



THE FIRE RATTLE



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The Station Fire: Now We Remember the Coconut Grove

As the last of the charred bodies were removed from what remained of the Station nightclub in West Warwick Rhode Island, the death toll reached ninety-seven, making it the fourth deadliest nightclub fire in United States history, and the seventh overall deadliest structure fire. The fire occurred in the wake of twenty-one deaths at a nightclub in Chicago, where patrons rushed to escape the effects of pepper spray that had been used by club security staff to break up a fight. The news media reported mass panic in both instances. Images of the crowd surging toward exits, only to become entangled and unable to break free were viewed on televisions from coast to coast. The accounts of victims, who had been pushed down and trampled by the crowd, gave the images life.

Panic, horror, chaos, death. Something must be done. Someone must be responsible. Those guilty must be punished. Who allowed this to happen? Why wasn't there a law? *Sure, yes, okay, it will come out in the investigation, and there is.* While much of the general public wrestles with shock and indignation, most fire service professionals aren't surprised at all. This has happened before, it will happen again. In 1942, 492 people were killed in the Coconut Grove nightclub fire. The Beverly Hills Supper Club in Southgate, Kentucky was the scene of a fire in which 164 people were killed and 70 injured in 1977. The Bronx New York, Happyland Social Club fire killed 87 in 1990. The images fade until the next tragedy jolts our collective memory. The question is, how can the frequency of these incidents be reduced to near zero, (which will once again lead to a false sense of security) and yet still enable us to recognize the need for adequate fire prevention measures?

“Acceptable risk” is a term describing the level of public sentiment for the need for government action to ensure public safety through its power to regulate. Prior to September 11, 2001, Americans would never have accepted increased airport security or a new federal bureaucracy dedicated to protection against terrorism. All that changed in one day. A series of fatal automobile accidents causes the public to demand a traffic light at an intersection. It takes catastrophic incidents to change the level of acceptable risk that the public will tolerate. The development of fire and building codes, and the level or intensity of enforcement are both driven by the same public sentiment. The politician who chastises the fire official for not permitting the indoor display of a live Christmas tree in a crowded restaurant in December, becomes the staunch advocate for inspection and rigid code enforcement after the indoor fireworks incident in February. In the span of two months, the fire chief hears the same elected official, who threatened the very

existence of his agency's inspection program, publicly ask if he needs more resources to accomplish the job. But time erodes the level of public sentiment, and over time, the public and the elected officials demand less stringent regulation and enforcement as they become more comfortable with the increased risk level. We get comfortable when nothing bad happens.

In the wake of the Chicago's Iroquois Theater fire in 1903, in which 602 people were killed, the public demanded swift action. Theaters across the country were inspected. Many were ordered to remain closed due to the lack of safety features. New codes were adopted. The "panic" or crash bar required on doors in all assembly occupancies since then was actually invented by Chicagoan Carl Prinzler. Prinzler had tickets for the Iroquois for the day of the fire, but arrived home too late to attend the show. The disappointment of his wife and children quickly disappeared when the news of the fire spread to their neighborhood. The large loss of life was partly attributed to the theater patron's inability to unlatch the exit doors in the dark smoky conditions. Prinzler invented the "self releasing door latch." Boston's Cocoanut Grove fire in 1942 led to code restrictions on revolving doors as exits. Many of our building and fire prevention regulations have similar origins. The statement that our codes were originally written in blood is a fair one, and something that we unfortunately have to be reminded of.

What could have prevented the tragedy in West Warwick? The fire prevention code adopted by the State of Rhode Island mandates a permit and inspection for the use of fireworks. The permit process ensures that the fireworks operator is adequately trained, proper fire extinguishing equipment is provided and that the building elements and decorative material are noncombustible or flameresistant. An inspection would have revealed the lack of adequate safeguards, and denial of the permit. Foam plastic, reportedly installed as acoustical treatment is severely restricted by every major building code in the United States, and should not have been installed in an assembly occupancy such as the Station. Fires involving foam plastics are fast spreading and produce large quantities of toxic, flammable smoke and gases. Had the building been protected with a properly installed and maintained sprinkler system, fire growth would have been significantly slowed, hopefully giving the occupants time to evacuate the structure in an orderly manner.

The most significant factor affecting survival in a fire situation is time. The time victims are exposed to heat and smoke, and the time required for fire intensity to reach a point referred to as "flashover," determine survivability. Flashover is the point at which the contents of the compartment reach their ignition point and simultaneously ignite. Flashover is not survivable. Codes attempt to regulate the time persons are exposed to heat and smoke by limiting the distance to an exit, and stipulating requirements for width, door-swing, door latching and identification and illumination. Preventing or delaying flashover, is accomplished by limiting combustible contents, decorative material and building elements, and installing fire sprinklers.

Videotape of the beginning of the concert shows the fireworks display impinging in the ceiling. The fire appears to quickly spread across the ceiling producing black smoke that

banks down from the ceiling obscuring the exits. Patrons reported that the lights went out, and then the crowd converged at the main exit, literally blocking it with bodies. *Panic* is defined in most fire protection texts as having two elements: high emotional arousal, and irrational behavior.¹ Documented cases of panic in fire situations are far fewer than are normally perceived by the public. The vast majority of fire investigations report orderly, cooperative evacuations, even in conditions of heavy smoke.² For patrons of the Station, rushing toward the exit was probably not irrational given the fact that they were directly exposed to worsening fire conditions. Was there a brutal competition to determine who might survive? Yes, and ninety-seven people lost. Permitting conditions that occurred at the Station and at Chicago's E2 Nightclub may have been unintentional, but the brutality of the situations make the omissions to comply with safety regulations inexcusable.

There will be funerals and studies and commissions and yes, trials. People will demand a new law or a new code, but we don't need either. We need the wherewithal to adequately fund and staff local fire prevention bureaus and state fire marshal offices. We need to allow them to do their jobs. And we need to remember what happened—this time. Had the code in West Warwick been followed, the worst fate to befall a patron of the Station that night would have been a hangover.

¹ Don't Panic, Jerome M. Chertkoff and Russell Kushigian, (West Port Connecticut: Prager, 1999), page 117.

² Ibid, page 118.