
Not Without Hope: The Our Lady of the Angels Fire and School Safety Reform in Late 1950s America

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On the afternoon of December 1, 1958 one of the worst school fires in the history of the United States destroyed the Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Grade School in Chicago. This tragic event, which led to the untimely deaths of ninety-two children and three nuns, shocked not just the local community, but the entire nation as a whole. The enormity of the tragedy made it evident there were serious problems with school fire codes and major reforms and changes were needed. The day after the fire, Mayor Richard Daley declared that, "A tragedy of this magnitude should not go without hope that we can somehow improve the protection of our children."¹ Although the impact of the fire is well documented in terms of its effects on Chicago, what is missing is an adequate exploration of the fire's impact on the country as a whole. It is the intention of this study to demonstrate what went wrong during the fire and to show how the tragedy served as a turning point in the history of school safety regulations across America.

The Our Lady of the Angels School was a Roman Catholic parochial school located on Chicago's West Side.² Originally built in 1910 with several additions added up until 1953, the school was a typical structure of its day.³ When the school was constructed, it was common to use wood and plaster for the inside as opposed to the concrete and steel materials now used today. The two-and-a-half story school, which consisted of two buildings connected by an annex,⁴ was made of ordinary brick and timber joist construction. The building also featured a wooden trim throughout.⁵ While cheaper and more economical, these materials were flammable and much more prone to

¹ David Cowan and John Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels: The Story of a Fire* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 138.

² Suellen Hoy, "Stunned with Sorrow: The sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary were among both the victims and the heroes of the horrific 1958 Our Lady of the Angels school fire," *Chicago History Magazine*, (Summer 2004), http://gapersblock.com/detour/a_tragic_day_in_chicago/Stunned_with_Sorrow.pdf [accessed April 10, 2010]: 1.

³ Chester L. Babcock and Rexford Wilson, "The Chicago School Fire," *The Quarterly: National Fire Protection Association* (January 1959), <http://www.nfpa.org/assets/files/pdf/research/ladyofangels.pdf> (accessed April 8, 2010) 155; Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 3.

⁴ Babcock and Wilson, "The Chicago School Fire," 155.

⁵ Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 12.

fire than the steel and concrete materials used in modern schools. In addition, the design of the building itself was problematic to fire safety. In an investigation conducted by the National Fire Protection Association one month after the fire occurred, the school building was described as a “one fire area” or in laymen’s terms a “chimney” because of the open stairways and the lack of adequate fire resistant doors on the upper level rooms.⁶ There was nothing in the school’s construction, in other words, to prevent a fire from spreading rapidly. Further, the school had six exits, and only one fire escape, located at the rear of the school’s annex and accessible only from the second story corridor of the annex. The school had twenty-four classrooms with high ceilings and electric globe lights. The doors to the rooms were six and a half feet high and were topped by eighteen-inch inward-opening glass transoms.⁷ Inside were 1,668 students, approximately fifty to sixty pupils per classroom.⁸

The school successfully passed a Chicago Fire Department examination just two months before the fire occurred.⁹ The 1949 municipal code stated that all new buildings had to be made of noncombustible materials and also had to contain enclosed stairways, sprinkler systems, and fire-resistant doors. It also regulated the number of people that could safely occupy a room. Unfortunately, the code was not retroactive and it did not affect existing buildings. Thus, the building was allowed to remain a hazard. Historian Suellen Hoy wrote, “In hindsight, the old brick building, with a wood interior and without up-to-date features, such as smoke detectors, sprinklers, an automatic fire alarm, and fire-safe doors, was an accident waiting to happen.”¹⁰ These factors set the stage for the tragic fire that was to occur at Our Lady of the Angels. Examining the events that occurred during the fire in classrooms and outside the building is crucial to analyzing the event. By doing this, we have a better understanding of how updated safety reforms could have prevented or at the very least lessened the severity of the fire.

The fire originated sometime between 2:00 and 2:25 p.m. at the bottom of the school’s north wing rear stairway. Investigators believed that the fire likely smoldered undetected for about twenty minutes before finally expanding and moving up the stairs. The fire alarms did not sound and no early warning was given to teachers or students.¹¹

⁶ Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 167.

⁷ Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 12.

⁸ Ibid; Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 157.

⁹ Hoy, “Stunned With Sorrow,” 2; Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 12.

¹⁰ Hoy, “Stunned With Sorrow,” 2.

¹¹ Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 43; Thomas M. Cunningham, “Our Lady of the Angels: A Historic Perspective on School Fires,” “With the Command”-Emergency

The fire was discovered at 2:25 p.m., after it had been burning for approximately twenty-five minutes and had filled the stairwell and second floor hallway with thick, black smoke.¹² The smoke was so intense that one nun later described it as looking like, “huge rolls of black cotton.”¹³ The teacher in room 206, Miss Tristano, noticed the smoke in the hallway and immediately ran to a nearby room to ask what she should do.¹⁴ The other teacher told Tristano to stay there while she ran to find the school’s Mother Superior. At the time there was a rule that stated only the Mother Superior could ring the fire alarm.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the Mother Superior was substituting for a sick teacher and could not be found. Eventually, Tristano and the other teacher evacuated their students from the building and then rang the fire alarm.¹⁶ By evacuating the students, the teachers had in fact broken another rule. No evacuations were to take place unless the fire alarm had already been rung by the Mother Superior.¹⁷

These two rules caused many teachers to hesitate evacuating their students from the school, even though they felt the heat of the fire and smelled the smoke. Precious time was lost because of this hesitation and confusion. One nun even turned to her students and said, “We can’t go until we’re told.”¹⁸ Even when the fire alarm did begin to ring it could do little good as the thick smoke and terrible heat had begun to encircle the second-floor classrooms. To make matters worse, the fire alarm only rang in the building. There was no outside line connecting the alarm to the fire department. The Chicago Fire Department did not receive word of the fire until 2:42, approximately forty minutes after it began.¹⁹ The school’s custodian, James Raymond, had been walking in the alley in between the parish house and the school and noticed smoke near the rear of the school by the stairwell. He immediately ran to the boiler room and saw the growing blaze. After telling two boys who were emptying some trash to get out and call the fire department, he left the boiler room and headed toward the church rectory. There he told the housekeeper to call the fire department. The housekeeper’s call

Services Information, <http://www.withthecommand.com/09-Sept/MD-OurLady-0904.html> [accessed April 1, 2010].

¹² Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 157;

¹³ Hoy, “Stunned With Sorrow,” 3.

¹⁴ Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 158; Cowan and Kuenster 34; “Our Lady of the Angels School Fire,” Archdiocese of Chicago’s Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Archives & Records Center, <http://archives.archchicago.org/OLAFire.htm> [accessed March 30, 2010].

¹⁵ Cowan and Kuenster 34; Cunningham, “Our Lady of the Angels.”

¹⁶ Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 158

¹⁷ Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 55-56; Cunningham, “Our Lady of the Angels.”

¹⁸ Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 56.

¹⁹ Hoy, “Stunned With Sorrow,” 2; Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 159 .

was the first emergency notification received by the Chicago Fire Department concerning the situation at Our Lady of the Angels.²⁰

By the time the first fire truck reached the school, the situation was very serious. Many children had already jumped out of the second story windows due to the heat and smoke leaving them seriously injured or dead. Instead of focusing on extinguishing the fire, firefighters focused mainly on getting as many children out as they could while attempting to keep the fire under control.²¹ The heroic efforts of the rescue crews that day were estimated to have saved 160 lives.²² Nevertheless, it was during this crucial time of rescue that some of the most horrific events of the day occurred. One firefighter recalled reaching out to grab a child through a second story window when the entire room exploded and the child before him vanished into the flames.²³ Another was shocked at the sight of the fire exploding into a classroom, killing the students before him instantly and causing them to fall to the ground “like a house of cards.”²⁴ The sheer enormity of the destruction caused by the fire would haunt many witnesses and rescuers for the rest of their lives. When the fire was finally out and the grim task of searching for bodies was over, shock turned to anger. As news spread of the tragedy, The nation responded to make sure that such a fire never happened again.

Discussion and planning for school fire safety reforms began the day after the tragedy. As investigators and reporters studied the ruins of the school, disturbing facts began to come out, facts which had for far too long been ignored. The lack of a sprinkler system had allowed the fire to grow uncontested and the lack of proper smoke detectors led to students and faculty alike being warned far too late about the fire.²⁵ As sobering as this was, a national *Newsweek* report soon after the fire warned that the conditions at Our Lady of the Angels were not unusual and that many schools had the same problems. The United States Office of Education conducted a nationwide survey shortly after the tragedy in which they found that, “nearly one school building in five [was] a potential fire trap [and that] another one in five [was] on the borderline.”²⁶ A nationwide crackdown on fire safety violations was taking place. On the first day after the fire, December 2, a meeting was held in Chicago of the Central Conference of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. The topic of discussion was how to prevent

²⁰ Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 159; Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 68.

²¹ Babcock and Wilson, “The Chicago School Fire,” 166.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 84.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁶ Hoy, “Stunned With Sorrow,” 2.

another such fire from ever happening again. The National Education Association was also present and urged the PTA to take action.²⁷ On that same day, Mayor Daley announced that “all the facilities of the city” would be used to find out how and why the fire started and to decide on how best to prevent another such occurrence.²⁸ Less than two weeks following the fire, a city-wide inspection of schools was carried out and 368 schools were inspected for code violations.²⁹ Thirteen days after the tragedy, it was reported that officials in Philadelphia had conducted their own city-wide inspection of schools using a fifty man inspection team. Four of the schools inspected were found to be in such gross violation of the fire code that they were threatened with closure unless they immediately updated their safety standards. All four schools complied.³⁰ In New York City, Edward Cavanagh, the city’s fire commissioner, ordered a full inspection of the more than 1,500 schools under his jurisdiction. Of these schools, eighteen were closed within a week after the tragedy due to serious safety violations.³¹

Los Angeles, California’s city officials responded particularly strongly to the disaster at Our Lady of the Angels. In 1959, the Los Angeles Fire Department was motivated by the fire in Chicago to perform a series of tests and training exercises in order to better prepare their crews for an event like Our Lady of the Angels fire. The first series of tests were named *Operation School Burning*, and the tragic fire of December 1 was mentioned in the very first paragraph of the report.³² During the tests, which lasted from April to June, 1959, a systematic analysis of fire prevention methods for open stairwells in schools was conducted. Tests included, “The effectiveness of automatic sprinklers (both partial and complete sprinkler systems), fire curtains, and roof vents in preventing the spread of flames and other products of combustion during fires.” Automatic smoke and heat detectors were also tested. In addition to this, over 100 live fires were set in a controlled setting in order to discover the effectiveness of various forms of fire safety materials available to schools. The fire department determined that only the full sprinkler system would be able to actually halt the

²⁷ “PTA Leaders Begin Study to Prevent Fires”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 3, 1958.

²⁸ “Army Experts on Burns Join Fire Doctors: City Acts to Avert New Tragedy,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 4, 1958.

²⁹ “Find Violation of Fire Code in More Schools”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1958.

³⁰ “Find School Fire Danger in Philadelphia,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 14, 1958.

³¹ Adam Groves, “Our Lady of the Angels School Fire: 50 Years Later,” *Fire Engineering Magazine*, December 1, 2008, <http://www.fireengineering.com/index/articles/display/347475/articles/fire-engineering/volume-161/issue-12/features/our-lady-of-the-angels-school-fire-50-years-later.html> [Accessed April 16, 2010].

³² Groves, “Our Lady of the Angels School Fire” and “Los Angeles Fire Department, Operation School Burning,” *National Fire Protection Association*, Boston, 1959: 5.

progress of the fire, and that the heat sensors had to be placed very close to the stairwell for it to go off in time.³³

Also addressed by the LAFD was the need to find adequate ways to control the smoke in school hallways during a fire, since smoke at Our Lady of the Angels had been a critical factor preventing many children from escaping. The smoke was described by the LAFD as the “principle hazard” during such an event.³⁴ In light of these discoveries made by the LAFD, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) revised the Life Safety Code to better handle inadequacies in school fires. The NFPA also conducted a nationwide poll of fire departments in 1960 to better measure the improvements that had occurred in regard to fire department readiness for school fires and other similar events. The poll found that, in most communities, new fire safety procedures and precautions had been implemented for area schools within the previous twelve months. Some of the new precautions being implemented in many schools nationwide included more numerous inspections by the fire department and more frequent fire drills.³⁵ In total, it was estimated that over 16,500 school buildings in the United States had undergone major life safety reforms in 1959 alone. Changes in fire prevention by schools and fire departments have obviously been beneficial. In fact, since 1958, “no school fire in the United States has killed more than ten people.”³⁶

In 1959, the Illinois General Assembly created a steering committee that produced a large set of safety regulations for schools covering everything from the “brightness of exit signs to the proper installation of furnaces.”³⁷ The next year the General Assembly went a step further by passing the “Life Safety Code of 1960” which codified the safety regulations.³⁸ There were obstacles on the road to reform however in Chicago. As important as the safety codes were, there was little to no oversight. Many school districts used the money given to them by the state for “life safety” to buy such “critical” things as baseball gloves, pianos and desks. One school even used \$44,000 in life safety money to resurface a running track.³⁹ The Chicago City Council had set December 31, 1963, as the final date for compliance in terms of updated safety features in Chicago schools. However, due to the heavy cost of adding such features and a lack of determination by some schools to see

³³ Groves, “Our Lady of the Angels School Fire.”

³⁴ Ibid., “Los Angeles Fire Department, Operation School Burning,” *National Fire Protection Association*, Boston, 1959: 5.

³⁵ Groves, “Our Lady of the Angels School Fire.”

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cowan and Kuenster, 243.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 244.

the reforms put into place, the date was pushed forward to a year later and by that time most schools were in compliance.⁴⁰

After considering the evidence presented so far concerning safety reforms in American schools one very important question still remains: What is the legacy of the Our Lady of the Angels School fire? Have the reforms that were so urgently called for after the fire stayed in place or have they fallen to the wayside to a certain degree? While these questions are no doubt debatable, it is possible to distinguish certain consequences of the fire that can still be observed today.

One obvious example is that both the International Code Council (ICC) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) require that fire alarm switches be placed throughout the school and not in just one location as was the case with Our Lady of the Angels. Another clear example is that the ICC's *International Fire Code* (IFC) and the NFPA's *Life Safety Code* (LSC) now requires that in all new school buildings larger than 20,000 square feet, there must be automatic sprinkler systems in place in every part of the building that is below the exit door at the ground level.⁴¹ Had such sprinkler systems been in place during the fire at Our Lady of the Angels, it is highly likely that the fire would have been either extinguished or greatly reduced in its intensity. However, it should be noted that the same old problem of a regulations not being retroactive is still clearly seen. Older buildings today that were originally constructed without automatic sprinklers need only fire-resistant doors on their below ground levels and if these rooms have windows to the outside then neither sprinklers nor fire-resistant doors are required. This is an unfortunate reality as fire investigators, even those around as far back as when the fire occurred in 1958, believed that had a sprinkler system been in place where the fire originated the tragedy would almost certainly have been averted. This theory was later backed up by the tests and exercises conducted by the Los Angeles Fire Department.⁴²

Yet another example of the legacy of the Our Lady of the Angels Fire is the requirement by the ICC and NFPA that all new school buildings be constructed of materials that are regarded as "fire-resistant," such as non-flammable interior wall and ceiling finishes, unlike the highly flammable finishes that were present at Our Lady of the Angels. An even more direct influence of the fire on school building construction is that all major hallways in schools are required by the ICC and NFPA codes to be partially enclosed.. It should be recalled that during the fire, escape by the hallway and down the stairs as was the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Groves, "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire", 2006 International Fire Code, Chapters 7 and 10, and NFPA 101, and Life Safety Code, 2006 Edition, Chapters 7, 14, and 15.

⁴² Groves, "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire."

procedure set forth by the school and which was practiced during previous fire drills was impossible due to the blinding and suffocating smoke. The *International Fire Code* now states that all stairways that connect two or more stories together must be enclosed with some kind of fire resistant door. The *Life Safety Code* expanded this law by declaring that all vertical openings in new schools must be enclosed. While these are obvious improvements in school safety, the same problem of regulations not applying to older buildings is once again before us. Many exceptions to stairway enclosures are still present in these older buildings.⁴³

Finally, both the *International Fire Code* and the *Life Safety Code* addressed the problem of classroom overcrowding obvious at Our Lady of the Angels by mandating that in every classroom, new or old, there must be at least twenty square feet per occupant in said classroom. The *International Fire Code*, dictated that every room that had only one exit must be limited to no more than forty-nine people. This decision was influenced by the 1959 fire and the accounts of students' inability to escape due to overcrowding and panic. Again, this rule applied and still applies to all schools, both new or old.⁴⁴

Adam Groves, the archivist and metadata librarian at the Illinois Fire Service Institute located in the State Fire Academy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign⁴⁵ wrote in 2008 that the Our Lady of the Angels Fire, "contributed to a major overhaul of fire safety codes and standards for schools [nationwide]." In addition, he stated, "while this single fire truly made U.S. schools safer, it should also serve as a spur for further reform."⁴⁶ He was right. The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that while the Our Lady of the Angels Fire is a story of "good coming out of evil," the task of ensuring safety in American schools is not yet done. Older school buildings should be held to the same standards as newer ones and monthly fire drills and inspections should never be missed. By remembering the tragic lessons learned from the catastrophe of December 1, 1958, and by constantly striving to improve our schools where the most precious of our citizens attend—our children, we will fulfill Mayor Richard Daley's prediction that "we can somehow improve the protection of our

⁴³ Ibid., 2006 International Fire Code.

⁴⁴ Groves, "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire."

⁴⁵ "Staff Directory Information: Adam Groves," Illinois Fire Service Institute, http://www.fsi.illinois.edu/content/information/staffDirectory/detail.cfm?people_id=92407, [Accessed April 18, 2010].

⁴⁶ Groves, "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire."

children”⁴⁷ and ensure that a fire like the one at Our Lady of the Angels “never happens again.”⁴⁸

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⁴⁷ Cowan and Kuenster, *To Sleep with the Angels*, 138.

⁴⁸ “Army Experts on Burns Join Fire Doctors: City Acts to Avert New Tragedy,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 4, 1958.