

Telecom Disaster Recovery in 1871

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It was 125 years ago on October 8-9, 1871 that the Great Fire in Chicago completely burned out a large portion of the city as it existed at that time. The entire month of September had been very dry and with no rain. In those times everything here was built out of wood with the exception of 'modern fire-proof buildings' which were made out of bricks.

The exact reason for the fire was never determined. There is the one theory of the Cow, and although the cow's owner Mrs. O'Leary at first alluded to the possibility that her lantern may have been kicked over by the cow during its milking, she later testified under oath in special hearings before the Chicago Board of Aldermen (what is now the Chicago City Council) that no such thing had occurred. Other witnesses who lived nearby Mrs. O'Leary's home claimed they had seen teenagers 'sneaking into the O'Leary barn to smoke cigarettes ...'

Oddly enough, Mrs. O'Leary's house did **not** catch fire and burn down although her barn and some 17,000 other buildings in the city were destroyed by the time the fire was extinguished due to a heavy rainfall early on Tuesday morning, October 10. About 90,000 persons were left homeless, and about 300 persons died in the fire. The fire burned from about 9:00 pm that Sunday night, throughout the day on Monday and until shortly after midnight at the start of Tuesday.

A combination of factors made the fire as bad as it was. Not the least were the nearly exhausted firemen who had battled a rather large fire on the west side of the city less than 24 hours earlier. Winds of 30 miles per hour spread the blaze rapidly. The 'sidewalks' were made of wooden planks elevated slightly off the ground and these had lots of trash under them. The citizens also were caught off guard or perhaps simply ignored the urgency of the matter until it was too late.

The steeple of City Hall contained a large bell which was used by the Fire Alarm office to warn of such emergencies. It was operated by a mechanical device which was spring-wound, much like the clock which was also in the tower of the steeple. This device had a 'clutch' or similar on it and could be set to ring the bell with various cadences to mean various things. One ring and a pause meant a fire in the north part of the city; two rings and a pause meant a fire in the south part of the city; three rings and a pause meant a fire on the west side of the city; four rings and a pause was a general alarm to which all citizens were urged to heed.

But as the {Chicago Tribune} reported two days after the fire, for nearly a week prior the bell had been ringing almost constantly due a large number of small fires all over the city created by the very dry weather and tinderbox conditions. The Tribune noted that 'our citizens cannot be blamed for giving the bell little attention that night; for over a week it seems everywhere we walk about town there is scarcely more than a few minutes passing before we see a team of horses racing down the street pulling their water-wagon with the firemen astride it making loud noises with their gongs to warn us to step aside quickly and let them past ...' So that warm and very pleasant Sunday evening as the good citizens of Chicago returned to their homes from church services they heard the bell in City Hall and most just said, 'oh, it is another fire somewhere ...' and let it go at that.

At the telegraph office on LaSalle Street, the fellow who was the combination clerk/telegrapher on duty that Sunday night sat 'on the wire' talking about it with other telegraphers in cities far and wide. Even to him, it was 'just another fire' -- although a bigger one than usual -- as he looked out the window and saw the orange glow a mile or so to his southwest. Everyone assumed the fire would end when it burned its way to the south branch of the Chicago River near Roosevelt Road. It was common for the telegraphers to 'chat' among themselves when none of them had any traffic. They'd sit at the 'key' and just idly 'converse' with their counterparts around the nation. If any of them had something to send over the wire, he'd just tap the key a couple times in a sort of heavy-handed way and the others who had been chatting among them-selves would become silent. Then the one who had interrupted would key "I have traffic", and the other operators would remain silent while he passed his traffic to wherever it was going. When he had finished, there would be a few seconds to a minute of silence as the others waited to see if more traffic was to follow, and if none was there, the chit-chat among them would begin again. The Chicago guy even mentioned it was quite a fire that seemed to be going on the west side of town that night.

Then what no one expected would happen did happen. Strong winds carried burning chunks of wood, etc across the river, and the first few landed on the roof of the People's Gas Works Building. Employees at the gas works had the presence of mind to cut the gas supply immediately, but sufficient gas under extreme pressure in a holding tank nearby was all that was needed to cause an explosion that, as the Tribune later reported 'must have been seen and heard by God Almighty himself, wherever he is, considering the huge ball of fire which rose into the air and the noise of the explosion as the gas works went up in flames. That was about midnight Sunday night, and from that point on, the fire just simply spread from one building to the next throughout the downtown area.

In an interview in the {Chicago Tribune} in 1911 on the fortieth anniversary of the fire and the fiftieth anniversary of the employment of the man who had been on duty in the telegraph office that night, the man told his memories of the occasion. By 1911, the Chicago telegraph agency was operated by Western Union (it had not been in 1871). WUTCO, as readers here know, was itself a consolidation of several small telegraph companies and their agencies which took place over a half century or so. The old gentleman was retiring from employment with WUTCO that year in 1911, and people at the Chicago Historical Society, the Tribune and others felt his story needed to be

recorded, because as the {Chicago Daily News} noted about the same time, 'soon all the people who were around at the time of the fire will be dead, and no one will be left to tell the real story.'

In his interview in the Tribune in 1911, the man mentioned a few things he remembered from that night forty years earlier. He remembered that:

1. Mayor Roswell Mason had come to the telegraph office with some of the aldermen about 1:00 am when it was apparent the fire was going to destroy most of the city. Mayor Mason had told him to send out several telegrams immediately; one to the president of the United States informing him of the disaster; one to General Sheridan of the United States Army asking for a declaration of martial law and to send troops; 'and a few others were sent calling for assistance to be given.'
2. By the time he had those messages as ordered by Mayor Mason, the wires were abuzz all over the country as other operators heard the messages being transmitted and began talking among themselves. By then it seemed every telegraph operator in the United States on duty at that time of night was talking about the great fire going on in Chicago. There was also traffic on the wire about a fire of similar fury and destructiveness going on at about the same time in the smaller town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin, where some 2000 people lost their lives over a 24 hour period.
3. He recalled watching the fire as it was burning in several buildings across the street from the telegraph office and then it became obvious his own office was going to go up in flames also. He said that he gathered up what he could of the company's books and records, as well as the cash box at the front desk, and stored it all in the fireproof safe there. He sat down at the telegraph key one last time and 'broke' the chatters who immediately went silent expecting that traffic was to be passed. When he had their attention he said, "the roof of our building here has caught fire and I am getting out now. Goodbye, we will be in touch when we can ..." He said he recalls grabbing a few more things to toss in the safe before locking the door on it while the 'key' was chattering and other operators were sending words of encouragement. He said he remembers 'God bless' coming on the wire as he was going out the door. It was fortunate he left when he did, because within about a minute the roof collapsed in flames and the entire building began to burn, just as every other building around him was already doing.

[A quick side note: I am reminded of the great flood a few years ago when the old underground tunnel system here sprang a leak and the Chicago River began pouring into the tunnels and the sub-basements of buildings all over the downtown area. Although City Hall was one building which had to be totally evacuated, there were ten or so women who stayed behind -- the centrex phone operators -- who took call after call from the media all over the world as well as countless frightened citizens asking for information about the disaster. One of the ladies was asked, 'how long are you going to remain there?' and she replied 'until

the phones go out of service or the water has risen to this level or the police come and carry us out. :) '

For about two hours employees of Ameritech frantically worked to re-route the City Hall centrex lines away from the rising flood waters in the basement to a location directly across the street in the Chicago Temple Building. They lost to the flood; the water rose faster than they could get the Fire Department lines and the centrex lines relocated, so the ladies were 'off line' about 45 minutes along with the people who answer fire calls routed to them through 911. For about 45 minutes, calls to 312-744-4000 just went off to nowhere; no ring, no answer but then suddenly it started ringing again and the cheery ladies who had taken several thousand extra calls that day responded once again. They had all gotten up and walked across the street to the Temple Building where banks of phones had been set up for the operators and the Fire Alarm office personnel. Other City Hall workers would be without phone service for a few more days.

4. He said he remembered walking around downtown the rest of the night, going nowhere in particular but just watching the fire everywhere. The streets were almost entirely deserted. He said perhaps the most grotesque thing of all was the bell in the steeple at the City Hall. His words were, "the bell was on a wind up spring attached to gears which allowed it ring without human intervention. What was so strange was that long after the people in the Fire Alarm office itself had fled in terror seeking to save their own lives and what they could of their possessions in their homes, that bell continued to ring. Totally deserted streets downtown and that bell with its hideous sound as it would ring four times and pause, then four more times and pause ... a fire everyone! a fire! ... but no one there to listen to it. And then he watched as the cupola of City Hall caught fire and 'the flames swept wildly up the steeple itself and into the tower. The ropes which held the bell in place began to burn and presently the bell itself fell to the ground with an awful noise and the mechanicals kept moving up and down as the remains of the rope to the bell got tangled up in it.' And then soon the clock itself got dislodged from above and fell to the ground next to the bell.
5. He recalled that about 3:00 am that Monday morning the fire further jumped the main part of the river and spread into the north part of the city. The water works caught on fire and the hydraulics which caused air pressure to go into the mains went out of order. That was the end of any possible fire fighting efforts. Nonetheless people did what they could on the north side all day Monday to save their homes but with little or no success.
6. He went back to the place where the telegraph office had been located shortly after daybreak to find only smoldering ashes with the building completely down, but the company safe still standing there. One of his supervisors asked him to go along with him to the telegraph office in the village of Austin to the west of the city (now a neighborhood in the city known as Austin) where they could obtain tools and spare equipment to get themselves up and going as soon as possible. He said they rode their horses out that way and he recalls passing two young ladies on their way to work downtown carrying their lunch sacks; they were totally

- oblivious to everything and apparently unaware of the fire. He said to his supervisor they would certainly be surprised when they got downtown ... :)
7. With tools in hand, a lot of wire, spare telegraph keys and the help of everyone employed there, he said they managed to relocate the telegraph office by the middle of the day Tuesday. He said they relocated in an area in the 'Customs Building' on South Clark Street near 18th Street and after working the entire day Monday and all that night they had a crude facility set up and operational Tuesday afternoon.
 8. He recalled that when they first began attaching the keys to the newly installed wire, the keys of course came to life immediately with traffic and at the first available free space in the traffic he keyed in to the other operators 'this is Chicago, I told you we would be back as soon as possible.' The other operators started chattering about it immediately of course, wanting to know the extent of the damage, etc.
 9. There were 'floods of traffic for several days afterward' as people anxiously inquired about relatives and friends. He said that at every minute there were three or four telegraphers on duty; none of them stopping for more than a few minutes at a time with people lined up in the street waiting to get out messages and a lot of messages coming in almost constantly around the clock.
 10. The first messages sent out were by Mayor Mason to government officials telling them of actions he had taken. He recalled Mayor Mason's message to the president of the United States in which he stated, "In emergency session of the Board of Aldermen on Monday I instructed the aldermen to get on their horses and ride to Lincoln Park (where over a hundred thousand people camped out homeless on Monday night) to assure the citizens that everything possible is being done for their welfare, and to advise them that the government has been reestablished and is in control."

He noted the message to the president continued by saying that martial law had been declared and that the First Congregational Church had been seized by the government to serve as the temporary location of City Hall ... and that furthermore, several railroad trains which had entered the city on Monday and Tuesday had been commandeered by the police with the food and other supplies therein seized to be given to the citizens 'most of whom went without their supper on Monday night as they stood in the park, grateful that the only real things of value -- their loved ones -- were there safe with them ...'

He remembered the day afterward, the Tuesday when the telegraph office re-opened for business and his visit to the downtown area that afternoon: 'Never did I see so many people downtown on one day. Thousands of people came downtown to wander the streets and look in amazement and awe. Just rubble everywhere. The safe remained too hot to open on Monday but after the rain Monday night it cooled off and on Tuesday morning executives of the telegraph agency went to the now burned out premises to open the safe and retrieve the contents. Quite a few of the documents were singed and crumbled into ashes when picked up, but there was quite a bit they saved.'

Looters and trouble-makers used the circumstances of Monday to their advantage that night, and groups of citizens formed vigilante parties to protect what remained from the disaster. He noted in the Tribune interview that 'General Sheridan and his troops rode into town late Tuesday evening and never were the citizens so glad to see anyone in their lives. Order was restored almost immediately and orderly distribution of relief supplies began the next morning (Wednesday) with the troops at nearly every street corner assisting the police. The first business to re-open downtown was that same Wednesday, two days after the fire. A man built a small wooden stand and had vegetables and fruits for sale. The Tribune Building had also burned down despite its supposedly fire-proof status, and the Tribune missed publication that Monday, but was back in business with a Tuesday edition from their new headquarters a few blocks away, and their headline that first day back after the fire was 'Chicago Will Rise Again'.

The telegraph office stayed at its new location for several years until Western Union bought it, and it then moved into the new building WUTCO constructed at 427 South LaSalle Street where it remained until the 1980's.

Telephones were yet to come; they would not be available for another seven or eight years in the city.

REFERENCES:

Visit the [Chicago Historical Society](#) on the web.

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