

# Landmarks: The cow didn't start the fire, but the story of Mrs. O'Leary and Holy Family Church ring true today

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Holy Family Church on Roosevelt Road in Chicago is identified as "Jesuit Church" on 12th Street between Blue Island Avenue and May Street in this 1866 painting by Louis Kurz. The church, built in 1857, is one of the few structures in the city to survive the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. (Ellen Skerrett collection)

People here who entertain visitors by bringing them downtown often relate a tall tale about how Chicago's famous Water Tower is the only building that survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Sometimes, that's accompanied by the story of Mrs. O'Leary's cow, the alleged perpetrator.



Both stories are false, and a Morgan Park-based historian is helping to set the record straight this week in a new documentary on WTTW.

But the actual story, Ellen Skerrett said, involves not just the surviving structures and a scapegoated immigrant woman, but the common threads that tie many of us to Chicago and its suburbs.

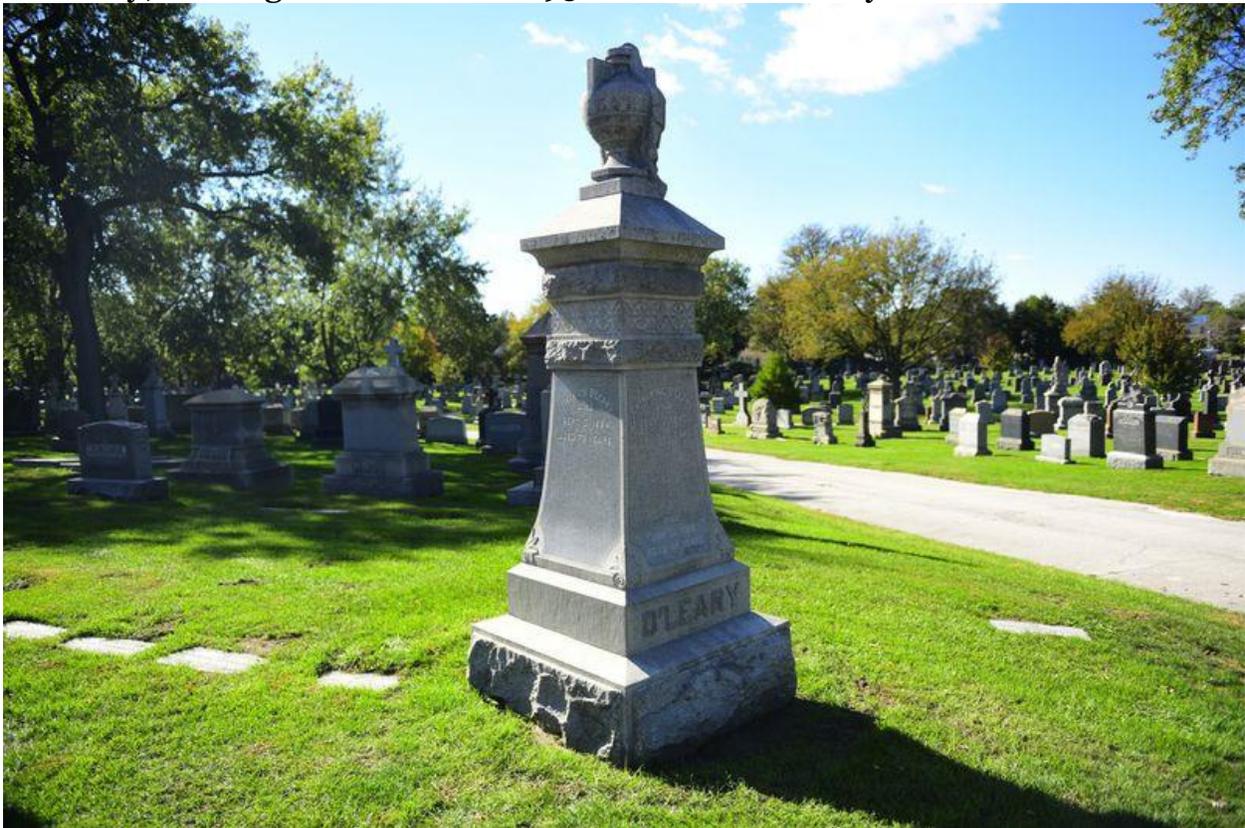
The story as she tells it centers on Holy Family Church, built in the late 1850s on 12th Street in an effort spearheaded by the Jesuit priest Rev. Arnold Damen, a Dutch immigrant whose name lives on in Chicago's Damen Avenue. It, along with neighboring St. Ignatius School, now St. Ignatius College Prep and a forerunner of Loyola University, were among the few buildings to survive the great conflagration that consumed nearly all of the city and killed 300 of its citizens.

Morgan Park based Historian Ellen Skerrett is participating in a WTTW documentary on the Great Chicago Fire premiering this week. (Ellen Skerrett)

Also a survivor of a 1990 demolition threat, the church was home to generation after generation of people like Catherine O'Leary, one of the many Irish immigrants who were Holy Family parishioners, many who helped establish the church in 1857.

“People were working class, and they contributed their pennies and nickels,” Skerrett said, “to building places of great beauty that were theirs. This helped them create a place for themselves in Chicago and helped build up the city.” The stories of Holy Family, the Great Chicago Fire and Catherine O’Leary are personal for Skerrett, whose great-grandparents were born in Ireland just before famine struck there in the 1840s.

“They landed in Chicago and had two or more of their children baptized at Holy Family before moving south, just like the O’Learys.” In fact, her ancestors lived just a block over from the O’Learys, she said, near 51st and Halsted streets. Both families gradually moved further south, and Skerrett was a classmate with Catherine O’Leary’s great granddaughter, Nancy Knight Connolly, at Longwood School on 95th Street in Beverly.



Catherine O'Leary is buried at the Mount Olivet Cemetery in Chicago. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)

“People went south or they went west,” Skerrett said. “Very few went north until the Jesuits decided to relocate and open up the (Loyola) university in

Rogers Park. So there's this huge southward movement of people who can trace themselves back to Holy Family."

It's a pattern that's been repeated through the years in successive waves of people — immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Italy, Latin American and African American of the Great Migration — and in countless churches throughout the city.

In helping to tell the story of the Chicago Fire, Skerrett said Holy Family is a great resource.

"It's really the only place in Chicago that you get the sense of what a church would have looked like in the 19th Century," she said. "History only becomes interesting when it's personal, to be able to tell people, 'this is where you came from. Holy Family looks remarkably like what your ancestors first saw.' It's amazing and unusual for Chicago."

As news of the Chicago Fire spread around the world, it was accompanied nearly immediately by the story of O'Leary and her cow. As an Irish immigrant and illiterate woman, she made for an easy target.

"It's not *Mr.* O'Leary's cow," Skerrett said. "Press accounts show up about her and her cow almost immediately. A New York reporter showed up and described her and her house in horrible terms. But she was blameless.

"She was scapegoated right away. It fueled anti-Irish, anti-immigrant stereotypes of the day, and that was unfortunate."



The interior of Holy Family Church is pictured in 2019. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

The grandeur of Holy Family Church, an early repository of art and craftsmanship she likened to “a little art institute before there was an Art Institute in Chicago,” illustrates a different story.

“It helps to show the world she lived in,” Skerrett said. “Yes, she lived in a rickety frame cottage, but she and her husband were homeowners. They were stakeholders in Chicago, and the church they helped to build and they brought their children to be baptized in, was this magnificent place.”

Another benefit of Holy Family having survived all these years is the treasure trove of information available in its archives remains accessible. Skerrett said she found early tuition records from the church school that list the O’Leary children as students.

“There was a Holy Family boy’s school that equalled or surpassed public schools of the day, and Catherine was paying 50 cents a month, which was really a significant sum, to send her kids there,” she said.

It’s a story that was repeated line by line in those tuition records.

Despite having grown up mainly in rural areas of their old country, “most of the Irish who came ... become consummate city people,” she said. “And one of the reasons for their success was this Catholic infrastructure that they helped to build and which developed their sons and daughters.

“This idea that you were investing in the future, and it was an American future, it was progressive, which isn’t a term we usually think of when we think of churches.”

It’s a story she was glad to help tell in the WTTW documentary “[\*\*The Great Chicago Fire: A Chicago Stories Special\*\*](#)” which premieres at 8 p.m. Friday.

“Catherine O’Leary wasn’t this hag; she’s not this fearful figure. She owned the cows. She’s an independent businesswoman,” she said.

After the fire, Catherine O’Leary refused to use her fame for financial benefit.

“The woman shunned publicity, and there were many opportunities for her to cash in on the myth and the stories about the cow,” Skerrett said, noting it could have become the theme of a local attraction. “She could have had interest in a dime museum, but she shunned it entirely.”

Aside from her mythical association with the Great Chicago Fire, Catherine O’Leary’s story is similar to that of many of us who call Chicago and its suburbs home, it turns out.

“Historians ruin peoples' good stories with evidence,” Skerrett said, “but sometimes what you end up doing is telling an even better story.”

*Landmarks is a weekly column by Paul Eisenberg exploring the people, places and things that have left an indelible mark on the Southland. He can be reached at [peisenberg@tribpub.com](mailto:peisenberg@tribpub.com).*