The Chicago Fire

It had taken almost a hundred days before the fire broke out in 8th October 1871 in Chicago. For all those days, it had not rained in Chicago. The structures in the entire city were made of wood including the buildings. The sidewalks and roads were just but planks, which were laid down on top of mud. They had all dried out due to the parched summer weather. When autumn came, leaves covered the brown lawns. Additionally, hay was also stockpiled for the domestic animals in preparation for winter. Essentially, kerosene and wood were always on-hand for cooking and heating. Lack of rain for such a long period in Chicago had left everything in such a way that, any spark could set fire that would probably seep large tracks of land or even the whole city. A strong and steady wind always blew from the sides of the south-western part of Chicago and what was required was just but a spark of fire to start a huge inferno all over the city.

Replacements for the fire volunteer department had been made in 1858 and full time professional cops had taken over their duties. As the new department in charge, they had requested larger water mains, new hydrants, and two fireboats for patrolling the rivers spanned by use of the wooden bridges. They also need more men to assist in the duties. In addition, the requested to have a department for building inspection that would be in charge of the storey business buildings, which were shoddily, build. The buildings acted as fire traps. The city had declined all the requests in fear of higher taxes hindering the growth and development of businesses

The fire fighters, who were only 185 in number, battled the city blazes each day in October 1871. This culminated into 17-hour battle of controlling the fire that ended up consuming four blocks of the city. The fire had begun on Saturday of October 7 and put the fire department on gear up to that Sunday morning.

The success in putting out the fire by the concerned department was dependent on the ability to spot the inferno as it occurred and controlling it before it even spread to other building or localities. At about 9PM on October 8th when the fire occurred, the guards put on duty perceived the fire on the western side of Chicago. The fire was located on a grid after alarm went out. The drawback was that, the guard had missed the location of the place by almost a mile. The defence, which was exhausted, were just coalescing about the whole location

On October 8th 1871, during the evening hours at the street of 137 De Koven on the western side of Chicago the neighbour of Catherine O’Leary reported that they had seen flames coming from the cow barn of O’leary. Within short period, the fire destroyed the poor shanties and was carried by wind towards the north and eastern parts. As warehouses and factories caught fire, higher flames were fuelled and filled the whole vicinity. The heat rose and increased compelling the cooler air down. As a result, the superheated air columns whirled and created the worst Tornado of whirl wind ever experienced in history then. As the whirling wind blew much faster, the roofs were ripped off. They were thrown hundred miles on the air.

Lump of fire spewed across the rivers of Chicago and by midnight, flames caught the southern side. Later, other chunks of flames were thronged across the rivers. The tossed flames landed on a tanker that harboured kerosene on the northern side. This doomed the wood-constructed residential areas of the northern side. The wood and trees burned, stones converted to dust as other stones crumbled and collapsed into rubble. Indeed, even steel and iron melted. The Palmer house was destroyed, the Marshall Field was blackened, the McCormick Reaper was consumed and the fire consumed other big buildings. Hundreds of people lost their properties and were left homeless. Crazed horses wildly flailed as trees exploded. Dogs were perceived running around in circles as rats fled the fire from the wooden sidewalks. In fact, some were killed by stampede of human as they ran. People ran and prisons were opened for the criminals to survive the night. Carriage drivers were hired by the rich to ferry their properties. Some of them if lucky found their properties and the drivers safe. The poor got into business of grabbing precious items, which they later abandoned as they sought shelter.

Heat seared through the backs of people as they ran and dried their lungs and chest as they tried drawing breath. In fact, the fire leaped ahead barring all possible path of escaping from it .At length, a big number of people accumulated along the lakes and water basins wading up to the stomach height in a bid to escape the sparks and heat. During that night, all people were united along the lake in their misfortune.

Fortunately, on tenth morning, rain came and flames were extinguished. About 300 individuals (one in every thousand people) died. More than 70,000 constructions and 73 miles along the street were also destroyed. The families were however, reunited immediately the ashes settled. The city’s power brokers got back to work and started rebuilding the city. The state street was cleared to pave way for the Potter Palmer’s plan for the new city. Many design opportunities cropped up for building the skyscrapers.

One month after the event of the fire, Joseph Medill became the mayor of the city after he promised to institute fire codes and stricter building to the city. That was the pledge that helped him win the election. Additionally, since the fire had destroyed records of voters in the city, it was alleged that people voted more than once to put him in power.

Despite the huge destruction caused by the fire, much of the physical infrastructure in Chicago remained intact such as the transportation system. The efforts to reconstruct started immediately and attracted, as well as spurred population grown and economic development. This was largely enhanced by the outlay of the modern city that featured the skyscrapers. During the time of the tragic fire, the population of Chicago was about 324000 people. Within a period of nine years, the population had increased to 500,000. Indeed, by 1890, Chicago had become a major transportation and economic hub and had a population of approximately one million people. During that time, in America, only New York had a large population of people. In 1893, the city hosted the Columbian Exposition of the world, which was a tourist attraction and was visited by about 27.5 million people. This marked the starting point of the growth of the city.

Apparently, the fire department training academy in Chicago is located on one side of the O’leary property. This is where the Great Chicago fire commenced. In 1997, the city council of Chicago passed a resolution that exonerated Catherine O’leary who was an Irish immigrant and died in 1895 together with her cow.

Nevertheless, the blame of the fire was pointed on the poor Catherine O’Leary despite the fact that the city had ignored all the recommendations and warnings hitherto issued. The downtown Chicago was also revealed as a Potemkin with facades of only one brick thick. The industrialists had also polluted the river with oil and grease and that is alleged to be the one that caught fire. There are also other theories that came up as the cause of fire. Some theorist argues that some boys were gambling as they smoke in the barn. A meteor split spontaneously and fell on the ground causing fire. It is therefore, hard for people to get the actual truth concerning the cause of the fire.

Catherine was an immigrant in the city and was just a newcomer. It was however, rumoured that her cow knocked down a lamp in the cow barn. This was however, a story invented by some reporters who confessed later to have committed the slander. By the time they admitted, it was too late and Catherine had become a recluse. Catherine died in 1895.