

# History of the Fire Service

## Our Lady of Angels Fire

December 1, 1958



The **Our Lady of the Angels School Fire** broke out shortly before classes were to be dismissed on December 1, 1958, at the foot of a stairway in the Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago, Illinois. The elementary school was operated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. A total of 92 pupils and 3 nuns lost their lives when smoke, heat, and fire cut off their normal means of escape through corridors and stairways. Many were killed when they jumped from second-floor windows (which were as high as a third floor would be on level ground). Another 100 were seriously injured.

The disaster was the lead headline story in American, Canadian, and European newspapers. Pope John XXIII sent his condolences from the Vatican in Rome. The severity of the fire shocked the nation and surprised educational administrators of both public and private schools. The disaster led to major improvements in standards for school design and fire safety codes.

### The Fire

The fire began in the basement of the older north wing between about 2:00 p.m. CST and 2:20 p.m. Classes were due to be dismissed at 3:00 p.m. Ignition took place in a cardboard trash barrel at the foot of the northeast stairwell. The fire smoldered undetected for an estimated 10 to 30 minutes, gradually heating the stairwell and filling it with a light grey smoke that eventually became thick and black.

The smoke began to fill the second floor corridor, but remained unnoticed for a few minutes. At approximately 2:25 p.m., three eighth grade girls, Janet Delaria, Frances J. Guzaldo, and Karen Hobik, returning from an errand came up a different staircase to return to their second floor classroom in the north wing.

The girls encountered thick smoke, making them cough loudly. They hurriedly entered the rear door of Room 211 and promptly notified their teacher, Sister Helaine O'Neill, who was not yet aware of the smoke. O'Neill got up from her desk and began lining up her students to evacuate the building.

When she opened the front door of the classroom moments later to enter the hallway, the intensity of the smoke caused O'Neill to deem it too dangerous to attempt escape down the stairs leading to Avers Avenue on the west side of the building. She remained inside the classroom with her students, awaiting rescue. The school's fire alarm rang.

About this same time, a window at the foot of the stairwell shattered due to the intense heat, giving the smoldering fire a new oxygen supply. The wooden staircase burst into flames and, acting like a chimney, sent hot gases, fire, and black smoke swirling up the stairwell.

As they left the building, the teacher pulled the fire alarm, but it did not ring. Several minutes later, after leaving her students in the church, she returned to the school and activated the alarm on the second attempt. This alarm rang inside the school, but was not automatically connected to the fire department. By this time, however, the students and teachers in the north wing classrooms on the second floor were essentially trapped, whether they knew about the fire or not.

Despite Raymond's hasty visit to the rectory soon after 2:30 p.m. to spread the alert, there was an unexplained delay before the first telephone call from the rectory reached the fire department at 2:42 p.m. One minute later, a second telephone call was received from Barbara Glowacki, the owner of a candy store on the alley along the north wing.

Glowacki had noticed flames in the northeast stairwell after a passing motorist, Elmer Barkhaus, entered her store and asked if a public telephone was available to call the fire department. Police initially thought this 61-year-old man was a suspect in the blaze until Barkhaus came forward and explained himself. Glowacki used the private telephone in her apartment behind the store to notify authorities.

The first floor landing was equipped with a heavy wooden door, which effectively blocked the fire and heat from entering the first floor hallways. However, the northeast stairwell landing on the second floor had no blocking fire door. As a result, there was no barrier to prevent the spread of fire, smoke, and heat through the second floor hallways. The western stairwell landing on the second floor had two substandard corridor doors with glass panes propped open (possibly by a teacher) at the time of the fire. This caused further drafts of air and an additional oxygen supply to feed the flames. Two other doors were chained open when they should have been closed; these doors were at the first and second floor levels leading into the annex. The upper door was quickly closed, but the lower one remained open throughout the fire.

As the fire consumed the northeast stairway, a pipe chase running from the basement to the cockloft above the second floor false ceiling gave the superheated gases a direct route to the attic. In the attic the temperature rapidly increased until flashover occurred.

The fire then swept down through ventilation grates in the second floor corridor and flashed through the cockloft above the classrooms. Glass transom windows above the doors of each classroom broke as the heat intensified, allowing flames in the hallway to enter the classrooms. By the time the students and their teachers in the second floor classrooms realized the danger, their sole escape route in the hallway was impassable.

For 329 children and 5 teaching nuns, the only remaining means of escape was to jump from their second floor windows to the concrete and crushed rock 25 feet below, or to wait for the fire department to arrive and rescue them. Recognizing the trap they were in, some of the nuns encouraged the children to sit at their desks or gather in a semicircle and pray. Smoke, heat, and flames forced them to the windows. One nun, Sister Mary Davidis Devine, ordered her students in Room 209 to place books and furniture in front of her classroom doors, and this helped to slow the entry of smoke and flames until rescuers arrived. Out of the 55 students in Room 209, eight escaped with injuries, and two died; Beverly Burda, the last student remaining in the room, died when the roof collapsed. Another student, Valerie Thoma, died at a hospital on March 10, 1959.



## The Rescue

Fire department units arrived within four minutes of being called, but by then the fire had been smoldering unchecked for possibly 40 minutes. It was now fully out of control. The fire department was then hampered because they had been incorrectly directed to the rectory address around the corner on West Iowa Street; valuable minutes were lost repositioning fire trucks and hose lines once the true location of the fire was determined. Additional firefighting equipment was summoned rapidly. In 1959 the National Fire Protection Association's report on the blaze exonerated the rapid response of the Chicago Fire Department and its initial priority to rescue pupils rather than merely fight the flames.

The south windows of the north wing overlooked a small courtyard surrounded by the school on three sides, and a seven-foot iron picket fence on the fourth side facing Avers Avenue. The gate in the fence was routinely locked. Firemen could not get ladders to the children at the south windows without first breaking through the gate. They spent two anxious minutes battering the gate with sledgehammers and a ladder before they managed to smash it by backing a fire truck into the gate. The gate delayed the rescues of rooms 209 and 211.

Firemen began rescuing children from the second floor windows, but nightmare conditions in some of the classrooms had already become unbearable. Children were stumbling, crawling, and fighting their way to the windows, trying to breathe and escape. Many jumped, fell, or were pushed out the windows before firemen on ladders could reach them. Children jumped with their hair and clothes on fire. Some were killed in the fall, and scores more were seriously injured. Many of the smaller children were trapped behind frantic students at the windows. Some younger students who managed to secure a spot at a window were then unable to climb over the high window sills, or were pulled back by others frantically trying to scramble out. Firemen struggled desperately to pull students and nuns from windows as classrooms partially filled with screaming children exploded. Firemen noticed that the white shirts of children in the windows changed color and turned brown. A wide portion of the school's roof collapsed, and the massive downward rush of heat would probably have instantly killed anyone remaining in the second-floor classrooms.

## The Investigation

The cause of the fire was never officially determined. A boy, age 10 and a fifth grader, confessed in 1962 to setting the blaze and subsequently recanted his confession. He was more afraid of confessing to his mother and stepfather than to the police. He also confessed to setting numerous other fires in the neighborhood, mostly in apartment buildings. This boy had been excused from his classroom to go to the boys' toilet about 2:00 p.m. on the day of the fire. This was roughly the time that the fire began to smolder in the bin at the base of the stairwell. After the incident, a fire investigator found burned matches in the undamaged sacristy area of a chapel located in the basement of the north wing. In his confession and lie-detector test, the boy related details of the fire's origin that had not been made public and that he should not have known. Neither he nor anyone else was ever prosecuted. He died in 2004. Officially, the cause of the fire remains unknown. An arson attempt on parish facilities in June, 1958, had burned itself out and nobody was injured.



## The Aftermath

The funeral for the three nuns took place first. A Requiem Mass was offered in Our Lady of the Angels Church after more than 2,000 parishioners paid their respects to the deceased teachers as the closed caskets lay in repose in the convent. A color guard of 100 policemen and firemen accompanied the coffins into the church. More than 100 nuns from the order of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary attended from across Illinois as well as from their main convent in Dubuque, Iowa. The funeral procession had several hundred vehicles. The three teachers were interred side by side in a grave next to other nuns of their religious order at the Mount Carmel Cemetery in suburban Hillside, Illinois.

For the young victims, a Solemn Requiem Mass and funeral service took place at the Illinois National Guard Armory abutting Humboldt Park, as the parish church was not large enough to accommodate the huge crowd. New York Cardinal Francis Spellman came to Chicago to lend his support. Many of the young students were buried in the "Shrine of the Holy Innocents" plot at Queen of Heaven Cemetery in Hillside.



## Fire Safety Improvements

After the Our Lady of the Angels School fire, Percy Bugbee, the president of the NFPA said in an interview, "There are no new lessons to be learned from this fire; only old lessons that tragically went unheeded." Sweeping changes in school fire safety regulations were enacted nationwide. Some 16,500 older school buildings in the United States were brought up to code within one year of the disaster. Ordinances to strengthen Chicago's fire code and new amendments to the Illinois state fire code were passed. The NFPA estimated that about 68% of all U.S. communities inaugurated and completed fire safety improvements after the Our Lady of the Angels fire, one of which being an increased number of law-mandated fire drills throughout the academic year. In addition, fire investigators came from as far away as London to study the lessons that could be learned. The City Council of Chicago passed a law requiring that a fire alarm box be installed in front of schools and other public assembly venues. The interior fire alarm systems of these buildings must be connected to the street fire alarm box.