

## Diaspora Story: The Dwyer Family and the Great Chicago Fire

By Kate Carmichael

On the night of October 8-9, 1871, a spunky 14-year-old Canadian Irish girl named Mary Agnes Dwyer noticed the sky was as bright as day. She snuck out of the house in her bare feet, met up with a friend, and experienced the Great Chicago Fire first-hand. Sixty-one years later, her granddaughter (my mother), writing a school paper, recorded what her grandma told her about this escapade.

Mary Agnes Dwyer was the second oldest child and oldest daughter of the eleven children of Michael and Anne (Elliott) Dwyer. The Illinois Deaths & Stillbirths Index gives her birth date as 4 July 1859 and the location as Montreal Canada.<sup>1</sup> However, the St. Colomban church record shows that she was baptized in St. Colomban on 9 July 1858.

According to the notation in that record, she was “born the day prior,”<sup>2</sup> making her actual birthdate 8 July 1858. Her parents, Michael C. Dwyer (b. 1831) and his wife Anne Elliott (b. 1836), were both born in St. Colomban,<sup>34</sup> and they were married there on 24 June 1856.<sup>5</sup>

My grandmother, daughter of Mary Agnes, told me was that her mother’s family had been neighbors of Mrs. O’Leary and bought their milk from her, and that her mother vividly remembered the Chicago Fire. To research this story, I started by tracking the family’s location. I knew that they were definitely living in Chicago by 1870. “Mike,” a laborer, and “Annie” Dwyer are listed in the 1870 Federal Census with four children: Mary (12), Bridget (8), Joseph (4), and Catherine (1). They lived in Ward 9, Chicago, Cook, Illinois, but no street address was given.<sup>6</sup> At that time, Ward 9 was an Irish neighborhood southwest of the city center.



Joseph, Mary Agnes, and Bridget Dwyer circa 1870

Next, I searched for more information about the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and learned that Mrs. Catherine O’Leary’s address was 137 DeKoven Street.<sup>7,1</sup> In the 1870 Chicago Street Directory, I found Michael Dwyer, laborer, listed as living at 183 DeKoven Street.<sup>8</sup> So, the Dwyer and O’Leary families certainly were neighbors the year before the fire. In

<sup>1</sup> Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916-1947, Mary Agnes Wallace, *Ancestry.com*, accessed July 25, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Drouin, compiler, “*Quebec, Canada, Vital and Church Records (Drouin Collection), 1621-1968*”, Institut Généalogique Drouin; Montreal, Quebec, Canada; database with images, *Ancestry.com*, image 5 of 8, Mary Dwyer, baptized 1858, St. Colomban.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, *Ancestry.com*, image 38 of 57, Michael Dwyer, baptized 1831, Ste-Scholastique. (Record is in French.)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* image 7 of 17, Anne Elliott, baptized 1836, St. Colomban.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, image 4 of 6, Michael Dwyer and Anne Elliott, married 1856, St. Colomban.

<sup>6</sup> 1870 US Census, Chicago, Cook County, Chicago Ward 9, Page 359, dwelling 2282, visit 3025, *Ancestry.com* accessed June 9, 2023 citing FHL: 545703. (Scroll down)

<sup>7</sup> Neil Gale, Ph.D., compiler, *The Digital Research Library of Illinois History Journal*, “The O’Leary’s, their cow, and the Great Chicago Fire of 1871”, online blog article posted Wednesday, December 28, 2016, <https://drloihjournal.blogspot.com/2016/12/the-olearys-cow-and-great-chicago-fire.html>.

<sup>8</sup> 1870 Chicago Directory p. 241, image 20 of 21, accessed through the Newberry Library site, Chicago Ancestors.org., <https://www.chicagoancestors.org/sites/default/files/downloads/1870d.pdf>. (Scroll down)

the 1871 Chicago Directory, Michael Dwyer, laborer, is listed as living at 74 Brown Street.<sup>9</sup> Brown Street no longer exists, but a Chicago city map from the period showed that Brown Street was located about four blocks west of Mrs. O’Leary’s DeKoven Street address.<sup>10</sup>

By far, the most exciting documentation for this family story was a school assignment handwritten by my mother, Gertrude Anne Robinson (b. 1918), dated 12 November 1932.<sup>11</sup> My mother was 14 years old at the time. The report is titled “My Grandma Told Me.” In the report, she quotes her grandma as saying, “Mrs. O’Leary was a good friend of ours. We got all of our milk from her.” Mary Agnes told young Gertrude Anne about her experiences the night of the fire when she described the sky being “as bright as day.”

“I could not sleep so I slipped on a dress and crept out of the house without waking my parents and not even stopping to put on my shoes and stockings. Downstairs I met one of my friends and together we set out. We only intended to go a block or two, but we kept going one block more and one block more. Hundreds of people were running towards the fire and as many more were running away from it. The police were kept busy that night because many people broke into stores. When we passed the Police Station we saw one man with twelve hats piled on his head and as many as he could carry in his arms. I began to get very hot. The sidewalks were like glowing coals. Oh, how I wished I had not forgotten my shoes.”<sup>ii</sup>

The bridge had been raised and no one was allowed to go across. The people who were already across were trapped, there was no way to get back again. Some threw themselves into the river to swim back but they either drowned or were scalded to death because the heat was so intense by this time that the water was fairly boiling. Some of my friends never heard from their fathers or brothers again.

We returned home at about three in the morning to find our parents wondering where we were. When I told my father that he did not need to go to work that day because his place of business had burned down, he could scarcely believe his ears. He went only to find what I had told him was true and nearly the whole city in total ruins.”

The fire spread north and east of Mrs. O’Leary’s house, so at least the Dwyer family’s dwelling did not burn down and no one in their family was injured in the fire., In that regard, they were very fortunate—certainly more so than poor Mrs. O’Leary, who was blamed for the fire and persecuted the rest of her life.

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<sup>9</sup> 1871 Chicago Directory p. 314, image 29 of 29, through the Newberry Library site, Chicago Ancestors.org., <https://www.chicagoancestors.org/sites/default/files/downloads/1871d.pdf>. (Scroll down)

<sup>10</sup> University of Chicago Map Collection. Chicago, [Place of publication not identified], [publisher not identified], [approximately 1871]. [Search Results: luna\\_media\\_exif\\_filename equal to 'G4104-C6-1871-C4.tif' - University of Chicago \(uchicago.edu\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> Gertrude Anne Robinson, *My Grandma Told Me*, handwritten school paper, 12 November 1932. Personal collection of Katherine Carmichael.

## Epilogue

I do not have any information about what Michael Dwyer did for work immediately after the fire, but by 1880, he and his wife and seven children were living in Hobart, Lake County, Indiana.<sup>12</sup> Michael's occupation is listed as "Farmer" which had been his occupation in Canada.

Mary Agnes remained in Chicago and married John Dwyer Wallace (b. 1854; different Dwyer family) in 1877.<sup>13</sup> They had seven children, but sadly, John died from blood poisoning at the age of 38 on 20 December 1892<sup>14</sup> and was buried two days before Christmas. Mary Agnes raised the children on her own. The youngest child was just three years old. She let my grandmother, the oldest daughter, go to high school and then to the Cook County Normal School (teacher's college). My grandmother taught in the Chicago Public Schools for quite a few years, to help provide monetary assistance to her mother and younger siblings.



Mary Agnes Dwyer circa 1877

The unfortunate Mrs. O'Leary (and her cow) were officially, but very belatedly, exonerated from starting the Chicago Fire in an official City Council Resolution on September 10, 1997.<sup>15</sup>

As for my mother, she got an A- on her paper for content and a D for punctuation and grammar (a very strict teacher). However, she certainly provided me with a wonderful source to glimpse a momentous event in Chicago's history through the eyes of my great grandmother.

Note: The photographs of Joseph, Mary Agnes, and Bridget Dwyer, and of Mary Agnes at about the time of her marriage are from the private collection of Katherine (Kate) Carmichael.

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<sup>i</sup> Neil Gale reports that the street numbering system changed sometime after the fire. The address of the Chicago Fire Academy that now stands on the site of Mrs. O'Leary's house is 558 West DeKoven Street.

<sup>ii</sup> The Chicago Historical Society and Northwestern University website, *A Birdseye View of Pre-fire Chicago* (<https://www.greatchicagofire.org>) describes pre-fire conditions and the neighborhood where Mrs. O'Leary and the Dwyer family lived. This article refers to "561 miles of wooden sidewalks, and the tens of thousands of wooden or wood-trimmed structures."

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<sup>12</sup> 1880 US Census, Hobart, Lake County, Indiana, p. 8 of 30 [page number on the form itself], dwelling 78, visit 78, *Ancestry.com* accessed 25 July 2020 citing: Roll: 291; Page: 499D; Enumeration District: 067).

<sup>13</sup> Illinois, Marriage Index, 1860-1920, *Ancestry.com* accessed August 15, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Illinois, Select Deaths Index, 1877-1916, *Ancestry.com* accessed August 15, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Op cit., Neil Gale.