

BY TIM HEALEY

The Cocoanut Grove Fire, Lessons Learned

Eighty years ago, on November 28, 1942, just after 10 p.m., a 16-year-old busboy had been ordered to fix a light bulb located at the top of an artificial palm tree at the Cocoanut Grove “restaurant-supper club” in Boston, Mass. (legend has it the bulb had been unscrewed by a patron desiring more intimacy with his date in the Grove’s basement lounge). He lit a match to locate the socket for the light bulb, and moments later, a flicker of a flame in the palm tree quickly spread to the highly flammable cloth-covered ceiling.

The official Boston Fire Department report states that “from the first appearance of flame until it had explosively traversed the main dining room and passed, almost 225 feet away, to the entrance of the Broadway Lounge (1), the commissioner estimated at total time of five minutes at most. At this point in time all exits normally open to the public, of which each had something functionally wrong, were useless for a safe escape.” A revolving door at the main Piedmont Street entrance was the worst culprit (2); it became jammed as patrons pushed toward the door to escape.

A combination of corruption, greed, and wanton disregard of local fire regulations led to the deadliest “nightclub” fire in U.S. history (Chicago’s Iroquois Theatre fire in 1903 ignominiously holds the title of deadliest fire in an assembly occupancy, with 602 fatalities).

So lethal was this disaster—which occurred somewhat ironically in the National Fire Protection Association’s own backyard—that it is still taught to this day in architectural and engineering schools, as well as by the NFPA itself, as a cautionary tale.

Lessons learned. As a result of the fire, building codes were

amended in Boston and elsewhere. Revolving doors were outlawed (and later reinstated, provided a revolving door is placed between two outward-opening exit doors). Exit doors were to be clearly marked, unlocked from within, and free from blockage by screens, drapes, and furniture. No combustible materials were to be used for decorations in places of public assembly. The definition of places of “public assembly” was changed (surprisingly, “restaurant-supper clubs” had not been considered as places of public assembly in many jurisdictions).

By the numbers. The estimated occupancy of the club at the time of the fire (more than twice its legal capacity): **1,000**

The total number of egress doors on the grade level (all deemed “functionally wrong ... useless for a safe escape”): **8**

The number of egress doors in the basement: **1**

The official number of victims: **492** dead and **166** injured (number of deaths is disputed; the Boston Fire Department report states “490 deaths”)

The approximate number of bodies found piled up at the Piedmont Street revolving door entry: **200**

The approximate number of bodies found at the in-swinging Broadway entry doors: **100**

The number of victims received in one hour by Boston City Hospital (the highest admission rate ever recorded by a hospital in the U.S.): **300**

The years served by Cocoanut Grove owner, Barney Welansky, of a 12-to-15-year sentence for involuntary manslaughter before being pardoned for health reasons: **3.5**



Photos courtesy U.S. Army Signal Corps, Boston Public Library