

**Blue flash signals tragedy at the Cocoanut Grove** by Curt Norris  
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[The story so far: On the night of Nov. 28, 1942, one thousand people had crowded into the Cocoanut Grove. The bleakness of that World War II year faded as they were caught up in the music and dancing and euphoria of the evening.]

Mickey Alpert, the Cocoanut Grove's master of ceremonies, sat down next to Billy Payne. "It's time to start the late floor show," he said. Payne sang a spirited "Star Spangled Banner."

Then there was a crash of glass and an alarmed undertone of voices. Payne shouted, "Fight, Mickey." Alpert turned to see flames creeping hungrily down the foyer corridor toward the Caricature Bar. In an instant, the lobby was obscured by a flash of searing blue flame, followed by blinding smoke.

The significance of this blue flame would go uninvestigated for the next half-century. Amid alarmed shrieks, people in far corners began to gasp and cough as acrid fumes filled the air.

An entertainer, Gracie Vaughn, one of the first people to see the trouble, went to the cocktail lounge. "There's a small fire in the dining room," she announced. "Nothing to worry about if you folks leave quietly."

People started to edge toward the Broadway exit, and Vaughn headed for the stage. She tried to make herself heard over the noise of the alarmed crowd but was drowned out. She rushed to the piano and started to bang out a sharp and loud tune.

The flames licked at the electrical wiring, and the lights flickered and went out. Now the hall was filled with lethal fumes from the red imitation leather, which was smoldering.

The notes from the piano weakened, then ceased. Gracie Vaughn was dead. Mickey Alpert rushed downstairs to the Melody Lounge, where he found bewildered guests clustered off the kitchen. Among them were most of the Holy Cross football crowd, who had been in the lounge celebrating the college's football victory over Boston College that afternoon.

Alpert took them up the stairs to a room that led to safety. He pushed open the door but found the way blocked by smoke and flames. Remembering a window, he seized a chair, smashed the glass, and dropped the guests, one by one, onto the smoke-filled street below.

There were other heroes. In the main dining room, Juan Pinedol, leader of the rhumba band, battered down a rear door behind the bandstand and led customers to safety. Then, realizing that his wife was still inside, he re-entered the blazing building. He found her lying unconscious on the floor and dragged her to safety.

The darkened interior was now and then lighted by grisly torches as women wearing light evening dresses went up in flames. Bodies piled up against the revolving doors, which no longer turned.

The first official word of the fire was received at Station 4 of the Boston Police Department at 10:27 p.m. Auxiliary Police Officers John Phelan Jr., George Seways, Daniel Crane, George Yen, Joe Adams, Henry Bertini, Tom Callahan, Davis Collins, and Richard Rodrique arrived at the scene just as the first survivors staggered out of the Grove and onto the street -- women whose burnt dresses had been ripped from their backs and men with charred limbs, who volunteered for rescue work.

John J. Walsh, chairman of the Boston Committee of Public Safety and a guest in the club a few minutes before, joined in the work for which he had trained thousands. Frantic radio messages were sent to neighboring towns for physicians and ambulances.

As the number of victims mounted, hospitals and morgues filled up, and vacant garages and other buildings were used to handle the overflow. The Red Cross was joined in the rescue work by various civil defense agencies and the Shore Patrol and Military Police.

The morning dawned cold and gray. The fire toll was now more than 450 and rising steadily. In some cases, whole families had been wiped out.

Fingerprints and melted jewelry and other accessories were used to identify victims as relatives and friends crowded into hospitals and morgues seeking missing ones.

Two chemists from the Merck Institute in Rahway, N.J., rushed to Boston with a "mystery serum" that was credited with saving the lives of many of the seriously burned. The drug was mixed with a broth and sprayed or daubed on a victim's burns. Scientists waited with keen anticipation the results of the first widespread use of this experimental serum.

Its name was penicillin. The recently developed sulfa drugs were also used to treat the Grove's victims. In the aftermath of the fire, Robert S. Moulton, technical secretary of the National Fire Protection Association, made a scathing attack charging "gross violation of fire safety principles" at the Coconut Grove.

"It is too soon," he declared, "to determine responsibility and to evaluate the part which may have been played by the chaotic condition of Boston's building laws, . . . political influence, and careless management."

Attorney General Robert T. Bushnell ordered a probe with all speed and dispatch "which is consistent with accuracy." City, state, and local police and fire departments started separate investigations. Fire Commissioner William Arthur Reilly heard testimony from fire department personnel that the blaze was a "flash," or quick-spreading, fire. The way in which the flames engulfed the decorations and furnishings and then whirled upstairs to where most of the victims perished was reconstructed.

Everyone wanted to know how the fire started and, as each report came in, the lack of this information became glaringly apparent. There was a cover-up, not very long-lived, that was soon revealed by Police Commissioner Joseph Timilty, who had assigned Capt. John F. McCarthy, formerly head of the homicide squad, to investigate the fire. McCarthy said it had been unintentionally started by 16-year-old Stanley F. Tomaszewski, who worked as a bus boy in the Melody Lounge although it was illegal for a minor to do so in a place that served liquor.

Tomaszewski told McCarthy that the head barman John Bradley had told him to check on a light that had gone out in a corner near a palm tree and an air-conditioning unit. He found a girl and a soldier in the corner and told them that they should leave the lights alone.

Tomaszewski tried without success to find the bulb in the darkness, so he struck a match, found the bulb loose in its socket, and tightened it. There was the blue flash, and someone shouted that the palm tree was on fire. Bradley rushed to the bar, grabbed some water, and tried in vain to put out the blazing tree.

The fire spread over the paper leaves of the tree and up curtains to the ceiling of the lounge. In less than two minutes, the whole corner was ablaze, and the flames and heat roared up the stairs.

Recent revelations suggest that the bus boy might have been spared much anguish if investigators had not overlooked a clear clue to the cause of the fire -- the eyewitness reports of the blue flash that signaled it. It is now believed that this indicates that the fire was fed by leaking and extremely volatile methyl chloride gas from the air-conditioning unit. The gas, odorless, toxic and highly flammable, was used in air-conditioning units as a wartime substitute for Freon.

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