

## **Third Great Chicago Fire?**

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We reviewed the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the Iroquois Theater Fire of 1903. Let us look at how another Chicago fire and changed the face of fire safety in our schools.

More than 1,600 Kindergarten through 8th grade students were in Our Lady of the Angels Catholic School, when the building caught fire on December 1, 1958. Built in 1910, the school had been renovated and expanded many times, before the 1958 fire. It is important to note that, as was the custom of the time, the floors were waxed with a petroleum-based wax every year. Of equal importance is that the school had only one fire escape, no sprinkler, no fire doors, and no automatic fire detection. Some time around 2:00pm, a fire started in trash can in the basement of the northwest stair well. The stair well rapidly filled with smoke. Heat from the fire broke a window at the base of the stairwell, allowing fresh air to fan the flames. The highly waxed floors caught fire almost immediately on contact with the flames. A lack of fire doors allowed super heated smoke to fill the second floor hallway almost instantly.

Without a smoke detection system, the teachers were not alerted to the fire until one of the Nuns, opened a door to the hall. However, by that time, the main hall way was filled with smoke and the north staircase was ablaze. The opening of doors caused another inrush of air, which allowed the fire to then race across the second floor. The highly waxed floors ignited, trapping the students in their classrooms. The students and teachers (Catholic School Nuns) were trapped with only the second floor windows as an escape rout; a 25 foot drop to the rocky courtyard. Therefore, they jumped, or many of them did. As fire fighter arrived on scene, they were met by a roaring fire, coming from the roof area and several classrooms, and the sight of "their children" jumping, clothes on fire from the second floor. As fire fighter tried to raise ladders to the second floor, they watched Nuns trying lower students to the ground with their own robes. Despite heroic efforts by the nuns and the fire fighters 92 children (kindergarten through 8th grade) and three nuns died because of the fire.

Life Magazine provided the most chilling realization of the fire with a single photograph. It was a picture of firefighter Richard Scheidt, carrying the life less body of 10-year old, John Jajkowski, from the building. Little John died under a window in the rear of room 212 from smoke inhalation. Of all the photographs taken that sad day, none captures the horror of children killed in the very place that their parents thought they would be most safe.

The events and conditions of the fire led to many for the fire codes requirements that are in place today for schools, such as elevated floors must have windows designed for rescue, prohibiting flammable floor finishes, restriction on wall covering flammability, and self closing fire doors. Of all the code changes, the most significant, being the mandatory presence of smoke and fire detection equipment. This is the third in a series of articles that will discuss fire prevention and historic fires.



For more information on the tragic fire at Our Lady of Angels School, please visit the memorial website at <http://www.olafire.com>.