. to suggest that builders of cities ignored these facts and kept using wood even though it was dangerous
  - b. to provide readers with historical background that helps them understand that fires happened a lot at that time and it wasn't possible to prevent them
  - c. to show that other cities as well as Chicago had experienced firefighters who could put out blazes
  - d. to demonstrate how important water supplies were to firefighters at that time