



NATIONAL FIRE PROTECTION ASSOCIATION

60 Batterymarch Street, Boston, Mass. 02110

The independent non-profit technical and educational clearing house of fire safety information



DEUEL RICHARDSON
Public Relations Manager
Day: 482-8755 Night: CE 5-9191

Release: SPECIAL, FOR AP ONLY
November 10, 1967

COCOANUT GROVE: 25 YEARS AFTER
Statement by Percy Bugbee, General Manager
National Fire Protection Association

Every major fire tragedy in this country has shocked both the public and authorities into action, and the result has invariably been a gain in protecting people from the hazards of fire.

The Coconut Grove disaster, as is well known, set off a crash program of building inspections in virtually every U. S. city, and a close examination of state and local codes aimed to provide life safety in buildings frequented by the public.

Hazardous conditions uncovered by inspections were corrected. A substantial majority of codes were strengthened to provide safe and adequate exits and to eliminate combustible decorations, and in other ways brought up to the standards set by the National Fire Protection Association's Life Safety Code.

In the 25 years since Coconut Grove, unquestionably many more lives have been saved by the actions taken in the months following the tragedy than were lost in the fire.

Progress did not stop then. A recent survey indicates that almost 60 per cent of the states have revised their laws and regulations in the past half-dozen years to adopt requirements of the NFPA Life Safety Code, which is stricter today than it was 25 years ago.

Building inspections have continued to improve. There is better coordination between local building and fire authorities, although there is room for further improvement in many cities. The quality of inspections has improved, because inspectors are better trained and more knowledgeable.

Technological advances in better building methods and materials, and in safer decorative materials, continue to make their contributions to a lessening of hazards.

Could there be another Coconut Grove today?

Unfortunately the answer must be "yes" -- although it is substantially less likely than in 1942.

There are still some areas of the country where requirements to provide life safety from fire in public buildings are antiquated and inadequate. There are areas where building inspections are not as thorough as they should be, and enforcement of codes neglected -- although to be fair, these conditions exist in many instances because inspection and enforcement agencies are not given adequate manpower and the general public support needed to perform effectively.

And, it must be said, there are some operators of night clubs, restaurants and similar places who have forgotten or who ignore the lessons of Coconut Grove, and who, in spite of orders to correct conditions, make exits as inconspicuous as possible, partially block them by using them for storage space, and crowd tables together to a point where panic might have disastrous results.

The public can help correct these situations by looking for these conditions and promptly leaving the place when they spot them. Incidentally, an

excellent rule for personal safety from fire is always to look for at least two exit routes on entering a restaurant, theatre or similar public place, so quick action can be taken in an emergency.

People have a larger responsibility. It is to demand up-to-date, strong codes for life safety from fire in public buildings, and strict, impartial enforcement of them -- and to be willing to provide the necessary funds for the enforcing agencies.

Public authorities have a parallel responsibility to work for the best in codes and sound enforcement. But no matter how dedicated and concerned they may be, they cannot be wholly effective without interested public support.

We are still benefitting from actions which stemmed from the shock of Coconut Grove, but the shock effect has largely disappeared, except for what is permanently fixed in the minds of the many conscientious inspection and fire officials. I pray a tragedy of similar proportions will not be needed to make the further advances needed before we can say with certainty that there never will be another Coconut Grove.