



Our Lady of the Angels Grade School Fire

On December 1, 1958, a fire broke out in the basement of Our Lady of the Angels grade school in Chicago. The building was built in 1910 with typical wood and plaster materials. Over the years, additional structures were added. By 1953, it was a two-and-a-half-story structure comprising two buildings connected by an annex. The inside was an open area with open stairways. There were six exits and one fire escape located in the annex on the second floor. There were 24 classrooms with doors with glass transoms that opened at the top of the doors. Each classroom held as many as 60 students.

Chicago had passed a new construction law in 1949 requiring all new construction in schools to be of noncombustible materials with enclosed stairways and fire-resistant doors. It also regulated the number of people that could safely be in a room. This code was not retroactive and did not affect existing buildings. The school had passed a fire inspection just months before the fire.

A fire started at the bottom of a rear stairway around 2:00 p.m. on December 1, 1958. By 2:30, heavy black smoke was rolling up the stairway to the second floor. The mother superior was the only one to pull the fire alarm. When one teacher told another of the fire, the second teacher told her to wait there while she went to find mother superior. When she did not find the mother superior, she returned, and the two teachers evacuated the building after pulling the fire alarm. The alarm rang in the building and did not ring in the firehouse. The fire department was not to learn of the fire until someone noticed the smoke and called the alarm in to the department.

The rules of the school rested with the mother superior. She was the only one to issue the order to evacuate the classrooms. This caused many teachers to hesitate and delay movement to safety. One nun told her students that they had to wait for the mother superior. By the time students began to move to the exits, the smoke was very thick and the heat began to encircle the second floor.

As the fire engines and trucks arrived, students were jumping from second-story windows to escape the heat. The firemen began to rescue people from windows as fast as they could. As they raised their ladders, classrooms exploded into fireballs. These images would haunt the firemen for life. The fire took the lives of 92 students and three nuns, and it changed American fire-protection codes.

Cities across America began to inspect school buildings. New York school system closed 18 schools within a week of the tragedy in Chicago. The Los Angeles Fire Department conducted tests on materials and fire-safety equipment and began training exercise to prepare for events like that of Our Lady of the Angels.

Close to 17,000 school buildings have undergone reforms since 1959. Money was made available reforms and improvements. However, some schools used the "life-safety" money for baseball equipment, musical instruments and classroom materials. One school resurfaced the running track.

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. www.HistoryDepot.com