

# O'Leary cow cleared of setting fire to Chicago

Local historian credits English language skills for quick rise to power by Irish

BY PATRICK BUTLER

What was the biggest difference between the Irish and everyone else who came here during the 19th century's immigration tidal wave?

They spoke English and knew good opportunities when they saw them, historian Thomas O'Gorman told a March 8 pre-St. Patrick's Day program sponsored by the Ravenswood/Lake View Historical Association at the Sulzer Library, 4455 N. Lincoln Ave.

"Ditch diggers from the canal projects saw their children filling cavities (as dentists) and operating on people (as doctors) thanks to the educations they got at places like St. Ignatius (high school) and Loyola Univ.," said O'Gorman.

In fact, the engineer in charge of building the canal linking Lake Michigan to the Illinois River was himself an Irishman, he added.

The Irish also knew how to bide their time and wait for their chance, even when then-newly-elected Mayor Levi Boone was firing every city worker not born in the U.S., said O'Gorman, an artist, author of 14 books and columnist for Inside Publications' Skyline, Inside-Booster and News-Star.

A staunch member of the anti-immigrant and especially anti-Catholic Know Nothing Party, this grand-nephew of frontiersman Daniel Boone urged repealing naturalization, which would have meant only those born here could be U.S. citizens, O'Gorman said.

Mayor Boone even started Chicago's first major riot when he tried to close the taverns on Sunday and during the Civil War was arrested and jailed on suspicion of helping a Confederate escape from Camp Douglas, a notorious Chicago POW camp.

But with 20,000 Irish-born Chicagoans by 1860, it soon became impossible to continue treating the Irish as second-class citizens, O'Gorman noted.

Once the shooting started, and the newspapers began reporting stories of heroes like Chicago Irish Brigade Col. John Mulligan, "the dominant culture had to recognize that the Irish were as patriotic as anyone else."

While they were at it, O'Gorman added, "the Irish discovered a natural bent for political leadership," thanks in part to their mastery of the English language and the fact "they did not 'ghettoize.' They lived all over the city so other immigrants with problems would go to their Irish neighbors for advice."

"In time, they became the ombudsmen between their neighbors and City Hall," he said, adding that soon the Irish were City Hall, producing leaders like North Sider Edward Fitzsimmons Dunne, the only person ever to become mayor of Chicago and move on to be Illinois governor.

He might even have gotten a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court if he hadn't been blackballed by President Woodrow Wilson for leading a delegation to Versailles asking that Irish independence be included in the treaty ending

World War I.

"Wilson wanted Britain to support his efforts to create a League of Nations and knew the British would never support that if the treaty included independence for Ireland," O'Gorman said.

But it wasn't just the political realm of the Daleys, Kellys, Burkes and so many others that

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marked the Irish presence in Chicago, he said, adding that by the early 20th century, a majority of both the priests and policemen were also Irish.

Even the father of Tennessee-born Cardinal Samuel Stritch, Chicago's archbishop from 1940 to 1958, was an Irish rebel, O'Gorman said.

In fact, "Pat Collins, onetime chief of detectives, was the older brother of Michael Collins, who some call 'the man who made

modern Ireland." Pat was always writing letters to his brother promising a job on the police force if he came to Chicago," O'Gorman said.

Some of "the Big Fellow's" relatives, incidentally, are still living here in Chicago.

Another noted Chicago police officer - Chief Francis O'Neal, who headed the police department from 1901 to 1905, is credited with saving literally thousands of Irish folk songs that would have been lost forever, said O'Gorman.

O'Neil is remembered on both sides of the Atlantic, including his namesake pub at 3471 N. Elston Ave.

With the passage of time, even Mrs. O'Leary's cow is no longer blamed for starting the Chicago Fire, said O'Gorman, a onetime aide to Ald. Edward Burke (14th), chairman of the Police and Fire Committee which in 1997 ruled that neither Catherine O'Leary nor her cow did anything to cause the fire that engulfed about a third of the city.

The likeliest suspect, he added, is an inebriated neighbor who may have dropped his pipe on the straw when he went into the barn to get some milk, O'Gorman added.

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