

Motivating Student Research about the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 with a WPA Life History

Lee Ann Potter

There were all kinds of songs made up about the fire. Years after the fire, people were still singing songs about it. You remember the song “Hot Time in the Old Town,” well there was a song made up to that tune. These are the words:

“One moonlit night while the families were in bed
Mrs. O’Leary took a lantern to the shed,
The cow kicked it over winked her eye and said:
There’ll be a hot time in the old town tonight, my baby.”
—Mr. Hyman Bernstein

Sometime in 1937 or 1938, Hyman Bernstein of Chicago, Illinois, participated in an interview with Hilda Polacheck, a writer employed by the Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA). The result was actually two versions of his life story that Polacheck entitled “Pack on my Back,” and submitted to the American Life Histories effort of the Federal Writers project. One was 12 typed pages, and one was 10. Both accounts included colorful descriptions of certain episodes of Bernstein’s life, and each featured three pages dedicated to his memories of the 1871 Great Chicago Fire.

His recollections of the night of the fire included the weather, the time of year, the location of the fire, the speed with which the flames spread, and the sound of the fire bells ringing, as well as images of people trying to save their

belongings. He also recalled theories about how the fire started, and the song lyrics included in the above quote, and he credited the fire as the event that led to his life as a country peddler.

Sharing the two versions of Bernstein’s life history with students could trigger insight into the challenges and joys of historical research, as well as inspire dozens of research paths. [The two versions are available at www.loc.gov/item/wpalth00081/ (images 6–8 are pages 4–6) and www.loc.gov/item/wpalth00082/ (images 3–5 are pages 2–4).]

To begin, inviting students to compare and contrast the two versions may help them consider the benefits and liabilities of relying on firsthand accounts recorded decades after an event for reliable information (in this case, Bernstein’s account was recorded more than six decades after the fire). It may also prompt an interesting

exchange about how a primary source is defined or a conversation about the role of an editor.

Bernstein’s memories of the Great Chicago Fire may speak to students in personal ways that motivate a desire to learn more. The details may drive their curiosity about “what really happened.” To encourage this, choose one version of Bernstein’s life history and share the section on the fire with student pairs. As one student reads it aloud, ask the other student to write down what part of the story they wonder—or would like to know more—about. Direct students to reverse roles, compare the elements they wonder about and select one or more elements to research.

Participating in this activity, one student may read “it was in October,” and wonder exactly when. Another may read, “There is a fire every Monday and Thursday in Chicago,” and wonder how common fires really were in Chicago in the early 1870s and why. A third student may read, “I saw the flames across the river,” and “everybody was running north,” and wonder about the geography of Chicago.

Still others may read about Marshall Field and Company and wonder if the store really did start doing business out of the streetcar barns after the fire.

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bility of bringing my father, two sisters and two brothers to America.

It was the great fire of 1871 that made me a country peddler. Oh, yes! I remember the fire very well. It was in October. We used to go to bed early, because the two roomers had to go to work very early. We were getting ready to go to bed, when we heard the fire bells ringing. I asked the two men if they wanted to see where the fire was.

"Why should I care where the fire is," one of the men said. "As long as our house is not on fire, I don't care what house is burning. There is a fire every Monday and Thursday in Chicago."

But I wanted to see the fire. So I went out into the street. I saw the flames across the river. But I thought that since the river was between the fire and our house, there was nothing to worry about. I went into the house and went to bed.

The next thing I knew my two bed-fellows were shaking me. "Get up," they cried. "The whole city is on fire! Save your things! We are going to Lincoln Park."

I jumped out of bed and pulled on my pants. Everybody in the house was trying to save as much as possible. I tied my clothes in a sheet. With my clothes under my arm and my pack on my back, I left the house with the rest of the family. Everybody was running north. People were carrying all kinds of crazy things. A woman was carrying a pot of soup, which was

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spilling all over her dress. People were carrying cats, dogs and goats. In the great excitement people saved worthless things and left behind good things. I saw a woman carrying a big frame in which was framed her wedding veil and wreath. She said it would have been bad luck to leave it behind.

When we came to Lake Street I saw all the wagons of Marshall Field and Company lined up in front of their place of business. (The firm was then called Field, Leiter and Company) Men and boys were carrying the goods out of the building and loading everything into the wagons. The merchandise was taken to the street-car barns on State near Twentieth Street. I am sure that Marshall Field must have been one of the owners of the street-car company. Otherwise why would the street-car people have allowed him to bring his goods there. A couple of weeks later, Marshall Field started doing business in the car-barns. I remember buying some goods there.

No one slept that night. People gathered on the streets and all kinds of reasons were given for the fire. I stood near a minister. He was talking to a group of men. He said the fire was sent by God as a warning that the people were wicked. He said there were too many saloons in Chicago. There were too many houses of prostitution. A woman who heard this said that since the fire started in a barn it was a direct warning from God. She said Jesus was also born in a barn. I talked to a man who lived next door to Mrs. O'Leary, and he

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told me that the fire started in Mrs. O'Leary's barn. She went out to milk the cow when it was begining to get dark. She took a lamp with her and the cow kicked the lamp over and that's how the fire started. There were all kinds of songs made up about the fire. Years after the fire, people were still singing songs about it. You remember the song "Hot Time in the Old Town," well there was a song made up to that tune. These are the words:

"One moonlight night while the families were in bed,
Mrs. O'Leary took a lantern to the shed,
The cow kicked it over winked her eye and said:
There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight, my baby."

As may of the homes were burned, many people left the city. Some went to live with relatives in other cities. A great many men became country peddlers. There were thousands of men walking from farm to farm with heavy packs on their backs. These peddlers carreid all kinds of merchandise. Things that they thought the farmers and their families could use.

There was no rural mail delivery in those days. The farmers very seldom saw a newspaper. They were hungry for news. They were very glad to see a peddler from any large city. They wanted to hear all about the great fire. When I told a farmer that I was from Chicago, he was very glad to see me. You see, I was a newspaper and a department store.

The farms were ten, fifteen, twenty, and even thirty miles apart. It would take a day sometime to walk from one farm to the next one. I used to meet peaddlers from all over. It was

Others may be curious about rumors, theories, and the actual cause of the fire. Some may want to know more about the original version of the “Hot Time in the Old Town” song; and others may read “There were all kinds of other songs made up about the fire,” and wonder about their lyrics. Still others may read about homes being burned and people leaving the city and wonder what the impact on Chicago’s population really was. Some may read “There was no rural mail delivery in those days,” and wonder how people on farms and communities outside of the city learned of events such as the fire; still others may be interested in learning about how the local and national press covered the story. Finally, some may wonder about the existence of other life

histories and personal accounts of the fire; or be curious about WPA writers, including Hilda Polacheck.

After students have identified what they are most curious about, directing them to the following associated resources available from the Library of Congress may seriously spark their interest in research, and may motivate them to explore additional sources.

Collection of prints and photographs related to the Great Chicago Fire, www.loc.gov/photos/?q=great+chicago+fire

Collection of maps related to the Great Chicago Fire, www.loc.gov/maps/?q=great+chicago+fire

Collection of sheet music related to the Great Chicago Fire, www.loc.gov/notated-music/?q=great+chicago+fire

1904 sound recording of “Hot Time in the Old Town,” www.loc.gov/item/jukebox-118044/

Chronicling America Historic Newspapers Research Guide for Great Chicago Fire of 1871, guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-great-chicago-fire

The American Life Histories Collection of the Federal Writers Project of the WPA, www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/ (See sidebar below).



The Great conflagration of Chicago. October 8th and 9th, 1871. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress. Photographer: William Shaw, 1871).

American Life Histories:

Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1940

A collection of life histories within the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress consists of approximately 2,900 documents, compiled and transcribed by more than 300 writers from 24 states, working on the Folklore Project of the Federal Writers’ Project, a New Deal jobs program that was part of the U.S. Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA) from 1936 to 1940. Typically 2,000–15,000 words in length, the documents vary in form from narratives to dialogues to reports to case histories.

They chronicle vivid life stories of Americans who lived at the turn of the twentieth century and include tales of meeting Billy the Kid, surviving the 1871 Chicago fire, pioneer journeys out West, grueling factory work, and the immigrant experience.

Writers hired by this Depression-era work project included Ralph Ellison, Nelson Algren, May Swenson, and many others. The documents often describe the informant’s physical appearance, family, education, income, occupation, political views, religion and mores. Pseudonyms are often substituted for individuals and places named in the narrative texts. The life histories comprise a small part of the larger Library of Congress Manuscript Division collection titled *United States Work Projects Administration Records*.


The American Life Histories Collection is available online at www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/.



As students find information to answer their questions, encourage them to share their findings—not just the information, but the sources. If they find conflicting information, encourage them to explore the differences and determine strategies for validating sources and corroborating evidence. 🌐



If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, tell us about your experience! During the last week of October, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers/ will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.

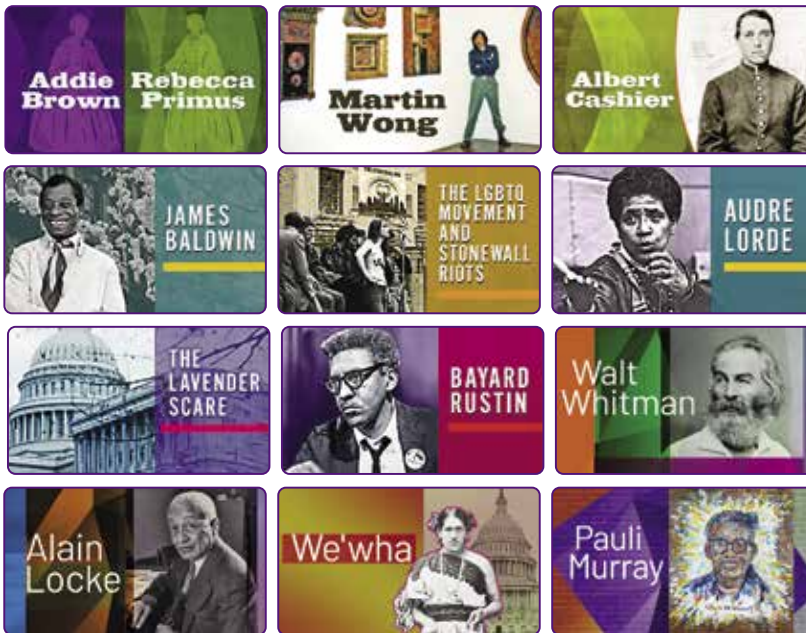


LEE ANN POTTER is the Director of Professional Learning and Outreach Initiatives at the Library of Congress and serves as the editor of the "Sources and Strategies" feature. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers/.

Bring LGBTQ+ history and narratives into your social studies curriculum



Free standards-aligned video-based resources from PBS LearningMedia



pbslearningmedia.org/collection/lgbtq-identity



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Advocacy Toolkit

Visit socialstudies.org/advocacy for the new NCSS Advocacy Toolkit and other resources for advocating the importance of social studies education.

