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A Hot Time in the Ole Town Tonight

By, Joyce P. Lansky

When Mr. McLaughlin held the grainy photograph in front of me, I had to admit, it looked splendid. I took the paper and moved it under the candlelight. Never had I imagined one could gain such a superb likeness of a person without an artist present. Though it's been less than fifty years since the first photograph, we've come a long way.

Mr. McLaughlin invited my wife, me, and several other prominent men of Chicago to his dinner party to take our likenesses with his black box. Normally, people had to be deceased to gain Mr. McLaughlin's attention, but he wanted to photograph living people, so having never had a likeness of us made, we eagerly stepped into his parlor.

A pair of violinists and a vocalist had set up music stands and performed favorite songs from a few years ago. We enjoyed listening to "The Man on the Flying Trapeze" and "Shoo Fly Don't Bother Me." Clearly, the McLaughlins were putting on airs in an attempt to blend into the American melting pot, as so many poor Irish potato farmers often did. Mrs. McLaughlin probably paid $3 for her hoop skirt, bustle and hair braid, not to mention the golden earrings and pin set that looked imported.

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The parlor rug of warm shades of red, sewn with intricate designs of branches and doves, covered the wooden floor. As my wife eyed the beautiful china placed on a splendid mahogany table, I hoped she had not formed new desires.

Clearing his throat, Mr. McLaughlin pulled out a heavy chair and motioned for all to be seated at our places. Shortly thereafter, a servant entered with a steaming platter of beef. A delicious scent rose from the meat and wafted throughout the room.

I couldn't understand why the McLaughlins chose to be tenants of the O'Leary's second house on De Koven Street. True, they were given the front part of the living quarters, yet I would think they'd have wanted to travel further from their Irish roots in their obvious attempts to climb the social ladder. Apparently, I was not the only one with these thoughts.

"Do you ever have trouble with the O'Leary's?" Mayor Mason gave a sly smirk that was barely visible under his full white mustache and beard. He sat erectly in his arm chair with his piercing eyes glued to our host. As Mayor of Chicago, he was a real lally-cooler!1 His image on film would bring business to Mr. McLaughlin with high pay, too.

Mr. McLaughlin's face dropped at the question. Had he been embarrassed for depending on the Irish family for his living space? If so, he was coy about admitting

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it. "Oh, no. Everything is fine as long as her five noisy cows don't moo into the night. I've often thought about turning them into a great, steak feast." A boisterous chuckle emerged from the group.

"Do the cows give a good milk?" Michael Ahern, a reporter for the "Chicago Republican" asked. Mr. Ahern was obviously invited to write about Mr. McLaughlin's photographic genius, but he seemed more interested in the five cows in the nearby barn. He swallowed his third glass of alcohol, and smacked his lips as he reached for the bottle of moonshine on the table. "This is delicious! Was it made from molasses, beats, or sorghum?"

"Fruits." Mr. McLaughlin grinned. Any person worth his weight in rum could tell the origin of the brew. That's a bottom fact.2

His reporter guest stumbled up from the table, being quite inebriated, and knocked over his heavy wooden chair. Having snatched the bottle of fire water, he then wandered out the door. I noticed a wobbly trail of liquor left in his wake as he ventured toward the O'Leary barn.

With considerable curiosity, I followed Mr. Ahern but kept enough of a distance to not alert him of my presence. The door to the barn remained wide open, so I had no trouble watching his antics from afar. The fool tried to milk Mrs. O'Leary's cow. No

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one milks a cow at nine o'clock in the evening, but in his current state, he was not attune to obeying societal graces. I wished our host had joined me to capture this event on film, but as the gentleman that he is, he remained with his guests. What a brilliant opportunity, to photograph the living, lost on the etiquette of a fine host.

In a careless manner, Ahern dropped his lantern. We hadn't seen rain for awhile, plus the O'Learys had piled up plenty of wood, hay, and coal shavings near the cows. Whoosh! The barn instantly burst into fire with twenty foot flames licking the night sky. The reporter managed to save his pitiful life by straggling out of the burning structure. He fell to a seated position and gaped at the spectacle in front of him. Putting out a fire of such magnitude would prove to be almost impossible.

The next morning, Michael Ahern told a thumper3 in the newspaper. He wrote of a cow kicking over a lantern, that had been carelessly left in the shed by Kate O'Leary. I hated the way he lied and spoke up immediately about what I observed, but no one believed me. There was so much disdain for the Irish, that people refused to blame the fire on an honorable member of society. Plus, if one reads something in print, it carries the stamp of truth. Ironically, dining at a photographer's home did nothing to help prove my story.

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Discussion Questions

Directions: Students should answer the following question independently or in small groups, and then discuss answers with their teacher and classmates.

1. What is the narrator's thoughts about technological advancements? Explain. How have we improved in photography since 1871?

2. What does it mean to put on airs? Do you think the McLaughlin's were doing this? Find textual evidence to support your thoughts.

3. Why do you think the carpet would contain branches and doves? Could this be symbolic for anything?

4. Write another possible reason, other than what was mentioned in the story as to why Mr. McLaughlin's face dropped when the mayor asked him about having trouble with the O'Leary family.

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Chicago Fire Research Questions

Directions: Use research materials to answer the questions below.

1. Why would Mr. McLaughlin have taken photos of people who were dead? Research this practice and explain it.

2. Research the term "moonshine." Discuss the origin of this term and the history of the people who made it.

3. Research Irish immigration to America. What problems did Irish Americans face when entering this country?

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