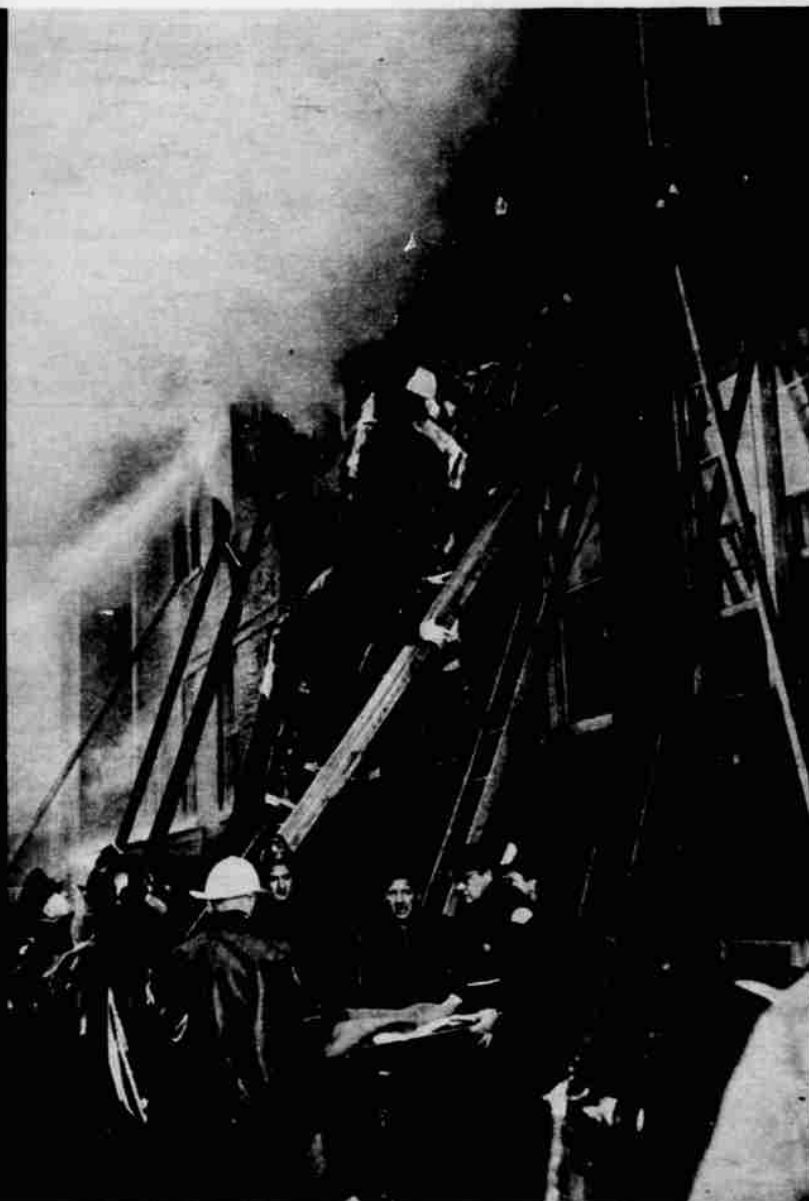


by Jerry Klein



ARE YOUR SCHOOLS SAFE FROM FIRE ?

THE FLAMES which roared through a Chicago school a few weeks ago to take the lives of 90 children and three teachers have burned into the national consciousness the alarming question: Are our schools potential firetraps?

Unfortunately, it seems that many are!

The National Board of Fire Underwriters had warned in 1957 that most of America's school buildings are not as fire-safe as they ought to be. But it took the Chicago tragedy to make many public officials—and parents—take a fresh look at their local schools. They saw many shortcomings from the safety standpoint.

In fact, Michigan's superintendent of public instruction estimated that his state has at least 1,800 schools which must be considered fire hazards. In Kentucky, the state fire marshal said that what happened in Chicago could happen to three-fourths of that state's schools.

Actually, the inferno at Our Lady of the Angels school in Chicago was only one of some 4,000 that broke out in U.S. schools last year! It also ranked third among America's most tragic school disasters—a 1937 explosion claimed 294 lives in New Lon-

don, Tex., and a 1908 fire killed 174 in Collinwood, O. Luckily, most school fires occur outside of class hours and very few cause personal injury.

In fact, not one child was killed in the worst school fires—fires causing \$250,000 damage or more—in 1957, the last year of complete records.

Analyzing the reports on these 19 major blazes, the National Fire Protection Association found the same shortcomings it has found in America's schools for years: Discovery of the fires was delayed, automatic protection devices were lacking, and buildings had construction weaknesses.

Discovering the fire was delayed "seriously" in all these 19 worst cases. In the Chicago holocaust, too, the blaze was not detected promptly and the alarm was delayed.

None of the 19 schools struck by the biggest fires had automatic sprinklers or an automatic warning system. Neither did Our Lady of the Angels.

"It is obvious that there are no new lessons to be learned from the Chicago fire," the N.F.P.A. declares, "just old lessons re-emphasized!"

As for building construction, over the years the association has found these flaws to be most com-

mon among schools suffering serious fires: They are built of wood, or brick with wood floors; they have interiors of combustible wallboard; they lack fire-division walls to break up large spaces; they have unshielded vertical openings such as open stairways through which flames may freely soar upward; non-firestopped walls; and concealed spaces above the ceilings.

NOW WHAT was the situation at Our Lady of the Angels? The school building was 50 years old, made of brick with wood floors and laths; its ceilings were finished in acoustical tile of low fire resistance. The blaze, which began in the basement, came up the stairwell and was prevented from entering the first-floor classrooms by a heavy door—but there was no such door on the second floor, so the flames flew down the corridor and into the classrooms. Says the fire association: "How different the story might have been . . . We can turn the tragedy of Chicago into a gain for all humanity if we take its lessons to heart."

In considering your own local school, you may feel assured. It may be fairly new, modern in