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The Cocoanut Grove fire

AS AN ORGANIZATION that is always trying to create a safer environment, we often find that the best opportunities to make progress grow out of some of the worst tragedies. There is no better example of this than the Cocoanut Grove fire that is written about in this issue of *NFPA Journal*®.

Sixty-five years ago, on November 28, 1942, the fire at Boston's most popular nightclub took the lives of 492 people. It was the deadliest nightclub fire in U.S. history. There are still many people alive today who were there that night and they have carried through their lives memories of an almost unimaginable scene as the crowd desperately tried to flee that inferno.

That fire created the opportunity for NFPA to lead the way to major reforms in fire safety that have had a lasting effect throughout the United States. Jurisdictions that previously showed little commitment to fire safety suddenly realized how vulnerable they were to this type of mass tragedy.

One of the biggest advances was a change in the definition of places of public assembly. Before the Cocoanut Grove fire, many jurisdictions did not consider restaurants and

nightclubs to be places of public assembly and so they did not see how dangerous they could be. After Cocoanut Grove, there was a new awareness of the particular dangers when fire occurs in any crowded place where there are inadequate exits.

At the time of the fire, Robert Moulton, NFPA's Technical Secretary and the secretary of the NFPA Committee on Safety to Life, said in a newspaper interview: "The most glaring feature of this tragedy was the lack of proper exits. Revolving doors have long been considered by the National Fire Protection Association Committee on Safety to Life as a menace under fire and panic conditions."

At the 1945 NFPA Annual Meeting, the Committee on Safety to Life recommended a change in the method of exit measurement, clarification of the need for stairway enclosure, provisions regulating loose chairs in nightclubs, and changes in lighting and signs.

Those changes were incorporated into the 1946 edition of the *Building Exits Code*, as was a special note on interior finish.

Today, it is recognized that all assembly occupancies should have at least two separate and remote means of egress, and the necessary number, width, and types of reliable

exits based on the expected occupancy should be available.

In addition to the technical changes that were brought forth from Cocoanut Grove, that experience showed how important it is for NFPA to publicize the details of how the tragedies occur. NFPA issued to its membership a 20-page illustrated report with an analysis of the factors involved in the fire and suggested ways that other Cocoanut Groves could be prevented.

There were those, including the Attorney General of Massachusetts, who did not want that report distributed, but NFPA put it out anyway and the story of the Cocoanut Grove fire became a great catalyst for change in fire safety in the United States as more communities rushed to adopt our *Building Exits Code*, the precursor of the *Life Safety Code*®.

It is important that we remember tragedies such as the Cocoanut Grove fire and those who were killed and injured on that horrible night in Boston 65 years ago.

The best way to commemorate those who die in events similar to the Cocoanut Grove fire is to study what happened, apply the lessons learned, and dedicate ourselves to using that knowledge to prevent those tragedies from ever happening again. ♦