

**Personal Experiences
During the Chicago Fire
1871**

by

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As this is a purely personal narrative, names of other persons with whom the author came in contact from time to time during these experiences have been omitted as of no historical value to readers.

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On October 8th, 9th and 10th, 1871, a fire swept out of existence the entire business district of the City of Chicago, located mainly on the South Side, virtually the entire residence and business districts of the North Side, blocks of many handsome and comfortable residences on the South Side and a goodly number of homes and business buildings on the near West Side. Over two hundred people lost their lives, and of its three hundred thousand inhabitants one hundred thousand were rendered homeless, of whom I was one. The money loss was over two hundred million dollars. The land devastated covered an area of over two thousand acres.

I had been a resident of Chicago for sixteen months and in that time had made myself familiar with its business and residence districts and its topography. I lived, at the time of the fire, in a boarding house at 110 North Dearborn Street, now 548 North Dearborn Street, one door south of Ohio Street. I was a bookkeeper for the Western Union Telegraph Company at its main office which was located at the northwest corner of Washington and La Salle Streets. The building now situated there, known as the Merchants' Building, excepting some recent interior improvements, is a replica of the one which was destroyed by the fire.

The summer of 1871 was an intensely hot one. No rain had fallen in the Lake region for about three months prior to October 8th. Great forest fires with large loss of life were taking place in the

then heavily pine-forested regions of Central and Northern Michigan and Wisconsin. I recall our excitement on Saturday and Sunday, October 7th and 8th, on reading in the morning papers stories of the destruction of forests and villages, with the loss of many lives, about Sturgeon Bay and other places in Wisconsin and Michigan.

As is generally known, the residential portion of Chicago was almost wholly constructed of wood. Brick and limestone structures were largely confined to the South Side business district. South of that were many handsome residences with Joliet limestone fronts and brick side walls. Such was not the case on the North and West Sides where the common structures, by the mile, were the one-story basement frame cottages with outside front steps leading to the upper floor. It is needless to state that there were many handsome homes in the district north of Indiana Street (now Grand Avenue), east of Clark Street and south of North Avenue.

The streets, where paved, were generally so with the so-called Nicholson blocks, round pine blocks laid upon hemlocks planks and heavily tarred over with a surfacing of torpedo gravel which in a short time was either ground into the soft pine blocks or swept away by the wind and rains.

The sidewalks, except in the South Side business district, where limestone flags predominated, were entirely of pine or hemlock planking and many of the streets were raised on wooden supports from four to ten feet above the natural surface to meet the street grades which had by that much been raised above the natural surface. It can be seen what added fuel to a general fire was made by such construction of sidewalks and street pavements. The raised

portions of the streets were sustained by heavy stone retaining walls on each side.

As there was little of grade uniformity in the sidewalks on some of the side streets, it was a real exercise to go up and down the steps from one lot to another between the walks respectively at street and surface grade. I recall that on the North side of Indiana Street, between Clark and Dearborn Streets, in a distance of about three hundred feet, pedestrians were forced to climb steps up and descend three times, the natural and street grades being over six feet apart. As the street was unpaved and impassable for foot passengers most of the time by reason of mud or deep dust, one was forced to stick to the walk. All this to accommodate the selfish interests of owners of abutting lots who refused to bring their walks to the street grade. Sprains, bruises and broken limbs were common, due to such irregularity of sidewalks, especially in wintertime.

Before midnight of Saturday, October seventh, our household of about thirty boarders was aroused by cries of "Fire!" The sky was red from a southwesterly blaze. A number of the young men, including myself, started for the scene of it and were stopped on the east side of the Madison Street bridge. From there we saw the destruction of the then Union Railroad Station, a frame structure, located on the East Side of Canal Street, opposite Monroe Street. South of Adams Street to Van Buren Street were located planing mills and lumber yards. The fire was fierce and spectacular with such material to feed upon, but there was no wind and the fire exhausted itself without crossing the South Branch of the river. That was the night before the beginning of the great fire. It brought directly home to us all the fire hazard the city was exposed to and

little else was talked of on that Sunday. Everything was as dry as tinder from the long drouth and great summer heat.

Chicago had no Sunday theaters, and for amusement one had to resort to the German beer gardens or to the North Side Turner Hall, where good music was the rule afternoons and evenings. Therefore church attendance was much more general than it is now. I would say that Chicago was then a City of Churches. I attended many services in different churches and often found standing room at a premium on Sunday evenings.

As churchgoers were coming out of their places of worship on Sunday evening, fire bells were ringing furiously and a rapidly increasing red glare towards the Southwest Side indicated that another fire had broken out. A strong hot wind had been blowing from the southwest during the day and it seemed to have gained in strength at this time.

Few of our fellows at the boarding house cared to see another fire after being up most of Saturday night at the one just referred to. Therefore only two of us started out for the scene of the new fire. My companion was young LeRow, somewhat undersized, but exceedingly active. His enthusiasm to see the new blaze carried me with him. We made our way speedily to about Franklin and Monroe Streets. The fire had just leaped across the South Branch at about Adams Street. In that vicinity was located the gas reservoir which supplied the South and North Sides with illuminating gas. All about that neighborhood were many small cottages inhabited mostly by Irish people. The destruction of their homes was an immediate certainty. The possible explosion of the gas tank could not be long deferred. The frantic excitement among the people in their fear that they could not save their household goods was most

moving. With a sympathy but a heedlessness which neither of us could afterwards account for, in the imminent dangers about us, we helped as we could to move their goods into the street. They had better have been left in the cottages for almost as they were being placed in the street some began to smoke from the heat of the air.

The panic which paralyzes human faculties under conditions like that is illustrated by one instance. From one of the cottages a mother had carried into the street, of all things, a bed tick filled with straw, where burning brands were everywhere falling in increasing numbers, and rushing back brought out and dumped a pair of twin infants upon the straw tick and hastened back into her home just as LeRow and I dropped some household articles and noticed a burning brand fall into the straw tick. He grabbed one infant and I the other. We gave the babes to their frantic mother, urging her to run with them for their lives. As we started to run we noticed the straw tick ablaze. No houses had then begun to burn but most of the people joined us in getting away.

We stopped a few moments at the northeast corner of Monroe and Wells Streets to watch a scene there. Barrels of whisky were being rolled on skids into Wells Street from several large stores of dealers in beverages, presumably awaiting immediate cartage, though no drays were visible. However, what we did see was a number of men, each two or three with a scantling or piece of board ramming some of the barrels, and as soon as part of the head had been driven in and the liquor was gushing out the men would throw themselves flat into the street to gulp the whisky as it poured over them. No one interfered with their amusement. It is very likely that some of those men were among those reported "missing" later on.

There was no time to lose. The streets were being littered with burning brands. We ran east on Monroe Street to La Salle and north towards Washington Street. North of Madison Street we were literally running over a coating of red and smoldering fire brands. We saw no other people in that block. About half way in the block LeRow cried out that he was smothering. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him as fast as I could go to Washington Street where the air was free of smoke with few cinders on the street, but a strong hot wind was blowing eastward and carrying many burning brands high in the air. Here LeRow revived and we parted, he to go north, I to go into the Telegraph Company's office to learn if I could be of service. Some three or four of my fellow clerks were there, besides the manager. Some one had opened the vault door, into which we put all the books of account that were about, the men having worked on them that day. Unfortunately the chief bookkeeper had been working all day in a private room on the fourth floor, on his September accounts and had left many of the books up there for the night. They were, of course, lost. I saw the manager place a lot of gold coins into a small portable office safe at his desk. It was suggested to him that we move the safe into the large vault but he declined to have it done as being unnecessary. After the fire the stack of vaults in that building was found upright amidst the debris of the rest of the building, the contents of each vault being intact, but the manager's safe had been melted down and after diligent search amidst the ruins there was found only a little trickle of gold in the shape of a thin vein over some bricks.

All salvage work in our office was being done by the light of the flames. The building opposite on Washington Street was ablaze and the roof of our building was burning. The telegraph operators had abandoned their instruments on the upper floors and were

running down the stairway as I hurried into La Salle Street and ran north to Randolph Street.

The tunnel at that time and until the late Eighties, when it was turned over for the exclusive use of North Side cable cars, had a foot passageway on the east of the teamway. The teamway entrance near Randolph Street was then where it is now, while the foot passage entrance was at Lake Street, the descent being by a stairway to a boardwalk.

I stopped for a few moments at the north corner of Randolph and La Salle Streets to look about me. All the buildings south on La Salle Street as far as I could see, south of Washington Street, were ablaze. So were some north of it. My particular attention was, however, called to the Court House and City Hall. The former had for its center building a brown stone structure surmounted by a cupola in which was hung a large bell. The interior of the building was burning and the flames being carried up through the open space had set the bell to ringing. Above all the sounds of the roaring fire, the wind and the excited shouts of a moving mass of people the bell whirled on its frame and over its stanchions, ringing out with a weirdness and a despairing clangorous volume, as though it were possessed of sense and were agonizing in its struggle against destruction. For many years thereafter the memory of its clangor often awoke me at night to recall the scene.

The east and west wings of the Court House were constructed of Joliet limestone—the west wing being the City Hall. I watched for some moments, with a fascination which only the growing danger to myself drew me away from, the effect of the fire upon the city hall. The strong southwest wind was driving the heat in sheets of flame from the hundreds of burning buildings to the west of it,

upon the southwest corner of the building, with such terrific effect that the limestone was melting and was running down the face of the building with first a slow then an accelerating movement as if it were a thin white paste.

I stopped for a moment to give directions to the wife of the janitor of the Metropolitan Block, the building which was duplicated after the fire and recently wrecked to make room for the present Burnham Building. The woman had four small children and a well filled basket of food. She explained that as it was impossible to save any household goods and as children were always hungry she had decided to take only food.

The carelessness with which some people must have viewed the oncoming flames was evident to me when I saw numbers of guests rushing out of the Sherman House onto Randolph Street. Most of them were in nightclothing, carrying whatever other clothing came handiest in the panic. The Court House opposite must have been burning for over a half hour for it was now near midnight and yet those people had apparently waited, or were left asleep, until the hotel was about to burst into flames before deciding to leave.

I joined the rush of people passing up La Salle Street to the tunnel's pedestrian-passage entrance. Some time after leaving Monroe and Franklin Streets there was a loud explosion. I learned from the crowd making its way to the tunnel that it was the explosion of the gas works. Gas lights had gone out everywhere and the escaping gas had doubtless hastened the action of the fire in many buildings. At any rate the tunnel was dark. As we entered it in pairs with a regularity that seemed as if it were a drill, each person put his hands on the shoulders of the person in front of him and with almost a lock step, with the slogan, "Keep to the right!"

“Keep to the right!” “Keep to the right!” repeated sing song by almost everyone we emerged on the North Side at Kinzie Street. Strange to say that at the same time that a double line of us was walking north through the tunnel, a single line was going south in the same order repeating the same slogan. There was no panic, no crowding, only good humor and good order.

On reaching my boarding house I found Dearborn Street a mass of people and of horses and vehicles. It appeared like an aimless confusion but it was everyone looking out for himself and family without regard to others, and expecting others to do the same. It was exciting but not wildly panicky. We all realized that haste was necessary to get away somewhere out of reach of the flames which were shooting high above the blazing business district and by the light of which we were moving about inside as well as outside the houses, but frankly I saw no evidence of disregard of others' rights in the confused moving to and fro. There were more calm people than one would expect. Our landlady had bethought herself to examine every room a few moments before I returned, she told me, and found two young men sound asleep. I saw one of those two standing on the upper landing of the outer stairs, looking wildly toward the blazing South Side. He had on a dress vest over a long linen duster. His confusion of mind was not much greater than that of most of us later when it came to a question of what we wished to save and what we could save.

I found that most of the boarders were still in the house but were fast leaving with whatever they could carry. I found two, who, ignorant of the extent of the fire, still refused to believe that it would reach the North Side. At that time the air was literally full of burning embers, the wind being so strong that we saw pieces of

wood two or more feet long in full blaze being driven northeastwardly.

Individuals and groups were concerned as to the direction to take in seeking to escape the oncoming flames. I joined a company of a dozen or more, broken into smaller groups later, who decided on going directly west on Ohio Street to as near the North Branch as we could get, thence northward toward Fullerton Avenue, then the city limits, which no one thought of as ever likely to be reached by the fire. Some of the others decided to go directly north into Lincoln Park. That was a bad choice. Others decided that they would go east on Ohio Street to the lake and be in safety on the beach which was very wide at that point. That was the worst choice. I recall a lady and her family taking that direction. When next I saw her she was minus much of her hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. They had been scorched off by the intense heat in spite of the fact that she sat in the lake and frequently ducked her head into the water.

In a very short time we had carried two trunks about three blocks west on Ohio Street and leaving two people to guard them, two returned to the house, threw two more trunks down the stairs and out into the street and carried them to the place where the others were guarded. We returned a second time for our books and carried some armfuls a block or two away and placed them alongside an alley fence.

During this time there was, of course, the greatest excitement on all sides as people were leaving their houses with whatever they could carry. The fire had now crossed the river and was making rapid progress on the North Side.

One scene took place, the relation of which will bring a sympathetic thought for an unknown book lover from all my hearers. I was on the walk in front of the boarding house when my attention was called to a gentleman who had a set of beautifully bound books in his two arms. He explained to an expressman that they were a set of Shakespeare and was asking him to take and move the books. He declined because he said he was trying to save his own goods. The gentleman then offered him \$50.00 to carry the books to a place of safety. This was declined on the ground that he must go quick to save his family. Then the gentleman said "won't you take and save the books if I make you a present of them?" "Yes," he would. "Then take them," said the owner, as he put them into the wagon, turned away and burst into tears.

At our second return to the house there were few people in the immediate vicinity. I saw one man whom I knew as a leather dealer weeping bitterly as he stood at the corner taking a farewell look at the home he owned which was so soon to go up in flames, and while that saddened me, another incident gave me a hearty laugh. It was the sight of a man simply crazy rushing up Dearborn Street with a window blind under one arm but clearly under the impression that he was saving a valuable household article.

On my third return to the house no one but my roommate was there and to all appearances the street south of us was deserted. We agreed it was useless to try to save any more books and we left. We saw no one else south of us. I remained a moment longer, standing on the top of the outside stairway, and saw a sight which in vividness has never faded from my memory. The fire had crossed Kinzie Street some four blocks south of Ohio Street where I was standing. The roar of the flames, the air alive with flying embers, the fierceness with which the wind and fire combined

were whirling the flames into and circling in and above the street, fascinated me. No voice could make itself heard above the roar. Even in the house we had to shout into each others' ears to make ourselves heard. As I came down the steps facing south, the three blocks south of Indiana Street caught fire with the suddenness of the explosion of a bomb, including the pavement and the sidewalks, and were a mass of flames in a moment. It was the first and only instance in which I saw an enveloping movement of the flames to that extent and especially the burning of the street pavement. The dryness of the season, the superheat for hours of the fiercely driven flames, the tarred-over pavement, were sufficient explanation to account for the street's burning, while the thousands of falling burning brands added to the other factors before mentioned easily explained how three blocks of buildings, including brick business buildings, could burst into flames at almost the same instant.

I was around the corner in a second after that and with overcoat collar up, sheltering myself from the heat on the north side of the building. It was now after one o'clock of Monday morning.

When I reached Clark Street the dense mass of people who had been moving up Clark Street for two hours or more had apparently not diminished in numbers although the fire was then burning only about three blocks south, but it was burning with a backward movement slowly towards the northwest. I use the word "slowly" in comparison with the terrific speed with which it was burning directly northeastwardly, of which I have just given an instance.

It will be understood that the force of the southwest wind was driving the flames in a straight northeast direction, the termination point so far as inflammable material was concerned being at about the pumping station at Chicago Avenue and present North

Michigan Avenue. Every one should have felt, but did not, that safety in flight lay in keeping out of the line of the fire as indicated, by walking northward and branching off westwardly and northwardly as fast as conditions permitted. I have indicated that many people took to the lake, in the direct line of the fire. It was strange how indifferent we all were to the contingency of a sudden shift of the wind to the south or southeast, which would have caught thousands upon thousands of us in instant peril of our lives. But the dense, slowly moving mass of people on sidewalks and roadways hindered any free or fast movement east of Wells Street or south of Ohio Street. There were few moving teams in the roadway at this time.

However, the passing crowd had a puzzle nearly equal to that of "The Lady or the Tiger." On my first return to the house I noticed unusual excitement two or three doors south of Ohio Street on the east side of Clark Street. Making my way there I found my haberdasher, a Jew and a genial fellow, in the most frantic condition of mind and body. He was running to the rooms above and back again and inquiring about the fire and looking down the street at the oncoming flames and rushing upstairs and down again with inconceivable rapidity. I did manage to extract from somebody the information that a baby was momentarily expected upstairs, but not knowing the exigency, it was not entering the world with that expedition which the nervous father, physician and family in attendance expected of it. Their very excitement, it was said, proved a hindrance. The puzzle, therefore, was, would the fire or the baby first come to that home? The passing crowd caught the state of affairs, took a humorous interest in it and were extending good wishes and "hopes for the best." I learned a year or two later from the father that "it" came first and was a boy. The mother was

carried out of the house on a stretcher when the fire had actually reached the south end of that block.

At the northwest corner of Ohio and Clark Streets there was a hat and cap store. Every time I passed there I heard the proprietor invite every passer-by to enter the store and fit himself with a hat or cap without charge. His reiterated invitation shouted to the moving mass was: "They'll all burn up anyway. Make yourselves at home with a new hat free. No charge! Take what you want." Not a man or boy accepted the invitation during the four times I passed there. It was acknowledged with humorous good nature by the men but time was too precious, the fire was too dangerously close; one could not afford to risk the loss of his place in the moving mass and separation from family or friends for a new hat.

At Ohio Street many people turned west so that with those coming up La Salle and Wells Streets the crowd seemed no less on Ohio Street west of Wells than it did on Clark Street. It was more dense than I saw it anywhere else. It was the best-natured mass of people I ever was in the midst of. The women were more sober-minded than the men. Losing a home was more serious to them, but endless badinage passed back and forth between the men concerning the suddenness and inconvenience of the moving and the ignorance of a destination or abiding place. I never heard a crying child except in one instance. The children as a rule considered it all a wonderful lark. I occasionally saw old people or sick ones being led or almost carried. On Ohio Street west of Clark Street everybody was carrying something, including babies, but most did as I finally did—left everything to burn and walked on with the feeling that we were lucky to escape with our lives.

Two of us men were puzzled as to what we should do with a woman standing in a dazed condition with only a nightgown on. She could not answer a question. While we were puzzling, the husband, in a wild state of mind, rushed up, lifted her into a single buggy standing at the curb, placed himself between the thills and pulled away, not, however, with a trotting gait.

An Italian of middle age carrying a load of bedding on his back was crying lustily. On inquiry as to the cause he said brokenly, with great sobs, that he had lost his dog. Some one inquired if he had a wife and children. He replied that he had but had lost those too. To a jibe from someone as to his failure to cry over their loss, his answer was that they could take care of themselves but the dog couldn't, and he knew he had lost him forever. The uncomplimentary remarks of the refugees manifested their radical dissent from such unnatural feelings.

I saw two boys carrying a showcase filled with candy. One walking in front carried the case with his hands behind him. Both were crying softly. They had lost their family. I saw them the next day on the prairie west of McCormick Seminary, playing marbles, the candy all gone. I have regretted since that I did not inquire whether they had lived on that in the meantime, for there was little opportunity to trade it for more substantial food.

By the process of slow walking to Erie Street bridge where a considerable number of people waited for an hour or two, thence by a ride with an express man, a part of our group found ourselves at the east abutment of Chicago Avenue bridge about 4 a. m. It had a slight grade above the street. From it for two hours we saw the flames everywhere leaping upward but ever steadily making their way toward us. At one time we witnessed six churches, some of

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