

The Origins of Fire Prevention Week

What do Chicago, IL, and Peshtigo, WI, have in common? This October 8 will mark the 148th anniversary of the start of two deadly fires...one in each community. It was on that date in 1871 that the metropolis of Chicago and small town Peshtigo were linked in history.

Most people have heard about the Great Chicago Fire. While the fabled story about the fire being started by Mrs. O'Leary's cow is popular, it's most likely just that...a fable. While the fire originated in the area of the O'Leary's, there is no evidence that it was started by her cow kicking over a lantern. Chalk it up to folklore. The fire killed an estimated 300 people and destroyed 3.3 square miles of the city.

On the same day in northeastern Wisconsin, a forest fire began which ended up being the deadliest fire in recorded history in this country. It consumed 1875 square miles and obliterated 12 communities. It killed over 1500 people including 800 in Peshtigo. Because so many people died, there were not enough survivors to identify the victims, and many bodies remain unidentified to this day.

Both fires had circumstances in common. There had been a period of hot, dry, windy conditions. Buildings were all constructed of wood. The term "firestorm" literally described how both fires acted.

But it was the Great Chicago Fire that grabbed all the headlines and notoriety. In 1911, on the 40th anniversary of the fire, a National Fire Prevention Day was first observed. By 1925, it evolved from a one day observance to Fire Prevention Week as proclaimed by President Calvin Coolidge.

Even though both fires started on October 8, Fire Prevention Week is always the week where October 9 falls. The 9th was the day when most of the damage was done in Chicago.

Our department expands the customary Fire Prevention Week to cover the entire month of October.

Firefighter Sue Carl coordinates our public education program. She, along with several other firefighters who assist her, either go to area schools or have the school children come to the fire station to talk about fire safety. Fire safety materials that the children receive are made possible through donations from generous Columbus businesses.

We also go to all schools to witness fire drills every October.

The month is capped off by hosting a safe trick or treat event for the community at the fire station. It will be held this year on October 26, from 5:00 – 8:00 p.m.

Now back to the beginning of the month. It's time for an advertisement... The first Sunday in October is always the date of the fire department's annual pancake breakfast. This year it will be on October 6, from 7:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. In addition to the large number of menu items (pancakes, sausage, ham, hash browns, scrambled eggs, applesauce, coffee, milk, juice), there is a huge number of raffle items and a bake sale. Handicapped parking is available in front of the overhead doors in front of the station or in the post office lot behind the station. We hope to see you there.

Remember to make Fire Prevention Week every week of the year in your home.