

Meet the O'Learys Biography



Catherine O'Leary is best known for something she did not do. So, who was she? She and her husband, Patrick, were born in Ireland near the city of Cork. They married in 1845. Ireland was in the middle of a famine, which is an extreme shortage of food. Many Irish people **immigrated** to the United States to find new opportunities. The O'Learys decided to leave too. The couple first settled in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Patrick **enlisted** in the Union Army during the Civil War.

After the Civil War, the O'Leary family moved west to Chicago. By 1871, they had five children and owned a small home. Patrick worked as a **day laborer** and Catherine had her own milk business. She owned five cows. Each day, Catherine milked the cows. She saved some milk for her family and sold the rest to neighbors. The O'Learys rented half of their small house to another Irish family. The rent money also helped them make ends meet.

The fall months of 1871 were hot, dry, and windy in Chicago. Fires were a problem throughout the city and in the O'Leary's neighborhood on the south side. Joseph Chamberlain was a newspaper reporter. He described the area as having "one story homes, cow stables, corn cribs, sheds. Every building within four feet of its neighbor and everything [made] of wood."

The night of October 8, 1871, the O'Leary's' lives changed forever. They were in bed asleep and a fire started in their barn. Neighbors woke them up. They worked hard to keep the fire from spreading to nearby buildings. There was no stopping it. The strong winds pushed the fire throughout the city. By the end of the Great Chicago Fire, 100,000 people lost their homes, and three miles of the city had burned.

Newspaper stories said Catherine O'Leary started the fire. Fire Department investigations into the cause of the fire proved she did not start it. People still blamed her because of who she was – an Irish immigrant, a Catholic, a woman. Reporters tried to talk to her and Patrick about the Fire, but they would not answer. The did not trust reporters to tell the truth. To get a fresh start, she and her family moved to a house in the Bridgeport neighborhood. She was never able to escape the blame for the fire. Patrick died in 1894 and she died about a year later. Sadly, the legend of Mrs. O'Leary and her cow starting the Great Chicago Fire is still told today. We can change that by telling the truth about them.

Vocabulary:

Immigrated: when a person has moved from one country to live in another

Enlisted: when a person has joined the military

Day Laborer: a person hired for a day or more to do physical work that did not require any specialized knowledge.