

The Lake View School Fire



By Casey C. Grant

WHEN THE SUN BROKE OVER THE BUSTLING village of Collinwood, Ohio, on Wednesday, March 4, 1908, the day began like any other day just off the shores of Lake Erie. But the day would end much, much differently. Unbeknownst to the children and teachers at the Lake View School, they were about to become part of a disaster forever etched in time. On this day, 172 students and 3 adults would die in the largest life-loss school fire in U.S. history. Collinwood, located just outside Cleveland, was seeing record growth in the early twentieth century. It was a prime location for booming railroads, which quickly began building depots and terminals in the area. The quick growth also meant the village would be annexed into the city of Cleveland by 1910.

To accommodate the growing number of families settling in Collinwood, the town built a second elementary school, the Lake View School, in 1901. In 1906, the citizens passed a bond to pay to enlarge the school, but even with this addition, the school was overcrowded by 1908.

Ash Wednesday at Lake View School

The three-story Lake View School was an imposing building, standing not far from the shore of Lake Erie. The front of the building faced east on Collamer Street in North Collinwood, at the corner of what today is East 152nd Street and Lucknow Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio.

The school building was of typical school construction for 1908, measuring 66 by 84 feet (20 by 26 meters) on its footprint. It had brick pier construction using 12-inch (30-centimeter) exterior walls and four 12-inch (30-centimeter) interior walls rising to the attic. Other construction characteristics included interior ordinary timber and joist construction, lathe and plaster walls and ceilings, floors of 7/8-inch (2-centimeter) tongue and groove boards, and a gable hip slate roof on wood



sheathing. The building stood by itself, with no outward exposures.

The three upper floors were used as classrooms with several supporting teacher rooms. The building had a relatively simple layout, with a classroom on each corner of the first and second floors surrounding a common open hall. The basement housed the service utilities, including two steam heaters, a fuel room, and an ash room, as well as two playrooms. This arrangement was designed to provide an efficient centralized use of the building heating system.

In school buildings such as this, there were not many candidate heat sources. Aside from the possibility of an intentionally set fire, the two primary utilities in the building were the electric lights and the heating system. Approximately 40 lights powered by a 110-volt alternating

current were used throughout the school, with electricity coming from the Collinwood Municipal Lighting Plant. There were 12 to 15 circuits on a concealed knob and tube arrangement on a tablet board in an enclosed cabinet on the second floor. The heating system used coal-fired boilers that circulated steam through insulated pipes to cast iron radiators, some located throughout the building and some in the ventilation shafts providing the building's air circulation.

The primary exits were two separate, winding stairwells 5 feet (1.5 meters) wide on the east and west sides that discharged on the ground floor through doors that led to the front and rear main doors. The main doors were each partly restricted by their own foyers, which contained partitions to support the doors and door

frames. An exterior fire escape on the building's north side provided additional means of escape, serving the lower floors and the third-floor gymnasium, which was being used as a fifth-grade classroom.

Fire drills were reportedly held regularly using the two primary stairwells, but not the exterior fire escape. Although the building did not have a fire alarm system, it had bells that could be rung selectively and were used for manual notification. At least one fire drill had been held during the first two months of 1908.

Nowhere to Run

At the start of the 1907-1908 school year, Lake View School had 350 students, more than it could comfortably handle, occupying nine classrooms. Because the day of the

fire was Ash Wednesday, however, the number of absentees might have been slightly higher than usual.

Classes at the Lake View School started at 8:45 each morning. As children arrived for school the morning of the fire, Fritz Hirter, the school janitor, found three young girls playing hide-and-seek in the closet below the front stairs sometime after 8:00 a.m. He sent them away and later recalled that he'd noticed nothing unusual about the encounter. All was normal as the students and teachers reported to their assigned classes.

Around 9:30 a.m., fifth-grader Emma Neibert left her third-floor classroom to use the basement washroom and noticed smoke. She alerted Hirter, and according to subsequent testimony, he went to Ruby Irwin's first-floor classroom of first graders and rang the school bell. He then went to the east and west stairs and opened the doors at both exits.

Later, investigators would determine that the fire started somewhere near the closet below the front stairs in which various supplies, including tools, wood, and lime for whitewashing the walls, were stored. The closet had no electricity, but there were steam pipes running through it. The investigators could not determine the official cause of the fire, but they theorized that it was the result of contact between the main steam line and wood joists in an area partially concealed behind the closet.

As the bells rang to evacuate the school, the students lined up in each classroom to file out much as they had been trained to do in previous fire drills. Many initially thought it was yet another drill.

When the classroom doors opened into common areas rapidly filling with smoke, however, they realized it was not. Though the students quickly proceeded with their orderly evacuation, the fire kept pace, growing with surprising speed. Dense smoke now billowed into the open halls and spread up the stairs from the basement and first floor.

On the first floor, teacher Ethel Rose had led nearly all of her kindergartners from their classroom in the southeast corner and out the front door before it was blocked by the heat and smoke. On the third floor, teacher Laura Bodey guided more than three dozen fifth graders through a window onto the exterior fire escape, which had not been used in earlier fire drills. Almost all of her students escaped safely.

As the rapidly growing heat and choking smoke quickly made the front door and stairs impassible, the students' orderly march started to disintegrate, and they rushed toward the rear stairway exit. The younger students leaving their first-floor classrooms were joined by older students coming down from the second floor, and they quickly overwhelmed the rear stairwell exit's capacity, crushing forward into the partitioned doorway that served the rear exit on ground level. As the younger students fell within sight of safety, the older students behind them, now sensing the genuine danger of the fire, pushed forward and climbed over their schoolmates, leading to an even greater tangled mass of bodies. Later, during the coroner's inquest, teacher Ethel Rose estimated that three minutes elapsed from notification until the massive pile-up

prevented further escape. Second-floor teacher Katherine Gollmar estimated two and a half minutes.

At the coroner's inquest, school Principal Anna Moran provided vivid testimony of these critical moments:

"When the bell rang, I, and I suppose other teachers, thought it was a regular fire drill. Every child in the school has gone out over and over again from the second floor to the open air in one minute and thirty seconds. You can judge from that how quickly we reached the first floor. When we neared the front door, we saw the flames coming up the basement stairs, and without knowing it, we led those little children into the very face of the fire.

"It is not true that the doors opened toward the inside, and they were not locked. The trouble was that only one of the double outer doors was open. The other was fastened with a spring at the top. Before the janitor got it open, the children had wedged themselves into the vestibule, and the others in a panic stumbled and climbed and crowded over them. It was frightful, so near safety.

"If I could have turned my line back, they would have had a chance on the third floor, but they kept coming down, and we could not stop them. Men from the outside were trying to pull the children out, but they were crushed so tightly together that no human strength could clear a passageway. Dozens of them died within a foot of absolute safety."

Fire at the School!

Word of the fire spread quickly, and residents closest to the school

were the first on the scene. Some of them, including parents of trapped children, managed to pull a few children from the massive pile-up at the rear entrance of the school. As testament to their frantic rescue efforts, one of the residents, John Krajnyak, would himself become a victim of the fire. With teachers Grace Fiske and Katherine Weiler, he was one of only three adults to the in the inferno.

Among the large crowd that quickly formed at the school were railroad workers from the nearby Lake Shore and Michigan Southern rail yards who forced their way through the front door but were unable to rescue anyone due to the intense flames. Also in the crowd were a large number of horrified parents. One of these was the school janitor, Fritz Hirter, who was seriously burned around his head fighting to save the trapped children, including three of his own who perished before his eyes.

The 20-member Collinwood volunteer fire department consisted of one horse-drawn gaspowered pumper, one hose wagon, and a small ladder truck. At the time of the fire, the department's only team of horses was dragging a road scraper over a dirt road more than a mile away. This delayed firefighters significantly, and by the time they arrived at the scene

with their equipment, the school was fully ablaze and the victims beyond rescue. Compounding the firefighters' limited resources and lack of rapid deployment was some question about the adequacy of the water supply, although whether this had any bearing on saving those trapped isn't clear.

At 10:16 a.m., the nearby city of Cleveland received an urgent request for assistance, and a still alarm dispatched Engine 30 (a 1904 American Steamer), an 1895 ladder truck, and a hose cart from the station at East 105th and St. Clair Streets. An automobile with a life net on its roof also responded from Cleveland Fire Department headquarters. These units were commanded by Battalion Chief Michael Fallon, who arrived at the school at about 10:50 a.m. from the quarters of Engine 14.

He described the following scene on his arrival:

"The building was doomed, nothing remained but the four walls. The fire was practically out, with the exception of some wooden partitions that were burning in the basement and the ruins burning here and there. There were five streams of water playing on the fire. One stream in front, one on the north side of the building, and two streams in the rear, one of which belonged to Engine Co. 30

of Cleveland in charge of Captain Mulcahy. The other streams were in charge of Superintendent Frany of the Lake Shore. The streams in the front and on the north and south side were in charge of the assistant chief of the Collinwood Fire Department, which consisted of a gasoline fire engine, hose wagon, and a few short ladders."

At the time of the fire, Collinwood Mayor Westropp and Chief George Hammell of the Collinwood Fire Department were both away in Cleveland on business. Battalion Chief Fallon consulted with the assistant chief of the Collinwood Fire Department, and based on their joint agreement, Fallon took charge of the rescue and recovery operation. By this time, the fire was virtually extinguished, and he ordered the withdrawal of all the hose streams except those in the rear of the building, which were cooling the last remaining embers and "... washing the debris from the dead bodies of the little ones who were burned to death."

The scene confronting the firefighters was horrific. As Chief Fallon describes it:

"Under my supervision, the men worked with shovels for about one hour but found this method very slow and rather difficult, as up to this time we had got about 10 bodies, owing to the entangled



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—Battalion Chief Michael Fallon

masses of burned bodies, and as I wished to extricate the bodies without any mutilating, I then decided to float the bodies by putting a large stream of water under each of them, therefore creating pressure which proved satisfactory. The bodies floated around like beef in a vat, after this our work was easy. We were hampered some on account of the parents of the dead children who were clamoring to get a glimpse of these little darlings as they were taken from the ruins of the building to stretchers to ambulances."

The Collinwood Police under the command of Chief Charles McIlrath established fire lines to keep back the surging crowds, and the work continued. Another 159 bodies were sent to a temporary morgue at the railroad's Lake Shore Store House. By the time Chief Fallon was finishing the final search of the building, Mayor Westropp had returned to Collinwood. After turning the scene over to the mayor and his staff, the Cleveland Fire Department personnel picked up their hose lines and gear, and returned to quarters at 5:55 p.m.

Wreckage of the Human Kind

By early afternoon, the recovery of the remains proceeded in earnest, and by 4:00 p.m., 165 bodies had been brought to the Lake Shore House. All available ambulances on the east side of Cleveland were pressed into service, and they served in a recycling stream, transporting bodies first to the temporary morgue and then, once they had been identified, from the morgue to the homes of grieving families.

Crowd control was a problem for the police at both the disaster

scene and the temporary morgue. Doctors and nurses from the local area collected at the morgue to assist parents overcome by grief, as mothers and fathers and other responsible relatives were brought through the police lines into the morgue in groups of 10. Among the groups providing assistance was the Cleveland Young Women's Christian Association, which sent 100 volunteers to help the affected families with funeral arrangements.

The final tally of casualties from the Lake View School fire was 172 children and 3 adults. Through an arduous identification process, sometimes aided only by a scrap of clothing, 153 children were identified and sent home for their funeral arrangements. However, 19 of the little ones were beyond identification.

Many of the families that lost children had recently immigrated to the United States, and it was not uncommon for some of them to have multiple spellings or pronunciations of their first and last names based on "Americanized" spellings of foreign names. For example, Lucy Fingleman was also identified as Lucy Zingleman,

while Mary Sega was also identified as Maria Sega.⁵ This presented a challenge for officials tabulating the list of the deceased. To this day, the precise spelling of some of the names is not clear.

Many funeral processions were held on Friday, March 6, and others the following week. The 19 unidentified children, along with teachers Grace Fiske and Katherine Weiler, were buried at Lake View Cemetery on Monday, March 9.

The Coroner's Report

Not surprisingly, the public outcry for answers to this tragedy was intense. An investigation was launched, led by the local coroner because he was the only public authority that could compel testimony. Coroner Burke, who was in charge of the investigation, was joined by Deputy State Fire Marshals Harry Brockman and Nathan Flegenbaum, Cleveland Fire Chief Wallace, City Building Inspector S.S. Loughee, and members of the Collinwood Board of Education, among others.

In addition to determining that the fire began in the basement



Collinwood Elementary School, built after the prior building burned down with massive loss of life. The "new" school gave every classroom direct access to the ground.

in a closet under the front stairs, investigators sought to answer an equally important question: Why were so many people trapped? At that time, there were no nationally recognized criteria for the sizing and design of exits, and thus no convenient baseline against which to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of a school egress system. Measuring the Lake View School today against such documents as *NFPA101*[®], *Life Safety Code*[®], leads us to question whether the exits complied with fundamental principles, including the remoteness of the two primary paths of egress, egress capacity, and the use or lack of certain exit components such as panic hardware.

Following the fire, claims that the school doors swung inward became rooted in the local folklore, but testimony from the inquiry disputes this detail. However, it is not surprising that the rear exit became overwhelmed since the 5-foot-wide (1.5-meter-wide) stairwells were further restricted in the foyer before the final exit discharge. The Coroner's report concludes that, as a result of "the failure of the children to complete their exit in good order and the faulty construction of the inner partition at the rear door, the children became jammed and congested on the rear steps and thus unable to escape from the building."⁶

Never Again?

The Collinwood school fire was one in a string of tragic, large life-loss disasters at that time that slowly eroded the apathy of the public, leading to initiatives to keep disasters of this type from recur-

ring. At the 13th Annual NFPA Meeting in 1909, then-President C.M. Goddard gave a challenging address highlighting how Americans were the most careless, indifferent, and unashamed people on Earth, ready to forget the spasms of horror soon after they occurred. In his remarks, he notes that "we have done valuable work in formulating standards, but this is not enough. We must secure the adoptions of these standards. We must begin a campaign of education of the public."

The fire at the Lake View School was an international news story, and a higher level of scrutiny of school systems everywhere resulted, with an increase in fire drills and a reassessment of school building design. Arguably, one of the single greatest advances in modern fire protection is the establishment of the Life Safety Code, first published in 1912 as *Exit Drills in Factories, Schools, Department Stores and Theaters*. Although NFPA 101's genesis is rooted directly in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, the need to respond to other disasters such as the Lake View School fire also had a strong influence, as reflected in the original title.

In addition, other publications appeared promoting a higher level of safety for schools. Perhaps most notable was a lengthy article published in the July 1919 edition of the *NFPA Quarterly* by H. Walter Forster, entitled "Fire Protection for Schools." A reprint of this article was approved by the U.S. Bureau of Education and widely distributed to school authorities throughout the United States.

When, if ever, will the next Lake View School fire occur? What still

needs to be done? Half a century after the Lake View School fire, that question was painfully answered when a fire broke out on December 1, 1958, at the Our Lady of the Angels parochial school in Chicago, Illinois. This fire had tragic similarities to the Lake View School fire: It, too, started under a stairway and trapped many on the upper floors. When it was over, 92 students and 3 teachers were dead.

The Collinwood fire significantly raised public awareness of the need for school fire safety, and the fire at Our Lady of the Angels 50 years later slammed home the reality that action was needed. The fire at Our Lady of the Angels resulted in sweeping safety improvements, and the statistics speak for themselves. In the five decades since that fire, there has not been another school fire in the United States in which 10 or more people have died.

Between 1994 and 1998, grades K through 12 averaged one civilian death per year, which has been a typical annual death toll for schools since at least 1980. Moreover, these fatalities do not appear to be innocent children, but juvenile firesetters caught in the fires they set or adults such as janitors. It is a bittersweet legacy that, after 100 years, we have indeed made progress in improving school fire safety, and the innocent victims of Collinwood, Ohio, did not die in vain. 

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