

## *An account of the School Sisters of Notre Dame at St. Michael's during the Chicago Fire*

From October 8 through 11, 1871, Chicago was afflicted with a conflagration worse than almost anything seen before. With nearly 300,000 inhabitants, it was the largest commercial city in the West. At our mission [St. Michael's], which was opened on May 1, 1862, and dedicated to Mary and St. Alphonsus, the number of school children had increased from 200 to 1,200 during its nine years of existence.

On Sunday, October 8, fire broke out in the southern part of the city at 10:00 p.m., and by 1:00 a.m. entire blocks were burned to the ground. Since the water conduit also burned, distress rose to the utmost. No water was to be had, and the frightfully strong whirlwind drove the raging fire more and more to the north side. The sky resembled a sea of fire, houses were destroyed, trees were bent down to the ground, people wept and lamented, and wagons, loaded with baggage, rushed in great haste towards the northwest side.

The sisters at St. Michael's, completely oblivious of the danger, were assembled in the chapel at 5:00 a.m. on Monday for Holy Mass and Holy Communion. The priest came earlier than usual, however, and told them that they were in great danger. Terrified, he was unable to say Holy Mass but, with a trembling hand, he gave the sisters Holy Communion and then took the Blessed Sacrament along with him. Hardly had he left the house when eight Benedictine sisters came with their boarders to seek protection and help from our sisters since their convent had already gone up in flames.

The wind, raging like a hurricane, continued to turn more and more toward the north. The sisters began to pack their things, but they could not and would not believe that the terrible element would reach them. Two men drove their baggage to the orphanage in Rose Hill.<sup>1</sup> By three in the afternoon the fire had already engulfed the school and convent. The sisters summoned up all their energy to save the beautiful tabernacle and carried it into the garden, but they never found it again. Then they left, resigned to God's holy Will, driven by the wind, enveloped by dust and smoke. They traveled seven miles beyond the city limits, looking back at the dear convent until the smoke prevented any further view. In ten minutes, everything was leveled. The sisters went to the sisters at the orphanage in Rose Hill.

The next day the superior [M. Emmerentia Eichhammer], accompanied by another sister, returned to the place where the convent and school had stood. Everywhere the ground was still smoldering under their feet. No street, no path, was recognizable. Only the ruins of the once magnificent St. Michael's Church indicated where the school and convent once stood. They could hardly believe their eyes when they saw the devastation and hastened to the smoldering garden. They tried to save what had been buried there, but the fire had already reached it. Everything was reduced to embers. With every shovel of earth that they removed, flames came up and were played about by the wind. Therefore, they went to the motherhouse in Milwaukee, thanking God that at least their lives had been saved from a fiery death.

The sisters from the other two houses at St. Peter's and on Archer Road in Chicago were spared from the fire.

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<sup>1</sup> Orphanage for German children conducted by the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ