

Myths and facts around great fires

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

The agony that San Diegans endured in recent days is too fresh in the mind to think seriously about how these fires will be remembered. But overlooking the firestorm bombings that terminated World War II, I doubt that any previous conflagration has seen more than a half-million people vacate their homes.

Multiple accounts of individual suffering, together with incredible acts of kindness - e.g., tales of refugee centers where volunteer caregivers almost equaled the number of victims - remain to be catalogued. In sheer numbers, however, I'd guess that these fires touched lives in greater numbers than any others in history.

Some notable fires have become so confused with mythology that we can be sure of very little. Example: Have you ever doubted that Nero fiddled while Rome burned? Not me.

There's no doubt, Rome had itself a first-class fire in the year A.D. 64. It started in the Circus Maximus, a fun center where ticket-holders regularly watched Christians eaten by lions or otherwise done in (a fitting locale, I'd suggest, for a little Christian arson). Whatever their source, those ancient flames spread through the Eternal City for nine days, while the widely despised emperor Nero reportedly showed his indifference by strumming some sort of stringed instrument.

The fire was real enough, entailing considerable loss of life. And ruler Nero may have been a real rotter, oblivious to the suffering of his subjects. But history, we know, becomes what chroniclers coming afterward choose to make it. I find no reliable evidence that Nero, who obliged detractors by dying four years later, was musically inclined.

Some think the story of Mrs. O'Leary's cow a myth too, but it seems pretty logical to me. With her husband Patrick, Kate O'Leary ran a small southside dairy at 137 DeKoven St., a couple of miles from today's Loop. The animal she was milking is said to have kicked over an oil lamp on the night of Oct. 8, 1871. Flames by the second morning had leveled more than three square miles, mostly downtown, in a blaze which astonishingly cost some 300 lives. And yes, a Chicago Republican reporter, one Michael Ahern, "confessed" 22 years later he'd made up the O'Leary cow story. A fine way to smear an industrious Irish lady, I say.

It took some San Franciscans a long time to acknowledge that the catastrophe virtually destroying their city on April 18, 1906, was caused by an earthquake. They feared their city's ill-fated location astride the San Andreas Fault might discourage reconstruction efforts and future civic glory.

In fact, of course, there was no question what had happened. Quake-severed gas lines inevitably caught fire, torching the city's entire commercial section south of Van Ness Avenue. This unusually wide

thoroughfare halted the flames and saved most of the city's famed residential sector. But a well-remembered cartoon of the time depicts someone's family dinner table under a swaying chandelier, with framed photos tumbling from the walls.

"Don't worry, dear," a loyal San Franciscan tells his wife. "It's just another of those pesky fires!"

A blaze two years earlier had similarly triggered the transformation of Baltimore - virtually unchanged since Civil War days - to a great city with wide streets, plus sewage and water purification systems.

The Great Fire of London in 1666 may have been the first such "disaster" to be credited with achieving social good. An entire people had suffered through three centuries of what still is referred to as the Black Plague. Its toll down the years exceeded the death rate from disease almost anywhere else. Pathologists of the era had begun to realize the disease could be spread as readily from filthy surroundings as from person to person.

Filthy surroundings? Charles Dickens readers know of the overcrowding and suffocating squalor he found typical among Britain's underprivileged. That Great Fire of 1666 may have provided the first significant social leveler in British life.

One needn't play Pollyanna. But a little adversity now and then measures our improvement as a society. I thought San Diego's TV coverage this time more mature, more helpful than before. Belatedly, we've overcome a few more bureaucratic obstacles to getting military aircraft airborne against fire threats. Surely the undergrounding of power lines has been hastened.

And though reluctant to contemplate it, we are one practice session nearer readiness for the ultimate emergency of a surprise terrorist attack.

But Nero? No threat to Fiddler Joe from Kokomo.

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