The Cocoanut Grove was one of the most popular nightspots in Boston, Massachusetts before and during World War II. Today, the Grove still exists, though only as a piece of history—a poignant niche carved into the edifice of time.

by Casey C. Grant, P.E.

To those unfamiliar with the Cocoanut Grove, the name itself brings to mind palm trees, laughing crowds, coconuts, dancing and just a good place to go and enjoy oneself with friends. The Grove had all of this. But, this is not how it’s remembered. In Boston, the Cocoanut Grove is etched forever in history as a city’s worst nightmare, with piercing screams, wild-eyed panic, and terrible heartbreak.

On the chilly New England Saturday evening of November 28, 1942, the Cocoanut Grove was packed beyond capacity with upwards of 1,000 people. Just after 10 p.m. in the Melody Lounge located in the basement, a small fire broke out in a fake palm tree, and then quickly spread across the ceiling decorations.

In the official Boston Fire Department report released after the fire, Fire Commissioner William Arthur Reilly estimated that the fire took only two to four minutes to develop momentum and cross approximately 40 feet of the Melody Lounge to the only public stairway out of the room. In seconds it had flashed passed the first floor foyer and the main entrance, and into the main dining room. 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, the commissioner estimated at total time of an incredible 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.

In minutes, the Cocoanut Grove was an inferno from one end to the other. Some escaped untouched...
but most did not. Rescuers pulled out trapped survivors and victims as quickly as possible, so that by midnight, the once bustling Cocoanut Grove was a blackened, soaking, but now empty hulk of a building. Just like the fire itself, the entire incident was but an instantaneous flash in its history, but the ramifications of this inferno are felt to this day.

This story is an update of my original story that appeared in the NFPA Journal in 1991. I have included additional information that relates to our codes and standards that was not available when the story first ran.

In addition, of the five individuals who were interviewed for this article in 1991, I am aware that Messrs. Graney, Collins, and Moore have passed away. On this basis I've revised the conclusion of each of their personal accounts to be independent of time.

While interviewing the people included in this article, they at times referred back to earlier testimony and interviews. Any similarity to other published material on this subject is based on the interviewee's own reflections on such material.

Sixty-five years have passed since that fateful evening. Many who were in the Grove and escaped, or were involved in some other way, are now gone. But some remain, and nobody knows the Cocoanut Grove's final moments better. Here are their stories.

The Patron

“We went to watch Boston College beat Holy Cross, and instead it was one of the greatest upsets in college football history,” says Hewson Gray of Waltham, Massachusetts. That afternoon’s big football game was the first in a series of events that would lead Gray, along with his wife and their companions, face to face with destiny.
Hewson Gray and his wife, Hilda, went to the game at Fenway Park that afternoon with Hilda’s sister Josephine Driscoll, and her husband, Francis. Later that evening, they would meet two other couples at the Cocoanut Grove for dinner.

The Boston College Eagles were better than six to one favorites over Holy Cross. They were undefeated with a very tough schedule, and they looked forward to pounding Holy Cross in the traditional end-of-the-season football rivalry. In contrast to the BC strength, Holy Cross had a balance of wins and losses in accordance with a rather mediocre schedule. Sugar Bowl representatives were in attendance on behalf of Boston College, and the only question before game time was by what margin BC would win.

“I was, and still am, a Boston College fan, but what a sad afternoon it was for the Eagles. We were stunned,” says Gray.

The final score was an incredible 55-12 upset, which remarkably were the same numbers of the two BC co-captains shown on the cover of the game program. Yet, even more remarkable is how delicate the balance of fate really is, since BC planned to hold the team’s victory party that evening at the Cocoanut Grove. Major Tobin himself would have led the revelry. Of course, all thoughts of a formal party were cancelled because of the magnitude of the defeat, but that loss kept them from an event in which the odds were a mere one to one between life and death.

But some of the BC contingent would carry on with the evening’s plans despite that afternoon’s debacle. Among these were the Grays and the Driscolls, who were obligated to meet up with the other two couples.

Their reservation at the Grove was for late evening, and in the meantime, they journeyed to several other clubs in the South End and Back Bay districts of Boston. About 8:30 p.m., Gray parked his car on Berkeley Street so that the group could cap the evening off with dinner and a show at the Cocoanut Grove.

The other two couples met them at the Cocoanut Grove. They were friends of Josephine Driscoll, one couple being from Dorchester and the other from Newton. The Grays had never met those other two couples, but they fondly noted that the wife from Dorchester was eight months pregnant. Hewson and Hilda Gray had been married almost ten years, and despite trying to have children, it would be another two years before their first child was born.

After leaving their hats and coats at the coat room, the party of eight waited momentarily in the lobby while their table was located.

“It was so crowded that you had to turn sideways to get through the tables in the dining room,” explains Gray. “They were having trouble getting us a table despite our reservation. We had to go all the way across to the far corner of the dining room, over to the other side of the stage. O’Brien was the name reservation on the table that they finally gave us.”

Even though this excursion to the far corner was not a big deal, it was somewhat annoying. Yet here fate was kind, since there were four O’Briens killed in the fire.

“We always wondered where the O’Brien’s sat; that is, where we should have been. We were lucky,” he said.

With their table in the corner, Hilda Gray had her back to one wall and remarked at one point that “the wall felt hot.” To satisfy their own curiosity, they each took a turn touching the wall and found it warm to the touch. This novelty provided an item of discussion, and since the outside temperature was near freezing, the men joked that if the women felt cold they should just lean against the walls.

“We can’t imagine why the walls were noticeably warm like they were” adds Gray, “But after the fire we had to wonder if this somehow contributed to its violent spread. It was so fast.”

The nightclub’s show was scheduled to begin about 10 p.m. Gray went to the men’s room located at the opposite corner of the dining room, just off the lobby at the top of the stairway that led down to the Melody Lounge. Because he had to push through the crowd, this journey was more arduous than usual.

Just as Gray had returned to his table and had sat down, they heard a commotion from over by the lobby where Gray had just come back from. Initially it sounded like people were shouting, “fight,” with some of the people bumping each other in an attempt to clear out of the lobby area. Then they saw a blue and yellow sliver of flame flash up to the ceiling.

With the realization that a fire was the cause of the activity over on the far side of the dining hall, the instantaneous reaction of those on the other side of the room was—nothing. They weren’t sure the fire was bad and it was far across the other side of a very crowded room. One of the waiters immediately rushed across the dance floor
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Hewson and Hilda Gray and the others were still all together, but a minute or two had passed and the smoke was starting to build in the little back rooms now jammed solid with people. Being at the corner table allowed them to be at the front of the tide of humanity, and they could feel in the darkness that they had come to still another door. But it was locked. Several men near the front teamed up to try and break it down. Just when this seemed hopeless, with a loud crash, the door flung open and there were firemen with axes. Outside the club became just as chaotic as the people in the small service rooms poured out into the street into the strikingly cold air. This was one of the first doors opened by the fire department, which by tremendous good fortune happened upon the scene after responding to a nearby car fire.

“Once out of the building, we all stumbled in the night air across Shawmut Street,” says Gray. “Then we realized the lady from Newton wasn’t with us.”

The four men started to fight their way back through the outpouring crowd when all of a sudden the missing woman was swept into their midst. She quickly explained that she somehow got separated and found herself going “down a staircase.” Without hesitation, she had turned around and now, was out. All eight in their group were safe and reunited on Shawmut Street, allowing the four men to return to the service door entrance as people stumbled out of the burning club.

“No, people were collapsing as they came out, having had been exposed to the smoke and flames. They were dropping all around, even some that looked okay, but some had soot around their faces. They were lying everywhere.” Gray says.

In almost no time at all Shawmut Street had become a seething mass of humanity. In addition to the people coming out of the Grove, firefighters and police officers were arriving on the scene in growing numbers as well as volunteers from many other facets of the community. People were also coming from the other nearby clubs and hotels. In all the commotion, the four men did what they could to help the people get out of the club. It was now readily apparent to Gray and the other three with him that many people had not escaped and the smoke and flames within the building were now unbearable.

After helping all they could, the four men returned to find that the four women were gone from the other side of Shawmut Street. The men knew they were out but they still worried. They searched the outside crowds for almost three-quarters of an hour, then finally came across them sitting in a restaurant at the corner of Shawmut and Broadway having coffee. It turns out that a lady had come by and taken them to her home to give them warm clothes as their coats had been left inside the Grove. The temperature had dropped and was now below freezing, causing numerous ice patches to appear from the water being put on the fire. To control the crowds, the police started blocking off the streets.

The four women went to the lady’s house, got the warm overcoats they now wore, and then snuck back through the police lines. They finally ended up in the restaurant in a further attempt to stay warm. The party of eight, now reunited, was
directed to a nearby hotel that was set up as a base for the Red Cross.

“As we walked up to the hotel a cop in the front was talking to a civilian and said to him ‘They were all drunk—that’s why they died.’ We were furious, all of us, and we gave him hell!” says Gray.

Their hats and coats weren’t the only possessions lost in the fire. They also lost their car keys. The Red Cross arranged for rides, and Hewson and Hilda Gray were driven home about an hour after they had left the scene at the Cocoanut Grove. The next day Gray got a ride down to pick his car up on Berkeley Street using a spare set of keys. A number of cars were still there, and he paused for a moment and thought about their owners if they had survived. About one week after the fire, while at home, Gray received a call from the Boston Police Department. His keys, which had an ID tag on them, had been found.

**The Employee**

On the evening of November 28, 1942, Daniel Weiss was working the cash register on one side of the bar in the Melody Lounge.

“The evening started, at least, just like any other Saturday at work in the Grove,” says Weiss.

The Melody Lounge was directly below the main lobby of the Cocoanut Grove. A single stairway descending into the lounge, which was comprised entirely of a bar in the center with seating around the bar and throughout the room. With a tropical motif of palm trees, greenery and cocoanut husks, the dimly lit lounge could accommodate up to about one hundred customers without discomfort, but this evening, people were four deep around the bar bringing the total in the basement lounge to probably twice that number.

Daniel Weiss was 24 years old at the time. In his fourth year as a medical student at Boston University he had worked weekends at the Grove for the past three years for his uncle Barney Welansky, owner of the Cocoanut Grove. He was just a few months away from beginning his career in medicine.

About 10:15 p.m., some of the crowd started to sing along with the lounge piano player as she hammered out a popular wartime tune. Despite the overcrowding and the difficulty keeping track of patrons, there was a stir in the corner to the right of the stairs that caught Weiss’s attention. He had noticed moments earlier that one of the white-jacketed bar boys had been conferring with the head bartender, John Bradley, about turning a light back on in the corner. Apparently, a patron had unscrewed the light to place himself and his girlfriend in a veil of solitude in the already dimly lit lounge.

After the bar boy had turned the corner light back on and returned to the bar, a sudden flurry of movement occurred in the corner. While some who were only a few seats away concentrated on the singing and were oblivious to the commotion, several in the immediate vicinity had jumped to their feet, some backing off and peering up. And there it was—a small flicker of blue light dancing about the top of the palm tree where it met the lowered ceiling.

In the next instant, the blue spurt of energy became a ring of orange outlining an ever-widening black hole in the fabric, with little jets of flame jumping up and down on the imitation bamboo.

“Get water quick. There’s a fire!” someone shouted.

The anxious pause that followed was as if the hearts of those who could see what was happening skipped a beat.

Weiss guarded his register as was expected of him during any type of commotion while John Bradley and several other employees made a frantic but feeble attack on the flames. Water from a pitcher and a siphon bottle of seltzer were ineffective. A bar boy swiped at the flames with a towel, but the orange and blue flames continued their ever-widening circle across the ceiling decorations. Another employee returned from the kitchen with an extinguisher, but the flames had advanced to a point beyond any appreciable service that the device could offer. The music had stopped, but even so, the noise of the crowd continued and many seemed to be unaware of the growing concern.

Few people made any effort to leave, as if hypnotized with fascination and disbelief. John Bradley, a busboy struggled to yank the palm tree, now ablaze like a torch, down off of its wall mooring. With a mighty yank and a shower of sparks, the tree finally came down, glancing off the howling Bradley and dragging a piece of flaming satin ceiling decorations onto the arms of the busboy. Unfortunately, their efforts were to no avail. The fire was now well involved in the ceiling fabric, and as if signaled by the falling tree, it suddenly flashed across the satin ceiling decorations with terrifying speed.

At that moment the spellbound crowd panicked. Screaming and
shouting, the mob rushed madly to the stairs, the only obvious exit. Fortunately for some, John Bradley had flung open the camouflaged service door and a small group was shepherded into the kitchen. But most were unaware and scrambled towards the stairway, which had now become a chimney. A few lucky ones made it out before the flames, but without hesitation a wall of bodies appeared as quickly as the panic, blocking the only exit and trapping the mob in the now-searing inferno.

During the panic, “I hesitated, staying at my post despite being terrified,” Weiss says.

By instinct, the cashiers were entrusted with safeguarding the bank during a disturbance, which normally would include such comparatively mundane occurrences like a fight. But this situation was very different. The other cashier had already scrambled into the kitchen, and as Daniel Weiss watched in horror as people were being burned alive on the stairs and were falling victim to the ever-thickening smoke and fumes fed by the blowtorch over their heads, he knew he had to get out. Just as he scrambled in the darkness to the bar gate and pushed, but it was blocked. Remembering the sight of those being asphyxiated, he stayed low. It was becoming difficult to breathe, so he maintained his crouch, reaching into one of the sinks and soaked a bar towel in the dishwater. With a seething maelstrom all around him, he placed the cloth over his mouth and nose and lay face down on the floor.

“The closer I was to the floor, the easier it was to breathe,” Weiss says.

The smoke was thick and choking, but for the moment this quick-thinking tactic was working. Weiss then realized that the screaming and crying that filled the lounge had subsided into only moaning and scratching, and this in turn was followed by an eerie foreboding silence. What was happening? Even the fire seemed to be gone.

In the darkness and in the silence, Weiss did the only thing he could do—he waited. As the seconds slowly ticked away, he desperately wanted to get out, and crawled to the bar gate, but again it wouldn't budge. Terrified at the thought of dying with the rest, Weiss took a deep breath, rose, and lunged over the counter. But instead of the floor, he landed on bodies.

Scrambling in horror and somehow still holding his breath, he fumbled through the service door into the welcomed chill of the smokeless passageway to the kitchen. Weiss believes he was probably the last person to leave the Melody Lounge alive.

Feeling his way through the dark passageway, Weiss found his way into the spacious basement kitchen. Under the light of a single bulb he was astonished to find several dozen people, most of them patrons, huddled around in an anxious daze. Some of the kitchen help were there, including the club's food cashier, an older lady named Katherine Swett.

“I always thought of her as ‘the Irish lady,’” Weiss says. Dutifully, she had no intention of leaving her register and later would become a victim to the intensifying fumes in the basement.

In a flurry of anxious talk, it was unclear as to why these people remained huddled and were not making an effort to leave. Weiss took the initiative and headed for the kitchen stairs that served the main dining room, wondering if the people up in the club had any idea what had happened in the Melody Lounge.

“I got halfway up the stairs, and then it hit me like an inferno—the heat upstairs was unbearable,” Weiss says.

It had never occurred to him that the rest of the Cocoanut Grove was now experiencing on a much greater scale the same disaster suffered in the Melody Lounge. Before retreating, he recalled once again hearing screaming, crashing of furniture, and the crescendo of the fire itself.

Remembering the service stairs beyond the furnace room on the other side of the kitchen, Weiss convinced the fearful and hesitating group to follow him through the darkened passageways. These stairs led to the service rooms behind the main dining room stage, and then directly out to Shawmut Street. But as the group apprehensively came through the storage room, they opened the door to the furnace room and were hit by the warm air and soft light from the club's boiler plant. As one woman screamed, another yelled, “He's leading us into the fire!” and the group broke ranks in a panic, retreating to the kitchen.

Once again they were all in the kitchen and he pleaded with the group. Smoke was now curling around the light bulb. This time, clinging to the security of the kitchen, none would follow him and Weiss could only promise that he would send help.

As he came to the top of the service stairs, he found himself exiting among gasping survivors who were
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somehow still stumbling out of the upstairs part of the club. The scene on Shawmut Street was chaotic. People were running everywhere: firemen, policemen, servicemen and civilians. There was shouting, screaming and sirens. Singed survivors stumbled around in a daze, and everywhere there were bodies, tossed about like rag dolls.

Once outside, Weiss cried out that others were trapped in the basement. Firefighters were now entering the building in numbers and for him try and re-enter the club was clearly impossible. He drifted about on Shawmut Street in a stunned daze, becoming oblivious to the maddening scene. Not sure what to do, he realized his family would be worried so he wandered over to the nearby Rio Casino, owned by his Uncle Jimmy. He was happy to find that some of the Grove’s help and entertainers had also ventured over to the Rio Casino.

As expected, Weiss’s frantic parents were greatly relieved to receive his phone call. Immediately, they rushed to meet him. Daniel’s father was himself a doctor, and upon seeing blood on Daniel’s neck insisted on him try and re-enter the club was clearly impossible. He drifted about on Shawmut Street in a stunned daze, becoming oblivious to the maddening scene. Not sure what to do, he realized his family would be worried so he wandered over to the nearby Rio Casino, owned by his Uncle Jimmy. He was happy to find that some of the Grove’s help and entertainers had also ventured over to the Rio Casino.

As expected, Weiss’s frantic parents were greatly relieved to receive his phone call. Immediately, they rushed to meet him. Daniel’s father was himself a doctor, and upon seeing blood on Daniel’s neck insisted on going to Boston City Hospital.

The scene at City Hospital, which had received the majority of the victims, was like a war zone. People were everywhere. Over 300 casualties were received over a period of a little more than one hour. It was calculated that one Grove victim arrived at Boston City Hospital every 11 seconds over a 75 minute period, ranking this as one of the highest hospital admittance rates ever.

On Sunday, the day after the fire, the police secured the area around the Cocoaanut Grove. None of the people who were in the Grove during the disaster would see the inside of the building again, except for the few public officials who were in the Grove when the fire broke out, like Civil Defense Director John Walsh who escaped out the Shawmut Street exit—and Daniel Weiss.

On Sunday afternoon, Weiss was allowed to pass through police lines with an escort to assist in securing the money located in Cocoaanut Grove’s cash registers. The building was gutted, with everything black and broken and sad, Weiss says. Furniture was upended and scattered everywhere. Below, the Melody Lounge was eerie and water logged.

“I was only doing my duty, it was not necessarily strange. The magnitude of the event was not fully known, I’m not sure I fully realized the extent of what had happened at the time,” Weiss says, who recalls the moment with a multitude of emotions.

While the building was heavily damaged and first assaulted his senses as a blackened hulk, he noticed how the fire damage in many places was strangely limited to the upper portions of the facility. In the Melody Lounge much of the bar appeared to be untouched. Even in the main dining room the fire damage seemed to be confined to the upper reaches. A hole was in the dining room ceiling and the wall and plate glass windows on both sides of the room had been smashed through, letting in the day’s sunlight.

Dr. Daniel Weiss became a well-known psychiatrist. Highly respected in his field, he often served as an expert witness in major court cases. Occasionally, he still gets calls from people asking if he knows what happened to a certain individual.

“I could hardly keep track of myself!” says Weiss. “The only person I ever kept in touch with through the years was a fellow nicknamed ‘tar baby’. He was the other bartender working in the Melody Lounge.”

A report by Dr. John W. Powell, a Maryland psychiatrist, studied many aspects of the Grove fire and classed it as one of the rare instances of true panic in this century.

“I’m not directly familiar with Powell’s report on the Grove fire, but it indeed was one of the rare instances of true panic in the twentieth century,” says Weiss.

“Certainly, at the time I had no idea that it would be such a prominent historical event,” he says.

The Firefighter

George “Red” Graney reported to work on Saturday evening, November 28, 1942. Graney had been on the Boston Fire Department for five years and at the time was assigned to Engine Company 35. This company was located in the old firehouse on Broadway by Warrenton Street, near the Don Bosco High School along with Engine 26, Rescue 1, Water Tower 2 and District Chief 5.

In many ways, Saturday night began like any other, but the mood was still somber in the firehouses throughout Boston. Just two weeks prior, six firefighters were killed at a major fire in Maverick Square in East Boston. Graney had also worked on that Saturday evening and Engine 35 had responded to the fire on the fourth alarm. Just after they had arrived at the scene
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the building came down. Ladder 8 was in front of the building and was crushed by the debris. Ladder 8 was known as the white elephant, so named because it was too big to maneuver in Boston’s small streets and was painted white instead of the traditional fire engine red. As bad as this tragedy was, it would soon become overshadowed by a calamity of greater proportions.

At 10:15 p.m. an alarm box had begun to sound: one...five...one...four. Fifteen-fourteen; Stewart and Carver Streets, South End. This was a border line call on two districts. The firehouse was only a short distance away and the apparatus arrived in very short time to find an automobile fire. The rear seats of the car were aflame and someone had pulled the street box. Graney and the others on Engine 35 immediately went to work by pulling the seats out of the rear of the car and throwing them onto the sidewalk.

The booster hose from Engine 35 was then used to quickly extinguish the small fire. Once the fire was extinguished, Graney and fellow firefighter Arnie Snell were loading the booster hose back on the reel. Hearing a commotion the firefighters turned around at which point one of them exclaimed, “Hey look, there’s another one around the corner.” With the hose now back on the pumper, they immediately backed around and drove over to the Broadway Street side of the Cocoanut Grove parking, right in front of the door to the new lounge.

People were running everywhere. Smoke was pouring out the Broadway Street door of the new lounge as screams pierced the air. District Fire Chief Daniel Crowley who had also responded to the car fire had seen enough upon arrival. He immediately ordered one of the firefighters to get to nearby box fifteen-twenty-one and skip the second alarm and sound a third. This was received at Boston Fire Alarm Headquarters at 10:23 p.m. One minute later at 10:24 p.m, Chief Crowley ordered a fourth alarm be sounded for what would eventually be a five-alarm fire.

Engine Company 35 was a two-piece engine company with a hose wagon and a pumper. The pumper was driven and operated alone by Paul Rodd. On the wagon along with Graney were Arnie Snell, Webby Mansour and Captain Jerry “Haddock-Ears” Cronin. The apparatus was able to pull up on Broadway Street right in front of the building. Rescue 1 followed them, but had trouble maneuvering between parked cars.

Graney went to grab the hose from the pumper as Paul Rodd yelled to bring a hose-line to the nearby high-pressure fire hydrant. This section of Boston has high-pressure fire hydrants that can be used directly and don’t require a pumper. Then Graney noticed the firefighters running away from the fire apparatus. As he lugged the hose the entire side of the building suddenly lit up, he saw what the other firefighters had run to. Inside the door at the corner of Broadway and Shawmut was a man stumbling out in a sheet of flames.

By tremendous good fortune, the fire department had gained a significant time advantage by virtue of coming upon the scene with their equipment. Yet because of the swiftness of the Grove fire, much of this advantage was lost. By the time the men had been able to even approach the club, it was ablaze from the Melody Lounge all the way out to the Broadway exit.

The Broadway Street wall of the new lounge had a wall made of glass bricks. This wall and a small nearby window started to fail from the heat of the fire. Firefighters worked frantically around the Broadway Lounge door. Inside, they could see people collapsing and bodies piling up, as they desperately tried to gain access and rescue them.

Graney now dragged the charged high-pressure hose-line toward the corner of Shawmut Street and Broadway to the Broadway Lounge door. As he pressed in with the
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had claw marks on his legs, offering a mute testimonial of the desperate final moments of so many.

The firefighters now moved forward into the entrance-way. Graney looked down and saw a young woman who, while unburned, was on her back pinned down to the floor by bodies. When she saw Graney she yelled to him, “Please get me out, my father will be worried!” Just then the fire flashed over Graney’s head and as he backed out he yelled to the girl to “hang on!” Yelling for another hose line, he didn’t wait, but instead pressed inward again, allowing the girl to be pulled by others out to safety.

Never before had Graney confronted such a mountain of human beings. “It was incredible,” he says. “I couldn’t go forward or to the right because of the bodies, I couldn’t even get in with the hose.”

In testimony to the desperation of the rescue effort, the firefighters made the noblest of attempts to rescue as many as they could as quickly as they could, but they were overwhelmed by the sheer number of people trapped by the fast-burning fire. Though no firefighters were included in the list of those who died, several of those first on the scene succumbed to the smoke and flames during their rescue efforts. One of those men was Charley Kenney, Sr. of Rescue 1 who, after pulling over a dozen people out the Shawmut Street Dining Room door, finally went down. Later in the hospital it was noticed that among his injuries he had claw marks on his legs, offering a mute testimonial of the desperate final moments of so many.

The fire was knocked down quickly. In a short period of time, the firefighters made an effective entry into the main dining room. If this fire had occurred in an unoccupied building, it would have been knocked down even more quickly; however, rescue was obviously the paramount concern.

With the flames now subdued, Graney now found himself with a policeman in the main dining room carrying out bodies.

“The tables weren’t all burnt and in some places people, though dead, were only singed, still at their chairs and drooped over their tables. Yet elsewhere other bodies were so badly burned you couldn’t tell the men from the women,” Graney says.

The false walls on the Shawmut Street wall had been breached and soon lights were brought in so that the extent of fire damage could be seen. Out on the street first aid was given to those who could still receive it.

“I remember seeing a priest standing, quiet and solemn, watching as we carried out the bodies,” he says.

Graney eventually worked his way through the building and found himself downstairs in the Melody Lounge. “There were small piles of belongings everywhere,” he says.

Most of the bodies were now removed, and the firefighters continued with their overhaul duties. Venturing into the Melody Lounge was Mayor Tobin and the Boston Fire Department doctor Martin Spellman.

“All of a sudden a small portion of the ceiling came down and Spellman yelled ‘get out!’” says Graney. “He said this remembering Maverick Square, but it turned out to be only a piece of the false ceiling material.”

Despite the magnitude of the event, the fire was extinguished and the bodies removed in a relatively short period of time. Red Graney and Engine Company 35 were not released from the scene until around 4:30 to 5:00 a.m. in the morning. The entire event seemed so unreal and taxed reality by playing on everyone’s fatigue.

“At the time we had no idea how many were killed, and we guessed that maybe 200 people had been lost,” Graney says.

In the days following the fire, the firefighters who were involved in the event were asked to submit any reasons or thoughts on why the flames had spread so fast. This information would eventually assist the official fire department investigation. Graney was not among those who were asked for official testimony; however, there was much speculation in the firehouse.

“There were all kinds of thoughts,” Graney says. “There was talk that vapors from alcoholic drinking along with a lot of smoking contributed to the fire. Some also were saying that it was German sabotage since there were a large number of suspicious fires during the war years.”

There was much conjecture, but it would be over a year before the official Boston Fire Department report became available and provided some answers to why the fire had spread with such incredible ferocity.

Red Graney retired from the Boston Fire Department after a prestigious career. While president of Local 718 of the International Association of Fire Fighters during 1952 and 1953, he was one of those responsible for introducing the muscular dystrophy campaign to the fire service. He is more widely
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known for the “Graney Plan,” the widely adopted fire department work schedule system still used today throughout North America.

The Serviceman

John Collins had been on the Boston Fire Department for about one year when the attack occurred at Pearl Harbor. Like many, he enlisted before the draft, immediately after Pearl Harbor. The year 1942 that followed was arguably the most hectic for the gearing up of the U.S. military during World War II.

Because of his firefighting background, Collins found himself as the first man in the U.S. Navy’s firefighting program based in Boston. This was one of five U.S. Navy firefighting schools located around the country. The others were located in Norfolk, VA; Pearl Harbor, HI; San Diego, CA and Bremerton, WA. The school in Boston had at any given time ten firefighters, half of whom were from the New York City Fire Department and half from the Boston Fire Department. This group was lead by Navy Lt. Commander Peter Hogstrom, originally from the New York City Fire Department.

The school in Boston was referred to as a A school, complete with a simulated ship structure made of concrete. Located at East First and I Streets in South Boston, the intent was to prepare the navy fire service for shipboard firefighting tactics. John Collins and the other instructors lived in barracks located at 500 East First Street. An emphasis was given to several innovative techniques, including the use of foam, and also the use of fog streams.

It was a Saturday night like any other and John Collins, who was on standby, was passing the idle time. As the evening came to a close he had just laid down on his double-decker bunk when the Lt. Commander came in and shouted for everyone to get their turnout gear. They were being called to a bad fire in the “film district” of Boston. The men grabbed their equipment, jammed into a single navy wagon and sped off to the scene.
Upon their arrival, the fire itself was quickly becoming subdued. However, a massive rescue effort was under way and the services of the Navy Fire fighters were clearly needed. As the group approached the Cocoanut Grove building, they came upon the main entrance revolving door on Piedmont Street. A row bodies had been laid out on the street and the rescue efforts had only cleared out the revolving door itself. Inside, a gruesome pile of bodies could be seen piled seven and eight high.

People were running and hollering everywhere, Collins says. Standing near the revolving door exit directing operations was Boston Fire Commissioner William Riley. Being a member of the Boston Fire Department on military leave, John Collins introduced Lt. Commander Hogstrom to Commissioner Riley. At least with regard to the Navy, Lt. Commander Hogstrom appeared to be the ranking Navy officer on the scene. Riley said that he thought there were about 200 dead.

“I couldn’t believe it,” says Collins. “Two hundred dead—it seemed so high for such a small place.”

The navy men split up and immediately started to work. The fire was being brought under control and the task at hand was to get the people out. Collins began helping to remove bodies at the entrance on Piedmont Street through the now tomb-like main entrance where the revolving doors had been. Just a few feet away other firefighters finally broke down an adjacent door with much effort, only to reveal a shocking sight. Bodies were piled chest-high against the door.

This door was located at the top of the stairs from the Melody Lounge in the lobby and was equipped with panic hardware, but it was double-bolted shut, with lifeless forms piled against it from the inside. After it was broken open, bodies were brought out through this opening originally intended to provide safe escape.

“Some bodies were very badly burned, but some were not. It was very, very strange,” says Collins. “But more than anything else, the stench of burned flesh was terrible. It was overwhelming.”

The stairway to the Melody Lounge was now being cleared, and the firefighters had finally gained access down into the basement Lounge from the lobby. Surprisingly, the fire damage downstairs was minimal. Except for the overhead area, there seemed to be very little damage from the fire itself.

“Of all the vivid impressions made upon me that evening, perhaps the most unforgettable was when we first went down into the Melody Lounge,” says Collins. “There, sitting at a table was a very pretty girl. She was sitting with her eyes open and her hand on a cocktail glass, as if waiting for someone. As I first looked at her I wondered why she was just sitting there, thinking she was okay. But, of course, she was dead. It seemed very strange.”

The large number of fire service personnel supplemented with the many other rescuers at the scene allowed the fire to be controlled and overhauled quickly. The bodies themselves were removed from the building at a rapid pace, so that by midnight that urgent task at hand was nearly complete. Bodies were removed from the Grove and laid out upon the street so rapidly that the transportation to the nearby hospitals and morgues could not begin to keep up with the high number of dead. Fire department officials forced entry into a garage across the street, making it a temporary morgue,
laying out row upon row of bodies on the cold concrete floor.

John Collins and the other Navy firefighters stayed until all the bodies were removed. In the early morning hours, they gathered together with their Lt. Commander and went to the nearby Mayfair Hotel to have coffee. The night was cold and the nearby hotels and other facilities had opened up, offering coffee, blankets, and anything else to help those working at this disaster.

"Afterwards as we talked, it seemed so unreal, almost as if it was a bad dream," Collins says.

With fatigue blending into reality, they gathered their equipment and went back to the Navy firefighting school in South Boston. In the early morning hours, they had showers and attempted to get back into their normal routine.

Like most of the people in Boston at that time, John Collins followed very closely the inquiries and activities that transpired after the fire. Convened the following day was a public hearing by the Boston Fire Department. This was chaired by Fire Commissioner Riley and was intended mainly to clarify fire department involvement. The final report from these provocative hearings would appear over a year later.

Another investigation began in the legal forum. Requiring more time to collect sufficient evidence to present to the grand jury, the state attorney general and the county district attorney’s office were working on criminal indictments that would eventually be handed down to ten individuals. Nearly a month would pass before they would hand down these indictments.

The investigation by the Boston Fire Department began less than 24 hours after the disaster. Among the questioners with the Fire Commissioner were representatives of various municipal and state agencies, Army and Navy brass, and Federal Government representatives, including the FBI. Among the first witnesses called by Commissioner Riley was one of his own inspectors, Lt. Frank Linney.

Linney had inspected the Cocoanut Grove approximately a week before the fire and turned in the routine report, terming the Grove’s safety conditions as “good.” This entire single-page report was printed on the front pages of area newspapers. Now, despite having several commendations for heroism, Frank Linney found himself in every fire inspector’s worst nightmare.

Linney was pressed to elaborate on his written report during the hearing. Another part of the report had stated glaringly that there were “no inflammable decorations.” Linney indicated during the hearings that he had taken some of the fabric and tried to light it with a match after it had been removed. He found the material was very difficult to ignite. This was the normal procedure. The fallacy of these test methods would later be shown, but this unfortunately would not assist Linney during his testimony. John Collins followed the testimony of his comrade very closely.

Riley’s hearings were meant to do nothing more than to bring forth public information as quickly as feasible, and would not result in any criminal actions. The fingers of blame pointed in many directions and even included Mayor Tobin himself. In other parts of Boston at the end of 1942, the grand jury handed over the criminal indictments. Among these indictments, charged with accessory after the fact of manslaughter and willful neglect of duty, was Lt. Frank Linney, inspector for the Boston Fire Department.

Linney went to trial in October, 1943. Defending Linney was an African-American lawyer by the name of Lewis, one of the top criminal lawyers in Boston at that time. Linney was a man of modest means and it was not clear to Collins how
he had attained such prestigious legal defense.

John Collins went to one of the court sessions relating to the Cocoanut Grove fire, and this was when Frank Linney was being cross-examined by his own lawyer.

“I remember when Linney was on the witness stand and was being examined by Lewis. Lewis kept asking questions and rebuking him, making Linney look bad,” says Collins.

Collins could not understand why Lewis was doing this, chastising his own client instead of defending him. Linney, though despondent, managed to keep pace with the relentless questioning.

“All of a sudden, Linney just fell apart and broke into tears. It was heart rendering,” says Collins.

Lewis, the shrewd lawyer that he was, was able to demonstrate that Linney had never intentionally meant to do anyone harm and had only followed standard, albeit terribly inept, inspection procedures. Following the testimony, the jury deliberated three and a half hours. The verdict: not guilty.

The painful legacy of Frank Linney in the Cocoanut Grove disaster serves as a classic lesson for all who may find themselves involved in fire inspections. Years later John Collins would recall this lesson as he was walking to work one evening to Ladder 26 in Boston’s Back Bay. In uniform, he was passing by Symphony Hall and noticed that a big show was about to go on for that evening. As he sometimes did, he would pass through Symphony hall, more for curiosity than anything else, gaining access as a fire department representative.

“It was a big show, and I was shocked to see that they had put
very quiet. The first Grove patient
cold and the hospital had been
says Moore. The evening was
charge of the emergency room,"
medical treatment.
become a milestone in the field of
into the mist of an event that would
duty and would find himself thrust
he was one of the staff doctors on
for post medical work. That evening,
the third of his five years required
General Hospital in Boston. This was
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Francis D. Moore was working as an
representative on radio and television.
times as the fire department repre
ment's public relation officer. In this
a Captain, serving as the depart
retirement. He ended his career as
Collins returned to the Boston Fire
happen again," Collins says.
I couldn't bring that upon myself.
and I thought of Frank Linney, and
of the exit paths," says Collins. "In
my mind I wasn't sure what to do, I
could've walked out and pretended
that I had never seen any of it."

He didn't. Instead, he contacted
the management and told them
that they could not start the show
until they corrected the problem.
As expected, the management was
furious, but they had no choice. The
show was delayed momentarily
while the chairs were cleared, and
as a result, some of the patrons were
removed from the audience.

"I thought of the Cocoanut Grove
and I thought of Frank Linney, and
I couldn't bring that upon myself.
What he went through should never
happen again," Collins says.

After his naval service, John
Collins returned to the Boston Fire
Department where he stayed until
retirement. He ended his career as
a Captain, serving as the depart-
ment's public relation officer. In this
capacity he appeared numerous
times as the fire department rep-
resentative on radio and television.

The Doctor

On November 28, 1942, Dr.
Francis D. Moore was working as an
assistant resident at Massachusetts
General Hospital in Boston. This was
the third of his five years required
for post medical work. That evening,
he was one of the staff doctors on
duty and would find himself thrust
into the mist of an event that would
become a milestone in the field of
medical treatment.

"Charlie Burbank and I were in
charge of the emergency room,"
says Moore. The evening was
cold and the hospital had been
very quiet. The first Grove patient
arrived at Massachusetts General
Hospital at approximately 10:35 p.m.

"I was upstairs and came down
after hearing the sirens," says Moore.

This would be the beginning
of an unprecedented onslaught
of patients. But as bad as it would
become, it would be worse at nearby
Boston City Hospital. For every four
victims sent to Boston City Hospital,
only one went to Massachusetts
General. Later, when City became
badly overloaded, this ratio shifted
so that about half of the victims
went to Massachusetts General.

The victims that were brought in
were wet from the fire hoses, dirty
from the soot and grime and suffer-
ing from the rough handling neces-
sary to get them out of the Grove.
They presented with an assortment
of afflictions, including burns,
partial asphyxia, exposure to the
cold, shock and fright. Some stared
blankly and said nothing. Others
screamed and raved, flinging their
arms and legs so violently that they
had to be restrained.

The magnitude of the disaster
became quickly evident as victims
arrived in quick succession.
Massachusetts General staff who
could not immediately be assigned
to medical work were asked to tele-
phone doctors and nurses associated
with the hospital.

Not long after the arrival of
the first patients, Dr. Oliver Cope
arrived. Cope headed an important
National Research Council Project
regarding the treatment of burns
and walked straight into a crisis that
would put the new burn treatment
techniques that they had developed
to an unparalleled test.

Also arriving in the early stages of
the staff response was Dr. Nathaniel
Faxon, the hospital administrator. He
immediately ordered the full use of
all phases of the war disaster plan,
leading to activity in every wing
of the giant hospital. Emergency
equipment and extra supplies
were assembled and rushed to the
Cocoanut Grove Ward.

As staff was being mobilized,
the accident floor was cleared of all
non-Grove patients. Despite this
action, victims continued to pour in
and the hospital was running out
of space quickly. Thus, patients on
the sixth floor of the White Building
were rolled, in their beds, to other
wards. The entire floor was quickly
converted into a Cocoanut Grove
Ward.

"The first few hours were spent
stabilizing the victims and clearing
the dead," says Moore.

Within two hours after the fire,
114 Cocoanut Grove victims were
delivered to Massachusetts General
Hospital. Seventy-five were dead
on arrival or before treatment could
be given. This left 39 patients to
be treated. Unlike the situation at
Boston City Hospital, this was a
number that could be effectively
accommodated at Mass General.
None of these patients showed any
sign of drunkenness. Also, in spite
of the wild panic, only a few were
bruised and none had suffered
broken bones.

Ten of the 39 patients admitted
to Mass General had significant
burn injuries, yet the other 29 had
slight or no external burns. Some of
them suffered gravely from severe
lung damage and anoxia (restricted
oxygen supply to body tissues). As
the casualties continued to arrive,
one facet of the crisis that increas-
ingly confounded the medical
staff was the seemingly inordinate
number of fatalities from causes
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other than extensive burn damage. Some of the victims appeared to have died instantly without burns at the scene of the fire, while others succumbed after they had reached safety or en route to the hospital. The most baffling were those who came into the hospital apparently with only minor injuries or none at all, and then with little warning, collapsed and died.

Typifying this phenomenon was a 23-year-old Navy Ensign, who was one of the first to arrive at Massachusetts General Hospital. He walked into the accident room under his own power with hands that were badly burned and some burns on his face and neck. Aside from a flushed appearance and his agitation, he seemed to be fit enough to be held aside as the flood of more desperate victims arrived. Despite being told to lie down and stay calm, he was soon pacing back and forth waving his hands in pain. Suddenly, he fell to the floor hardly breathing. Further examination revealed that his nostrils were deeply burned. He soon developed a swelling of the throat and then rapidly began to experience obstruction of the upper respiratory passages. Hours later, he died.

As the crisis continued, one young doctor was assigned directly to each patient. Moore’s responsibility was to monitor the emergency room, taking an overview of the area. By 3 a.m. on Sunday morning, all 39 patients at Massachusetts General were bedded down.

“This flood of patients dominated everything for the next several days, there was little rest for anyone,” says Moore.

The research project headed up by Cope was intended to develop a superior and simple method of treating burns. Throughout the year every patient suffering burns was treated in accordance with these studies. The new plan of therapy was carefully tested and developed, and involved the use of ointments containing boric acid. After Pearl Harbor, Massachusetts General Hospital administrative staff had developed a plan by which the institution’s full facilities could respond to a disaster of war by virtue of their mobilization plan and this ongoing burn research.

The hospital was ready for the crisis that impacted them following the Cocoanut Grove fire.

The awful toll in human life of the Cocoanut Grove fire produced a lesson of enormous value. Those who lost their lives and those who suffered agonizing pain and misery in the days that followed were to make available through their sacrifice knowledge that was to save thousands of victims in the future.
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Summarizing the diverse hospital experiences of the Cocoanut Grove victims is difficult. Each was excruciating in its own way, but each contributed something to the knowledge of medicine. The Cocoanut Grove fire, with its terrible number of victims, became one of the most informative single tragedies ever approached by physicians.

After the Grove fire Moore spent many years practicing in the field of medicine. As one of those directly involved in this tragedy, he was intimately familiar with the medical advances that followed. Among his noteworthy professional achievements, he became Mosely Professor of Surgery-Emeritus at the Harvard Medical School and Surgeon-in-Chief-Emeritus at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital.

Decades Later

With the march of time the fire at Boston’s Cocoanut Grove has become an event from far away and long ago. And yet to some, it seems like only yesterday—a bad dream they are still waiting to forget.

The Cocoanut Grove fire was a tragedy of immense proportions. Perhaps most demonstrative of its magnitude is that a few lingering questions regarding the final death toll still continue to remain unanswered. News reports finally settled on the figure of 492 dead based on their information gathering efforts. But depending on the particular count, questions persisted about certain individuals who had been counted twice or not counted at all, or who died later in the hospitals either from direct physical injuries or from serious and deteriorating psychological scars.

In this regard Fire Commissioner Reilly’s report carried a “Master List” of the dead and injured that indicated 490 dead and 166 injured. This list had an effective date of December 10, 1942 and adjusted to October 16, 1943. Yet despite its claim to cancel and supersede all other tallies, it did not include the name Eleanor B. Powerell, who had succumbed at Boston City Hospital. Also, regarding the injured, the list did not include patients treated and immediately released, or service-men and women admitted to military hospitals. And then there were victims like Francis Gaturna, who several weeks after recovering from his own injuries returned to the hospital despondent over the loss of his wife, only to end his suffering by throwing himself through a closed sixth floor hospital window.

As testimony to the healing power of time and how much has changed through the years, finding the precise location of the Cocoanut Grove today is challenging, even for those considering themselves native Bostonians. When standing at the former Grove site, one can see that even the streets have been altered to accommodate a high-rise hotel complex over most of the Grove’s main dining room and Broadway Street Lounge. Shawmut Street now curves into Piedmont Street right at the site that was the Grove’s main lobby area.

Today’s quiet residential streets at Shawmut and Piedmont in Boston’s Bay Village allow a person to stand at the exact location of the revolving door and at the top of the stairway to the Melody Lounge—a place were bodies piled seven and eight high. Ironically, though as it should be, a long string of exit doors from a movie theater in the new hotel complex discharge out onto this site.

The shock of Cocoanut Grove Fire death toll drove society to make significant changes in fire regulations and emergency procedures that would have taken years to change otherwise. This leads to the debatable thought of how many more would have cumulatively died in smaller, less impacting tragedies through the years that followed.

With regards to advances in medicine, the sheer enormity of the work done in Boston’s hospitals along with the timeliness of war-related research allowed significant strides forward in medical knowledge. The Cocoanut Grove fire, with its terrible aggregate of victims, became one of the most informative single tragedies ever approached by physicians.

Perhaps the greatest irony of this tragic event is that, at least in Boston, there will never be another Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire. There is only truth in this statement because immediately following the fire, the Boston Licensing Board ruled that no place of entertainment could ever again use the name Cocoanut Grove. Of course, this was only a measure to prevent future exploitation of this tragedy and not to prevent fires.

Unfortunately, we all know that fires of this magnitude continue to be possible. We can only take comfort by hoping that we’ve learned from our mistakes, mistakes like the fire at the Cocoanut Grove.