

A NON-PROFIT TECHNICAL AND EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION:

"To promote the science and improve the methods of fire protection and prevention; to obtain and circulate information on these subjects and to secure the co-operation of its members in establishing proper safeguards against loss of life and property by fire."

National Fire Protection Association

INTERNATIONAL

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The Cocoanut Grove Fire Tragedy

Boston, Nov. 28, 1942. 479 Dead

Statement by Robert S. Moulton, Technical Secretary
National Fire Protection Association; Secretary,
N.F.P.A. Committee on Safety to Life.

The Cocoanut Grove Night Club tragedy is clearly due to gross violation of several of the fundamental principles of fire safety which have been demonstrated by years of experience and which should be well known to everybody. It is too soon as yet to determine the responsibility, to evaluate the part that may have been played by the chaotic condition of Boston's building laws, incompetent enforcement, political influence and careless management, but the main lessons are clear.

A night club is essentially a place of public assembly in the same life hazard class with a theatre but having greater possibilities of fire. As a result of the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago in 1903 when 602 people were burned to death, theatres in the United States are well regulated by fire laws. Automatic sprinklers are required over combustible stage scenery, adequate exits are required and regular inspections are made in accordance with the law to make sure that exits are free and unobstructed and that all fire precautions are observed. No such safeguards have been applied to night clubs which are far more dangerous than theatres. Night clubs commonly are located in old buildings made over for the purpose and practically every known rule of fire safety is violated. The Cocoanut Grove building was certainly no worse than hundreds of other night clubs located throughout the United States.

The most glaring feature of this tragedy was the lack of proper exits. The National Fire Protection Association in its Building Exits Code, which is a well recognized standard prepared by a representative committee of national experts.

contains in its provisions on places of public assembly a number of basic requirements which, if observed, would clearly have prevented this tragedy.

Revolving doors have long been considered by the N.F.P.A. Committee on Safety to Life as a menace under fire and panic conditions. Even though a revolving door may be of the so-called "collapsible" type, it can readily serve as a death trap. The N.F.P.A. Building Exits Code prohibits revolving doors as required means of exit in places of public assembly and further specifies that if revolving doors are used there must be a swinging door immediately adjoining or within 20 feet. In our opinion revolving doors should be prohibited in all places of public assembly.

Reports indicate that there were other doors from this building which might have served as exits but which were locked and one important door was hidden by drapes. The N.F.P.A. Building Exits Code requires that all doors be kept unlocked and unobstructed at all times when a building is occupied, also that in a place of public assembly no draperies shall be permitted in front of exit doors.

The basement lounge where many persons perished violated the fundamental rule that there shall be two clearly marked exits, so arranged that if one is blocked during a fire the other will furnish a safe path of escape. A clearly marked second exit from this room leading directly to the outside of the building, as provided in the Building Exits Code, would have saved many lives.

The immediate cause of the start of this fire is unimportant and too much blame should not be attached to the boy who was responsible. With a large quantity of highly combustible decorative material, fire might have started from any one of a number of causes. The main factor was the presence of the combustible material in violation of the Building Exits Code which provides: "Paper and cloth decorative material should be kept to a minimum in places of public assembly since such flimsy materials increase the hazard of the kindling and spread of fire." Combustible

decorations can be flameproofed but effective flameproofing requires careful treatment and at best no chemical treatment of combustible materials actually makes them fireproof. Some chemicals used for flameproofing may generate noxious smoke when heated and according to reports this may have been an important factor in this fire. The N.F.P.A. has published standards on the flameproofing of combustible materials but advises against placing too much reliance on such treatments.

A standard automatic sprinkler system would have prevented this tragedy. A few sprinkler heads, opened by the heat of the fire, would have stopped the blaze in its incipency. In the 50-year records of the National Fire Protection Association, there is no case on record where any major loss of life by fire has occurred in a building equipped with a standard automatic sprinkler system.

The fire department apparently did excellent work in this fire. It clearly shows, however, the fallacy of relying upon any fire department, no matter how efficient, to prevent loss of life by fire in a crowded building. Even though the fire department is on the scene immediately, they are largely powerless to rescue the helpless victims trapped inside.

As a result of this fire, there will doubtless be a wave of state and city legislation regulating night clubs. It is indeed high time that these potential death traps are brought into line with the established fire safety requirements that have long been applied to theatres and other places of public assembly. The Building Exits Code of the National Fire Protection Association, which dates back to 1913, is available as a guide for legislation which will require reasonable fire safeguards involving a minimum of inconvenience and expense to the operators. No legislation, however, will be effective in preventing repetition of such tragedies unless it is competently enforced without interference by political or commercial interests.