

Mr. Morrow's paintings. He could watch over the farm from here. And he would look out these windows to watch as Chicago sprouted up again.

But now it was time to go downstairs with Jennie and Bruno, to join Mama and Mr. Morrow.

Finally Bruno would get his cookie.

WALKING IN OSCAR'S FOOTSTEPS



Every I Survived book feels like a special occasion for me, a chance to travel back in time, to bring new characters to life. But this book, the eleventh in the I Survived series, is unique because the topic was picked by you, my readers. Thousands of I Survived readers participated in an online contest in which you chose one of three topics.

The winner: the Great Chicago Fire.

And now can I tell you a little secret? (Don't tell my editor!)

I wasn't *really* rooting for the Chicago Fire to win. Of course I knew it was a terrible disaster. But

I worried that it wouldn't be so interesting to write about.

Well, I was wrong. And that's what I LOVE about writing this series. Even topics that at first don't fascinate me get a grip on me, pull me in, take over my thoughts.

The Chicago Historical Society has collected eyewitness accounts by survivors, and most are available online. There are also some incredible books about the history of Chicago, and I devoured them. I studied old maps and hundreds of photographs, and watched documentaries.

But the best part of researching my book was visiting Chicago with my family.

What a beautiful city! We prowled the streets, staring at some of the most famous skyscrapers in the world. We took a boat ride along the Chicago River, strolled the shores of Lake Michigan, and gorged ourselves on some of the most delicious foods I have ever eaten.

I was able to imagine the city as Oscar would have seen it in 1871. It wasn't such a pretty place back then. The streets were crowded with buggies

and wagons and drays, all pulled by horses. The wooden sidewalks were raised above the streets, so you had to be careful not to tumble off. Hundreds of trains arrived in Chicago every day, more than in any other city in the world. Train tracks ran right along the streets, and grisly collisions between trains and wagons, trains and horses, and trains and people were common.

And then there was the smell.

I actually spent about a week coming up with that one line in Chapter 3, where Oscar compares the smell of Chicago to the smell of one hundred skunks in a hot outhouse (I do love a simile!). I'm not sure if that's exactly right, and I'm glad I didn't have to smell it for myself. The stench came from the slaughterhouses, the stockyards filled with cattle, the coal smoke from factories and hundreds of trains steaming in and out every day. Plus, people didn't take as many baths back then, or wash their clothes often. So you can imagine (or better yet, maybe you shouldn't try!).

But even in those long-ago smelly days, Chicago inspired people with its unique energy and

can-do spirit. Many of those who lived in Chicago at the time of the fire were new immigrants, most from Germany, Poland, and Ireland. They had braved long voyages in hopes of finding better lives for their families.

It was this spirit that made Chicago into the fastest-growing city in the world, and that enabled its people to rebound from the Great Fire. Just two decades after that terrible disaster, Chicago had been completely rebuilt, and this time it truly was beautiful (and better-smelling).

As with every book in my series, the historical events in the story are all true. My characters come from my imagination. But the situations they face and the details of their lives are inspired by real people I discover in my research. I'm grateful to all of you for leading me to this topic, for sending me on a journey through time that I will never forget.

On the following pages are answers to some questions that might be on your mind, and ideas for how you can learn more on your own.

Lauren Tarshis

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE AND MORE



When did the fire start, and how long did it last?

The fire began at around 9:00 P.M. on Sunday, October 8, 1871. It started in a barn owned by the O'Leary family, on DeKoven Street. It spread quickly to the north and east, crossing the river, and finally destroying an area of the city four miles long and one mile wide. The worst of the fires had burned themselves out by late Monday night. Rain that started on Tuesday morning finished the job.

What about Mrs. O'Leary and her cow?

The most famous story about the Chicago Fire tells how it started. It goes like this: A poor and lazy woman named Catherine O'Leary was in her barn on Sunday night, milking the cow she'd ignored all day. The cow was upset and kicked over a kerosene lamp that Mrs. O'Leary had brought into the barn to light her way. *Whoosh!* The fire started, and burned much of Chicago to the ground.

This story was first printed in the *Chicago Evening Journal-Extra* on Monday, October 9, while the fire still raged. The story spread as quickly as the fire.

The only problem with the story: It's probably not true.

Catherine O'Leary was a real woman. Her cow was a real cow, and there is no doubt that the fire started in her barn.

But most agree that the rest of the story is fiction. Even the man who wrote the newspaper article admitted he'd made up the part about the cow kicking over the lamp. He was looking for a colorful story to explain how the great fire

started, and people were eager to pin the blame on someone. Poor Mrs. O'Leary.

Here is what is known for sure:

Catherine O'Leary and her husband, Patrick, were a hardworking and respected couple raising six children. Mrs. O'Leary actually had five cows and ran a successful business selling the milk to neighbors. At the time the fire started, at around 9:00, the O'Learys were fast asleep. But the truth didn't matter. As Jim Murphy wrote in *The Great Fire*, "Gossip hardened into established fact."

The O'Learys lost all of their cows in the fire. But it was the gossip that did the most damage. According to her children, Mrs. O'Leary never recovered from the hurt and shame of being unfairly blamed for the most famous fire in U.S. history.

So who is to blame for starting the fire?

Over the years, people have suggested other theories about the cause of the fire. Some blame people who were renting the small cottage near the O'Learys' house. There were reports that they

hosted a party, and that guests drifted into the barn and sparked the fire with their pipes or cigars. Others blame a man named Daniel "Peg Leg" Sullivan, claiming that he might have sneaked into the barn to steal some milk.

But there is no evidence backing up these theories.

The real causes are probably less interesting.

The main culprit was a drought that had gripped the entire Midwest for more than a year before the fire. In Chicago, only one inch of rain had fallen since early July. The entire city was bone dry.

Another cause, and probably more important, was the careless way the city had been built. Most buildings were made of wood, mostly pine, which is especially flammable. Even most of the "fire-proof" buildings were often made of wood, with thin layers of brick or marble on top and highly flammable tar shingles covering their rooftops. The city's miles of sidewalks were made of wood, as were many roads. In some neighborhoods, wooden houses, shacks, and barns were all crammed together.

Did people know this was dangerous? Yes. Fires were common in cities back then. But in the fastest-growing city on earth, these worries were pushed to the side.

Why didn't the fire department try harder to put the fire out?

Chicago really did have one of the best fire departments in the country, with 185 firefighters and 17 horse-drawn steam engines. These engines, powered by coal, were used to pump water through hoses.

Just the night before, the fire department had battled an enormous blaze not far from the O'Learys. It took nearly every fireman in the city to fight that fire, which destroyed dozens of buildings. But in the end, the firemen succeeded in putting it out before it spread farther.

It was these same exhausted, scorched firemen who were called to fight the fire that broke out in the O'Learys' barn. Seven fire companies rushed out. But a series of errors sent them to the wrong neighborhood. By the time they arrived at

the scene, the blaze was out of control and was spraying embers and sparks into the sky. An unusually strong wind was blowing that night, and it carried those sparks far and wide, igniting fires and then spreading the flames.

How many people died?

Estimates hover around 300. At the time, about 334,000 people lived in Chicago, so the vast majority of the residents did manage to escape. Many of those who died were trapped by the fire. Others died crossing bridges that collapsed into the Chicago River.

Was the Chicago Fire the deadliest in U.S. history?

The Great Chicago Fire is remembered because it destroyed a four-mile swath of one of America's most important cities. But it was not the deadliest fire. Amazingly the deadliest fire in U.S. history happened the *very same day* as the Great Chicago Fire, about 250 miles to the north, in Peshtigo, Wisconsin.

Peshtigo was a logging town, and workers often set small fires in the surrounding forests to burn away brush and stumps. But on October 8, those same prairie winds that hit Chicago were blowing in Peshtigo, and the small fires turned into a massive forest fire.

Nobody knows exactly how many people died in the Peshtigo fire — between 1,500 and 2,500. But the terrible event was overshadowed by the Chicago disaster.

Were there really children living alone like Jennie and Bruno?

Sadly, yes. In fact, this is the second *I Survived* book that features children who are orphaned and living on the streets (the other is *I Survived the San Francisco Earthquake, 1906*). The problem of "street children" was huge in American cities, until perhaps the 1930s. Many children lost their parents to diseases that today are curable, such as cholera and influenza. In Jennie and Bruno's day, many children also had lost their fathers on the battlefields of the Civil War, which ended in 1865.

What happened to people who survived the fire?

Of the 334,000 people living in Chicago at the time of the fire, 100,000 lost their homes.

Within days of the fire, train cars filled with food, tents, clothes, blankets, and other supplies were pouring into Chicago from all around the country. Tent cities cropped up in Lincoln Park. The city set up food kitchens, and handed out wood so people could build shacks where their houses had stood.

But life was grim and difficult, especially for the poor. Many people lost everything they owned in the fire. And with so many factories and businesses destroyed, many people could not find jobs.

But most people in the city were determined to rebuild their lives — and their city.

By the early 1880s, the city was bustling again. Glorious new buildings replaced the shoddily constructed structures that had burned so quickly in the fire. Strict building laws made the people living there much safer.

FOR FURTHER READING AND LEARNING



I used many books and other resources to research my book. Here are two I think you would like to explore on your own.

The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory

This website, created by the Chicago Historical Society and Northwestern University, features eyewitness accounts of the fire, articles written in the aftermath, photographs and illustrations from the time of the Great Chicago Fire, and

much more. You could spend weeks happily exploring this interactive site.

www.greatchicagofire.org

The Great Fire by Jim Murphy

(Scholastic)

In this award-winning book for kids, author Jim Murphy follows a group of survivors of the Chicago Fire to create an almost minute-by-minute account of the event, from the first sparks in the O'Leary barn to the city's recovery.



PHOTO BY DAVID DREYFUSS

THE AUTHOR AT THE CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM

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