

“Prairie Birds” raced to Chicago to fight Great Fire of 1871



This image shows the American Standard locomotive that carried the Prairie Birds and their steamer to the Great Chicago Fire. The high wheels of this 4-4-0 locomotive translated into good speed but low pulling power. The 4-4-0 designation represents the locomotive's wheel arrangement - 4 in the front, 4 behind coupled to the drivers and 0 trailing.

Kick or no kick from Mrs. O'Leary's fabled cow, we do know that the Great Chicago Fire started around 9 pm Sunday, October 8, 1871. Driven by steady, bone-dry winds from the southwest, the gathering conflagration soon jumped both the south and main branches of the Chicago River and laid waste to great swaths of the booming prairie metropolis.

Late into the first night, with the ravenous flames and densely packed wood frame cityscape making for a Hades on the lakefront, Chicago Mayor Roswell B. Mason, himself a refugee from the fire and widening chaos, began sending pleas for assistance over the telegraph wires.

Monday morning, less than an hour after such a message reached Bloomington, a half-dozen or so men of the Prairie Bird engine company, the pride of the city's fire department, scurried about loading their new steamer onto a Chicago & Alton Railroad flatcar. Pulling the firemen and their equipment to Chicago was C&A engine No. 97 (see accompanying image), an American Standard locomotive, the most common type on U.S. rails at the time. The hand on throttle belonged to the fearless (or was it reckless?) 39-year-old Scotsman Samuel L. Hawks.

One version of what followed comes from C&A conductor E.J. Smith, who recalled the historic run many years later. “An order was sent from the general offices to sidetrack everything, give the special the right of way,” he said. “Only persons standing by the side of the road could tell how [No. 97] strained every ounce in her cylinders to reach the burning city.”

Though accounts differ, it appears Hawks completed the 127-mile run to Chicago in two-and-a-half to three hours. There is general agreement, though, that during stretches the train’s speed approached a mile-a-minute. “Sixty miles an hour was not common then like it is now, and such a speed in those days was regarded as little short of suicide,” recalled Bloomington fireman Thomas B. Corman some 40 years after the fact.

Battling the Chicago fire was a rather ho-hum experience compared to No. 97’s record or near-record run. “From Chenoa to Pontiac, ten miles required ten minutes. Dwight to Gardner, nine miles, in as many minutes,” said Corman, who as a Prairie Birder witnessed events firsthand. “I heard that the dispatchers and officials in the general [C&A] offices . . . were dumbfounded as they received reports from the operators at each town as we passed.”

In addition to dispatching men to fight the fire, Bloomington provided assistance in other ways. For instance, on Tuesday, October 10, a “citizens’ meeting” was held to raise funds for the stricken city. “The pride of the state and nation is in ruins,” U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Bloomington resident David Davis (who was home on vacation) told the gathering. He pledged the considerable sum of \$1,500, with State Representative George Washington Funk following with \$500. By the end of the meeting pledges totaled nearly \$11,000.

The last of the flames were put out the morning of Tuesday, August 10. It was a cheerless victory, for the “burnt district” encompassed more than 2,000 acres, or an area about four miles long and three-quarters mile wide. An estimated 18,000 buildings were lost, leaving some 100,000 residents homeless. Although property damage was catastrophically immense, loss of life—relatively speaking—was minor, with the number of dead estimated at 200 to 300.

The Fire Birds returned home late in the evening of October 11. The Pantagraph reported that the steamer was “in good condition, and the boys all well, with no killed, wounded or missing to report, no broken arms or legs.”

On Thursday, October 12, the Bloomington relief committee personally delivered to Chicago Mayor Roswell Mason a little more than \$13,800 (or nearly \$250,000 today, adjusted for inflation). While in Chicago, the local committee also “visited the whole extent of the desolation,” reporting “that neither pen nor tongue can give even a faint idea of the terrible destruction of property; only one word seems fit to express it—desolation! desolation!”

Soon after their safe return, the Prairie Birds presented Samuel Hawks, the C&A engineer, with a solid gold Knight Templar Maltese cross, fashioned for the occasion by Bloomington jeweler Joseph Gluckselig. "Our Prairie Birds on board the train fairly held their breath (as well as their hats) as the train flew through the wind," remarked The Pantagraph, "and we are sure there is not a man of them but will remember that ride till his dying day."