

Mrs. O'Leary's Cow, The Fire and the Diaconate

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*One night dark when bed we all were in
O'Leary Mrs. lit the shed the lantern in
And when the kick cowed it over she eyed her wink and said,
"It'll be a time hot in the town old tonight."*

--A backwards version, loved by Girl Scouts, of the popular old song about the Chicago Fire

As a kid, I loved singing this song. As a kid growing up in a rural state just east of the rural state in which Chicago is located, we sang it a lot. We sang it on our bus trips to the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago (a spectacular place), and to our visits to the Chicago Art Institute (equally spectacular). We even sang it frontwards.

Now years later after having traveled from Iowa City to Capetown; from Des Moines to Johannesburg; from New York to Amsterdam; from Coralville to the Dominican Republic, I'm back home in Davenport, Iowa. We're just three hours west of Chicago, living in a Quad City area of about 400,000. The Mississippi River is my touchstone. I grew up around it. I love every inch of it. From Lake Itasca to New Orleans. But about Mrs. O'Leary's cow:

Depending on the version of the legend that you hear, her name was Daisy, or Madeline, or Gwendolyn. The cow, that is. I'm pretty sure it was Daisy though. And the fact is, she's never been proven guilty. Mrs. O'Leary even had to go through an inquest. As if losing her property, other animals included, wasn't enough.

The web site of the Chicago Historical Society has a wonderful section on the Great Fire. I commend it to you. It was there that I was reminded again about the "Mrs. O'Learys" of every generation in every place. She was a scapegoat.

"... she was a familiar and recognizable type who could readily be made to stand for careless building, sloppy conduct, and a shiftless immigrant underclass. Blaming her simply involved adapting existing anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiments to the terrible calamity at hand. As a poor clumsy Irishwoman and not a sworn enemy of the social order, she was a disempowered comic stereotype, the damage she caused the result of accident, not conspiracy."¹

And there I was connected, once again, with our identity – to be present with each Mrs. O'Leary who still presents herself today. To interpret the needs, concerns and hopes of all of Mrs. O'Leary's family and friends. To recognize that throughout our history, and throughout the history of all of God's people, God has asked for some to be voices for others.

The next conference of our Association will be held in Chicago June 24-27, 2010.

We invite you to plan now for this event. In the state that gave our country Abraham Lincoln, Carl Sandberg, Jane Addams, Frank Lloyd Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks and Mrs. O'Leary, we'll gather at the Watertown campus of Loyola University.

In the upcoming months we'll tell you more about Chicago and about the conference. In the meantime, please put it on your calendar, save your money, and pray for all the Mrs. O'Learys you know about.

(Footnote)

¹ <http://www.chicagohistory.org/fire/oleary/essay-4.html>