



Commemorating a conflagration

Fire Prevention Week was established to commemorate the Great Chicago Fire, the tragic 1871 conflagration that killed more than 250 people, left 100,000 homeless, destroyed more than 17,400 structures and burned more than 2,000 acres. The fire began on October 8, but continued into and did most of its damage on October 9, 1871.

According to popular legend, the fire broke out after a cow - belonging to Mrs. Catherine O'Leary - kicked over a lamp, setting first the barn, then the whole city on fire. Chances are you've heard some version of this story yourself; people have been blaming the Great Chicago Fire on the cow and Mrs. O'Leary, for more than 130 years. But recent research by Chicago historian Robert Cromie has helped to debunk this version of events.

The 'Moo' myth

Like any good story, the 'case of the cow' has some truth to it. The great fire almost certainly started near the barn where Mrs. O'Leary kept her five milking cows. But there is no proof that O'Leary was in the barn when the fire broke out - or that a jumpy cow sparked the blaze. Mrs. O'Leary herself swore that she'd been in bed early that night, and that the cows were also tucked in for the evening.

But if a cow wasn't to blame for the huge fire, what was? Over the years, journalists and historians have offered plenty of theories. Some blamed the blaze on a couple of neighborhood boys who were near the barn sneaking cigarettes. Others believed that a neighbor of the O'Leary's may have started the fire. Some people have speculated that a fiery meteorite may have fallen to earth on October 8, starting several fires that day - in Michigan and Wisconsin, as well as in Chicago.

The biggest blaze that week

While the Great Chicago Fire was the best-known blaze to start during this fiery two-day stretch, it wasn't the biggest. That distinction goes to the Peshtigo Fire, the most devastating forest fire in American history. The fire, which also occurred on October 8th, 1871, and roared through Northeast Wisconsin, burning down 16 towns, killing 1,152 people, and scorching 1.2 million acres before it ended.

Historical accounts of the fire say that the blaze began when several railroad workers clearing land for tracks unintentionally started a brush fire. Before long, the fast-moving flames were whipping through the area 'like a tornado,' some survivors said. It was the small town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin that suffered the worst damage. Within an hour, the entire town had been destroyed.

Eight decades of fire prevention

Those who survived the Chicago and Peshtigo fires never forgot what they'd been through; both blazes produced countless tales of bravery and heroism. But the fires also changed the way that firefighters and public officials thought about fire safety. On the 40th anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire, the Fire Marshals Association of North America (today known as the [International Fire Marshals Association](#)), decided that the anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire should henceforth be observed not with festivities, but in a way that would keep the public informed about the importance of fire prevention. The commemoration grew incrementally official over the years.

In 1920, President Woodrow Wilson issued the first National Fire Prevention Day proclamation, and since 1922, Fire Prevention Week has been observed on the Sunday through Saturday period in which October 9 falls. According to the National Archives and Records Administration's Library Information Center, Fire Prevention Week is the longest running public health and safety observance on record. The President of the United States has signed a proclamation proclaiming a national observance during that week every year since 1925.

Fire Prevention Week themes over the years

1957 Don't Give Fire a Place to Start
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1965 Don't Give Fire a Place to Start
1966 Fight Fire
1967 Fire Hurts
1968 Fire Hurts
1969 Fire Hurts
1970 Fire Hurts
1971 Fire Hurts
1972 Fire Hurts
1973 Help Stop Fire
1974 Things That Burn
1975 Learn Not to Burn
1976 Learn Not to Burn
1977 Where There's Smoke, There Should Be a Smoke Alarm
1978 You Are Not Alone!
1979 Partners in Fire Prevention
1980 Partners in Fire Prevention
1981 EDITH (Exit Drills In The Home)
1982 Learn Not To Burn - Wherever You Are
1983 Learn Not To Burn All Through the Year
1984 Join the Fire Prevention Team
1985 Fire Drills Save Lives at Home at School at Work
1986 Learn Not to Burn: It Really Works!
1987 Play It Safe...Plan Your Escape
1988 A Sound You Can Live With: Test Your Smoke Detector
1989 Big Fires Start Small: Keep Matches and Lighters in the Right Hands
1990 Keep Your Place Firesafe: Hunt for Home Hazards
1991 Fire Won't Wait...Plan Your Escape.
1992 Test Your Detector - It's Sound Advice!
1993 Get Out, Stay Out: Your Fire Safe Response
1994 Test Your Detector For Life
1995 Watch What You Heat: Prevent Home Fires!
1996 Let's Hear It For Fire Safety: Test Your Detectors!
1997 Know When to Go: React Fast to Fire
1998 Fire Drills: The Great Escape!
1999 Fire Drills: The Great Escape!
2000 Fire Drills: The Great Escape!
2001 Cover the Bases & Strike Out Fire
2002 Team Up for Fire Safety
2003 When Fire Strikes: Get Out! Stay Out!
2004 It's Fire Prevention Week! Test Your Smoke Alarms
2005 Use Candles With Care
2006 Prevent Cooking Fires: Watch What You Heat