



Great Chicago Fires: Historic Blazes That Shaped a City (Illinois)

David Cowan

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"the hand of God and the lack of fire escapes"

In 1916, poet Carl Sandburg wrote about a young girl who jumps to her death in a Chicago factory fire, attributing her tragic end to "the hand of God and the lack of fire escapes." Sadly, the lesson of Anna Imroth's untimely demise would go unheeded. Instead, thousands of times in Chicago and elsewhere, the circumstances of her loss would be repeated.

Perhaps no other city in America identifies itself with fire quite like Chicago does; certainly no other city cites a great conflagration as the cornerstone of its will and identity. Yet the Great Chicago Fire was not the only infamous blaze the city would see. Rather, as Chicago changed from agrarian outpost to industrial giant, it would be visited time and again by some of the worst infernos in American history-fires that sparked not only banner headlines but, more importantly, critical upgrades in fire safety laws across the globe.

In *Great Chicago Fires*, acclaimed author and veteran firefighter David Cowan tells the story of the other "great" Chicago fires, noting the causes, consequences, and historical context of each-from the burning of Fort Dearborn in 1812 to the Iroquois Theater disaster to the Our Lady of the Angels school fire. He also explores lesser-known fires such as fatal tenement and flophouse blazes that often underscore how poverty and poor living conditions set the stage for these urban catastrophes.

Along the way, Cowan follows the colorful evolution of Chicago's firefighting forces from early 19th-century citizen bucket brigades to the armada of the modern day fire department, lacing his narrative with the dangers of his profession, including a vivid account of the worst day in American fire service history when twenty-one firefighters died battling a fire at Chicago's Union Stockyards.

In transporting readers beyond the fireline and into the ruins, Cowan brings readers up close to the heroism, awe, and devastation generated by the fires that shaped Chicago.

This book contains over 80 stunning historic photos.

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