87 Students, Three Nuns Die In Parochial School Fire

CHICAGO (AP)—Fire struck a parochial grade school with terrifying swiftness Monday, trapping pupils and teachers at their desks a few minutes before dismissal time. Ninety perished.

The final toll included 87 children and three Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The fire was Chicago's worst since the disastrous Iroquois Theater fire of 1903. It was the third worst school fire in the nation in the last 100 years.

More than 85 youngsters remained in hospitals, suffering from burns, broken bones received in frantic leaps for life and shock.

In the Cook County Morgue, sheet-covered little corpses, a few charred nearly beyond identification, still lay waiting to be identified by tearful parents.

A special detective task force joined firemen in seeking the cause of the catastrophe.

The fearful speed with which the blaze devoured the Our Lady of the Angels Roman Catholic School led Fire Commissioner Robert J. Quinn to consider arson. Billowing black smoke indicated an oil-type fire, he said.

Quinn called the blaze "the worst thing I have ever seen or ever will see."

Drew Brown, head of the police arson squad, said a rubbish blaze could have started it.

Brown said he learned a student was instructed to burn some rubbish in a concrete pit just outside the two-story brick building's northeast stairway about 2:20 p.m., some 20 minutes before the fire broke out. The vicinity of the northeast stairway was where the fire apparently started, Brown said.

Just 18 minutes was the difference between life and death for the 1,300 students and blacked-robed teachers in the school. The first box alarm was turned in at 2:42 p.m. The school let out at 3 p.m.

Within minutes the building turned into a wild, screaming inferno. Smoke and heat filled staircases and second-floor corridors so fast that normal exits were impassable.

"We are trapped. We are trapped," nuns screamed from the windows as they huddled with groups of pupils.

Many children panicked, stampeded to windows. Some leaped to death on sidewalks below.

"Nothing killed those kids but heat and smoke," Quinn said. "They just couldn't get out into the corridor to go downstairs."

Nearly all the eighth-grade class in two upper-floor classrooms perished.

Screams of children trapped on upper floors drifted down to hundreds of horrified spectators and hysterical parents.

Firemen raised ladders and brought down dozens of pupils. Priests, on the scene even before the fire fighters, led out others.

Nuns, with disregard for their own safety, rolled some pupils down staircases. Children ducked to the floor, seeking cool and fresh air, and crawled out. Others groped their way to freedom by grasping hands and beltbuckles of classmates and filing out the smoke-filled structure.

For some there was no rescue, however.

"God, we tried. God, how we tried," sobbed one fireman. "But we couldn't move fast enough. No one could live in that fire."

As the bodies were brought down in the eerie, hazy light, parents pushed against police lines, crying, "Where are our children? Where are our children?"

The dead were placed in a courtyard where only a few hours before the children had been laughing and playing.

The injured were taken to seven nearby West Side hospitals. Twenty-two victims died en route to hospitals or soon after arrival. Sixty-eight bodies were sent directly to the morgue where parents and relatives gathered for the dreaded identification ordeal.

Of the dead 53 were girls and 34 boys. The heroic nuns accounted for the other three.

The U-shaped school at 3808 Iowa St. was built some 40 years ago. It was remodeled about five years ago. Fire officials said the school was checked last October and no violations were found. Exits were adequate, they said, and the ceilings were of wood lath and plaster. There were no false ceilings. The heating plant is fueled by oil.

A single fire escape, with exits from the first and second floors, was in the center of the rear, or east side of the building — the bottom of the U which joined the wings.

As news of the impending disaster spread through the low-income neighborhood, hundreds rushed to the scene. Grief-stricken parents began crashing through police cordons as the dead were removed. Several people fainted in the surging mass of humanity.

Priests walked through the crowd and stood near the doomed building, administering Extreme Unction, last rite of the Catholic Church.

As in most tragedies, there were countless talks of heroism.

A nun, who refused to identify herself, made three trips into the blistering fire, each time leading out six pupils. "I felt untold strength," she told newsmen while being treated for burns at St. Anne's Hospital.

Casimir Janik, 38, a milkman, said an unexplainable impulse made him alter his regular route home. He arrived at the school before firemen. He parked nearby and several times ran into the school, carrying burned children to safety.

"I found one girl, her shoes missing, hanging on to a banister, seemingly in a state of shock," he said. "I yanked her loose, took her to church and placed her on a pew. Twice I carried two girls out, one under each arm."

Students in the school painted a grisly picture of terror.

Linda Barleto, 12, said she was pushed out of a window in a second-floor classroom. "Our backs were burning. Then someone pushed me out the window." She suffered burns and bruises.

Her cousin Andrea Gagliarco, 12 told newsmen, "Some of the boys jumped out the window. When we looked out we saw them lying still on the ground. It was like a miracle when we saw the firemen with their ladders."

A boy who lives across from the school, Deroy Hewlett, 13, gave this graphic description: "Kids were hanging from the windows, jumping or falling in groups of three or four at a time. Smoke and flame poured from the windows. A little girl stood at the window of a ledge, screaming for help."

Early reports that there had been an explosion were discounted by firemen. Commissioner Quinn said the boiler room was intact. Then he said, "This could have been a touch-off. It spread too damn rapidly."

Fire investigators were closely checking the story of Mrs. Barbara Glowacki, who operates a candy store adjacent to the school on the north. She said just before she learned about the fire a man came into her store and asked to use a telephone.

The man, said Mrs. Glowacki, ran out quickly, calling out, "The school is on fire," after she told him she had no public telephone.

Police began a search for the man, described as middle-aged.

With a toll of 90 the fire is the nation's third most disastrous school tragedy in the last century. The toll is exceeded only by the New London, Tex., explosion and fire which killed 294 March 18, 1937, and the Collinwood school fire which claimed 176 lives March 4, 1908 in Cleveland.

In Chicago it ranked as the second greatest fire killer of the century. On Dec. 30, 1903, 602 persons died when flames swept through the downtown Iroquois Theater.

Editor's Note — Tommy Raymond, 12, a seventh grader, was trapped for 20 minutes in his second floor classroom at Our Lady of the Angels School. Here is his story.

By TOMMY RAYMOND
As Told To UPI

CHICAGO (UPI) — I hesitated on the window sill thinking about jumping — and how I would look dead — when firemen shouted to me to wait and they'd save me.

Most of my other classmates had got out and I was the last one. But when I walked into the hall the smoke was so thick I ran back into the room. I ran to a window in the room and threw some books out through the glass to break the window. Its funny, but I remember the books — my reader and some text books.

After the window broke I got on the sill and began thinking about jumping. That's when the firemen down below started shouting at me not to jump, but they'd come and get me. So I got back off the sill.

Now that I think back to when it started, I remember we were having a singing lesson. We didn't know anything about the fire until all of a sudden we heard a lot of screams. We couldn't make out what the screams were for a moment, then we knew it was the eighth graders yelling, "Fire, fire, fire."

We started leaving the room like we had practiced in fire drills. You know we had two or three fire drills already this winter because this is an old school and somebody always figured it was going to burn down some day.

For a while I was all by myself in the room and then some girls came running in. They were from another room. I yelled at them to lie down on the floor, because that's what I remember from fire drills to do when there's a lot of smoke.

The girls said kids from other rooms were hanging on one another's belts to form a line to get to the stairs because the smoke had made it as dark as night on the second floor. A man came running through the door and we could see flames on the other side of the building. The man grabbed a few girls and led them back out with him.

But I stayed by the window, and I was scared. Then the firemen came up and led me down the ladder.

I'm sorry about all the others.

CHICAGO (AP) — The acrid stench of burned bodies and clothing hung heavily over the morgue at the Cook County Hospital today.

Inside, scores of priests and hospital attendants tried to comfort bereaved relatives still trying to identify the bodies of school children who died in Monday's fire at Our Lady of the Angeles Roman Catholic School.

Ninety sheet-covered bodies lay on stretchers in three rooms of the morgue basement. Some had been identified within hours after the fire.

Some fire-blackened bodies contorted in agony may never be identified.

Among white-clad nurses and morgue attendants could be seen the frocked figures of priests. Here was one, his arm around the shoulder of a weeping woman, trying to console her.

"It was the will of God," was heard in a low whisper from the priest. "Your daughter is an angel in heaven."

The woman wept unrestrainedly.

From the other side of the room came a shriek. A woman collapsed and immediately attendants ringed her, eased her into a chair and administered smelling salts.

Nearby stood a couple in their 30s. Pale, dry of tears, they fingered a rosary, their lips moving wordlessly. The man had said earlier his daughter was not reported in any of the half-dozen hospitals to which many of the children had been taken. The couple came to the morgue, but had not looked at any of the unidentified children. They were praying she still might have only been injured, perhaps still in a hospital through some mixup in names.

Hovering among the parishioners was Father Joseph Ognibene. This 32-year-old priest, a native Chicagoan, came to Our Lady as the parish was known, in 1952. It was his first assignment after ordination.

He was "Father Joe" to everyone.

It was his daily routine to walk about the schoolyard and near the entrances during recess, the noon lunch period and as the children left the building at 3 p.m.

Monday, Father Ognibene met an old friend for lunch. They dallied at the table. Then he noticed it would soon be time for his young parishioners to leave school for home.

"I was hurrying to the school in my car," he said. "I saw smoke coming from the upper windows and drove my car the wrong way up a one-way street. I parked the car and ran into the building.

"Some children were leaving the building in an orderly fire-drill manner. Others were running about, screaming. Then everything was ablaze.

"I tried . . . I wanted to . . . It was the will of God."

When the first bodies began arriving at the morgue, Father Joe was asked to make tentative identification. He knew the greatest force of the fire was concentrated in the section housing Rooms 207, 208, 209, 211 and 212.

Scores of these children he knew by name. All were his friends.

Yet, when he had to identify them by name, or grade he could only whisper: "I'm not sure of this little one. . . I think this one was in 209. . . This boy was . . . I'm not sure."

He pressed a thin, shaking hand to his temple. For a moment, it appeared that he might collapse. An attendant slipped a bottle of salts to the priest's nostrils and he straightened up, backing away from the pungent odor.

Then he walked among the bereaved relatives.

City Slates Eat Contest

BOLOGNA, Italy (AP) — This hearty-eating city is going to find out who can eat the most—the fats or the leans.

The leans can weigh up to 165. The fats must weigh 210 or more.

They will compete in an eating contest Dec. 13.

Sponsors are the National Gastronomic Academy and the National Assn. of Chefs.

The ground rules warn: "The promoters disclaim any responsibility whatsoever for any damage real or imagined now or in the future to the health of contestants. They stuff at their own risk."

Contestants can come from anywhere in Italy.

Sole dish for the contest will be a standby, tortellini in brodo. The tortellini are little, round, meat-stuffed pastas, shaped like doughnuts and tasting like ravioli. They're served in rich broth.

Just to eliminate the pikers, contestants will have to gulp their way first through three bowls of tortellini—each dish weighing a pound—in 45 minutes.

Those who can still hoist a spoon and fork after that are in the finals.

They get one dish after another of the tortellini for 90 more minutes. The one who puts away the greatest poundage of it in that time is the winner.

He will be awarded a golden tortellini.

Aide Rejects Bids On Cars

SALEM (AP) — Bids for the state purchase of 800 cars were rejected Monday by Oregon Finance Director John Richardson.

Richardson said the state simply could not afford to buy the automobiles.

He said, though, that Oregon already has accepted a bid for 20 Nash Ramblers.

Richardson added that the state will consider whether it would be suitable to buy fleets of cars below the Ford-Chevrolet-Plymouth price range.

The low bid on the 800 cars was submitted by Francis Motor Co. of Portland, a Ford dealer. The Francis bid was $1,850 for each four-door sedan.

And that, said Richardson, was about $400 more per car than the state paid last year. The state, he said, just cannot afford such a price.

State departments will be advised to continue to use cars which still are in good condition, Richardson said.

Richardson said the higher prices resulted from car makers ending dealer subsidies in bidding on state cars.

When the Ramblers are put into service, studies will be made to compare their operating costs with other models now in use.

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