

# Holy cow! Research questions O'Leary cause of Great Chicago Fire

## Lawyer says records point to neighbor as the likely culprit

By PAM BELLUCK

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CHICAGO — *"Late one night, when we were all in bed, "Mrs. O'Leary lit a lantern in the shed. "Her cow kicked it over "Then winked her eye and said, "There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"*

Now it can be told: Mrs. O'Leary and her cow have gotten a bum rap. Somebody else may have started the Great Chicago Fire.

So, at least, says a title insurance company lawyer, who has spent every other Saturday for the last two years burrowing into the underbelly of Chicago's most grievous disaster and most popular legend—indeed, one of the most notorious yarns of urban American folklore.

Richard Bales, a 45-year-old employee of Chicago Title Insurance Co., contends that his research throws water on the O'Leary cow-conflagration theory.

He says evidence suggests Mrs. O'Leary was not in the barn milking her cow that night 126 years ago, but was home in bed.

And he says there is another likely culprit: a relatively unknown fellow named Daniel (Peg Leg) Sullivan, a one-legged horsecart-driver who was a neighbor of Mrs. O'Leary and who may, in fact, have been in her barn, lighting a lantern or smoking a pipe on Oct. 8, 1871, when one-third of Chicago burned down, 300 people were killed and

100,000 were left homeless.

Bales is not the first person with a hunch that Mrs. O'Leary might be innocent. But he realized a couple of years ago that, for all the speculation, no one had ever looked in depth at some crucial pieces of evidence. No one, for example, had been able to map the area around De Koven Street, where the fire started in the O'Leary barn.

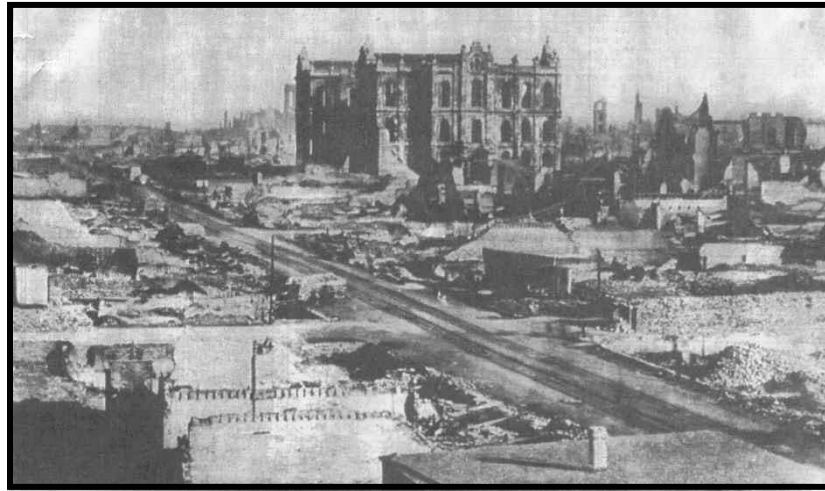
Bales had access to the property records kept by Chicago Title. He dug them up and figured out what houses and barns stood where, how the doors were positioned and where the fences stood. Then he sat down in the Chicago Historical Society archives with his lap-top computer and began to transcribe the 1,000 pages of the official inquiry conducted by the Chicago Fire Department.

He was struck that Peg Leg Sullivan seemed to have a lot to say. Sullivan said he had been in front of another neighbor's house and had seen the fire break out in the O'Leary's barn. But Bales discovered that the title records showed that at least one house, maybe two, plus an 8-foot-high fence, would have blocked Sullivan's view.

Sullivan also told the fire department that he had run to the barn, had tried to rescue the animals and then had run to get help—all on his wooden leg.

"It does not seem possible that Sullivan would be able to hobble 193 feet into a burning barn that was full of hay and wood shavings, struggle with animals, fall down, but still ultimately free a calf," Bales wrote in an article published in the Spring issue of The Illinois State Historical Society journal.

Bales thinks that Sullivan, who also testified that he went to the O'Leary barn every evening to feed the cow that his mother kept there,



**This is a rare photo from the Chicago Historical Society of downtown Chicago after the fire. The gutted building in the center was the Cook County Courthouse.**

might have been in the barn and inadvertently caused the fire himself.

"There's no smoking gun, but I think I have enough ancillary smoke," Bales said last week as he stood outside the old water tower that was one of the few structures to survive the fire.

Bales says he thinks that Sullivan "dropped a pipe or maybe dropped a lantern," adding: "A third of Chicago burned down. You can't blame him for being afraid to tell."

To be fair, Sullivan was not the one trying to implicate Mrs. O'Leary, who kept five cows and made rounds selling milk in the working-class Irish neighborhood. Indeed, Sullivan said his calls for help roused Mrs. O'Leary and her husband, Catherine and Patrick, out of bed.

But Bales says he thinks the fire department, in an effort to close the case quickly and cover up what reportedly was its own bumbling, booze-drenched, bribe-influenced

manner of quenching the fire in certain neighborhoods and not in others, neglected to ask Sullivan about inconsistencies in his story.

The official panel demurred on reaching a conclusion.

Still, the legend of Mrs. O'Leary and her cow rocketed around the world, elasticized and altered along the way.

A 1938 movie, "In Old Chicago," starred Tyrone Power, Don Ameche and, in an Oscar-winning role, Alice Brady, as the fire-starting cow-milker, who was called "Molly O'Leary" in the film.

Lyrics about Mrs. O'Leary were written to the tune of "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

In the telling of the tale, the cow went through various identity crises. In most versions of the story, her name was Daisy; in others it was Gwendolyn or Madeline. (Her real name, if she had one, has been lost to history.)

There was even a postcard circulating in the years after the fire that

putatively showed the culpable cow—except the animal was a steer, complete with long horns.

And as a symbol of Chicago, the cow has endured in poetry, paintings, product commercials, tavern names and gift-shop trinkets.

"One of the most remarkable things about this is the way that the city embraced its own destruction," said Carl Smith, a professor of English and American Studies at Northwestern University, and author of a book about the Great Fire, "Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief" (University of Chicago Press, 1995). "It is one of the nodes of memory in American popular culture, another, Kennedy theory, another Lincoln theory."

Mrs. O'Leary herself was both vilified and sought after by the 1870s incarnations of paparazzi and the tabloid press; she reportedly refused to sell her story or her photograph, and, mortified by descriptions of her as lazy, slow-witted or as a woman with a husband who made her do the milking, she moved to Michigan for a time.

"On one hand it can be seen in a kind of sinister way, anti-Irish, anti-woman, anti-Catholic, anti-poor," Smith said of the O'Leary legend. "On the other hand, it became integrated" in the Chicago booster mythology: This is the city that a cow kicked over."

On occasion, other theories have been floated.

There was an allegation that the fire was started by an exiled member of the Paris Commune who wanted to "take revenge on the capitalist class," but missed and burned down mostly working-class houses, said Karen Sawislak, an assistant professor of history at Stanford University and also the author of a 1995 book on the Chicago fire, "Smoldering City: Chicago and the

Great Fire" (University of Chicago Press). There was the rumor that the fire had been prophesied by an American anarchist.

And, in 1985, Mel Waskin, who worked for a science film-making company, wrote a book called "Mrs. O'Leary's Comet! Cosmic Causes of the Great Chicago Fire," which said the fire was caused by pieces of the comet Biela II hitting Chicago.

Both Professors Smith and Sawislak say they think the mystery will never be solved, but they add that Bales might be onto something.

"It's really a very impressive piece of historical detective work," Professor Sawislak said. "And I think he has gone at it with sources and skills that are unique."

Smith, who last year wrote the text for a Chicago Historical Society Website in honor of the 125th anniversary of the Great Fire, said he would "very likely" include Bales' thesis in an updated version of the site.

"Dick Bales has done a very careful and suggestive investigation," Smith laid.

Will the Peg Leg Sullivan theory catch on? Will Steven Spielberg option the Illinois State Historical Society journal article?

Bales knows very well that legends have a longer shelf life than facts. But, with less than 100 pages of the fire department inquiry left to transcribe, he is working on a book he hopes will become accepted history.

And a month and a half ago, in the city's upscale Lincoln Park neighborhood, came the first sign that the man with the wooden leg might yet earn a spot in the Chicago pantheon of infamy, right up there with Al Capone and John Dillinger.

A bar-restaurant opened—the first to be called Peg Leg Sullivan's.