

A kiss helped spark fire which killed 491 in US nightclub

MARTIAL law was declared in Boston on Saturday night, November 28, 1942. The world was at war, but that was not the reason. Indeed, Bostonians had been out on the town. There were thousands of servicemen based in and around the city and Saturday night was the one night of the week they were allowed out to party.

As well, earlier that day had been held the biggest football match of the year, when the underdogs, Holy Cross, won sensationally over the previously unbeaten Boston College, 55-12, and the streets were filled with fans, either celebrating their win or mourning their loss.

In the course of the evening, when one love-sick man tried to steal a kiss, his passion sparked one of the most disastrous fires in American history.

In the Cocoanut Grove nightclub, which broke practically every rule and ordinance governing its operation, 300 people were either burned to death or suffocated in the inferno, which raged for 40 relentless minutes, while another 191 died later from their shocking injuries.

Whether the unknown man got his kiss or not will never be known but, if he did, it would have to go down in history as one of the most expensive, in terms of lives lost, as he turned a night of celebration into a mass cremation.

That night, the Cocoanut Grove, with its sordid past, consumed its last victims and its blot on Boston's landscape was removed when the bulldozers came in to clear the rubble to make way for a car park.

"King" Solomon, one of America's most notorious gangsters, had opened the Cocoanut Grove in 1927 as a speak-easy, during the days of America's Prohibition, and it became the national headquarters for his vast empire of sly grog, vice, protection and gambling rackets until he was murdered in 1932.

A year later, when Prohibition ended, the building was developed into a fun-filled, and "legitimate", nightclub. By 1942, when it was owned by Barney Welansky, a racketeer and gangster, major renovations gave access from Piedmont Street through huge, two-metre wide revolving doors, which opened into the spacious main floor. From there, elegant, wide steps took the free-spenders down to the Melody Lounge, with its enormous circular bar, tables and booths.

Spread around the lounge were dozens of huge, artificial palms, while the walls and ceiling were decorated with a tangle of exotic-looking vines — all made of paper and pre-Christmas tinsel.

But the Cocoanut Grove was a dead-end street — easy enough to get in but, as was proved on that fateful night, nigh impossible to get out. Apart from the main doors on Piedmont Street, there was an exit from an office at the back of the building onto Shawmutt Street. It had been "King" Solomon's secret get-away in the speak-easy days and few people knew of its existence — least of all the club's patrons.

Of the two other doors, one was hidden behind a screen and the other one, flanking the main revolving doors, was locked. As well, none of the doors had illuminated exit signs.

Because of the war-time black-out, most of the steel-framed windows, so small that only a child could get through each one, were boarded up.

By 10.10pm on that Saturday, about 550 people were crowded in the main floor, while about 350 others partied in the Melody Lounge.

It was probably the biggest crowd in the club's history — and it was more than twice the number for which it was licenced — 400.

Men from the Coastguard, Marines, soldiers and sailors had their numbers bolstered by the hordes of football fans.

Another large party, of

Cocoanut Grove horror

way over each other towards the main hall.

Within seconds, it was absolute pandemonium, as women screamed, tables were upturned and crockery and glassware crashed to the floor, while the fire leapt from artificial palm to artificial palm as though driven by a wind storm.

Then the lights went out, making the scene even more terrifying as the fire spread through the darkness. A new menace then emerged, as the fire-proofed, leather-covered walls caught fire, spewing toxic smoke into the room, choking

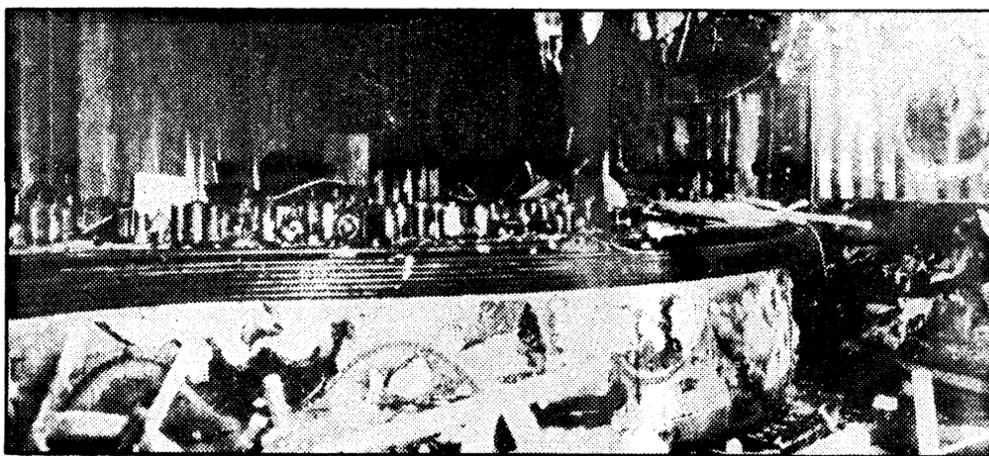
fied by those outside trying to drag them through.

A group of about 50 rushed to the kitchen, thinking there would be a back tradesmen's entrance. There wasn't, they were trapped and all perished.

In one of the few good luck stories to emerge from the tragedy, one couple, as they groped in the dark, touched a door handle. A voice on the other side called: "This is a refrigerator. Jump in quick. It's fireproof."

The three survived, as did several others, who, also through good luck, found their way to "King" Solomon's back door. But, unbelievably, they were confronted by a burly club employee, who barred their way with the ruling: "Nobody gets out of here without paying his bill." Needless to say, the hysterical rush rendered his stand futile.

Two chorus girls became trapped upstairs on the first floor. In a show more spectac-



The burnt-out bar of the club's Melody Lounge. Firemen found a group of drinkers, still seated on bar stools, with drinks in hands — but asphyxiated by smoke and fumes.

about 30, belonged to "Buck" Jones, a famous Hollywood cowboy star of the time. During the previous couple of months, he had travelled more than 6000 miles throughout the US, selling War Bonds and that night he should have been at a servicemen's club, half a mile away, selling more.

But he was exhausted and had cancelled that night's show to spend some time relaxing at the Cocoanut Grove.

At the edge of the Melody Lounge, in the dim light beneath one of the artificial palms, an amorous young man was about to kiss his girl friend. But he decided the area was too well lit — so he turned around and removed the light bulb from a coconut-husk lamp on the wall behind him, plunging his corner into darkness.

Within seconds, one of the barmen, 16-year-old Stanley Tomaszewskie, was sent to the corner to replace the bulb but the area was too dark for him to find the socket.

It was 10.12pm, as he lit a match to help him see. Some one or something bumped against him, causing his hand holding the match to come in contact with one of the artificial palms. Almost instantly, the flame roared up the tangled paper vines to quickly ignite the ceiling's flimsy tinsel and paper decorations.

As a girl's shrill cry of "fire" pierced the room, the 350 or so patrons crammed into the Melody Lounge began a wild stampede, as they fought their

and blinding the hundreds groping their way out.

Because there were no visible exit signs from the Melody Lounge, the crowd headed towards the main hall, where they knew they could get out through the revolving doors. As they did so, their numbers added to the stampede by the 550 or so who were already in the main hall.

As the human avalanche poured towards the double doors, hundreds of men and women were pushed, kicked, knocked down and trodden on by hundreds of others, as the frenzy in the dark gained a frightening momentum.

Then the most horrendous thing of all happened — the revolving doors stuck. The few people who had made it through and those who had gathered outside could only stare in abject horror at the bodies of more than 200 people, who were squashed up against the glass doors — their faces contorted with terror as they realised there was no way out.

With this way out blocked, the panic in the main hall grew. Those near the tiny, boarded-up windows somehow managed to rip away some of the boards and beat against the glass panes with their fists.

Some broke but the windows were so small that those who were able to get head and shoulders through found their stomachs impaled on shards of glass still held in the frames. Their agony was intensi-

ular than anything they had done on the Cocoanut Grove stage, they leaped from the window into the arms of two male dancers below.

Also upstairs, a 19-year-old chorus boy named Marshall Cook smashed open a window with a chair and led another 35 stage performers to safety across a neighboring roof.

But most of the stories to come out of that terrible night were tragic ones, like that of the club's cashier, Middle-aged, bespectacled Katherin Swett was one of the first to be swept to safety by the human tide. But, as she was being attended to, she suddenly stood up and cried: "The money, the money" and dashed back into the flames. Her charred body was later found next to the cash register holding \$1400.

If Miss Swett's valour had, in hindsight, been misdirected, others' actions were awe-inspiring. The head waiter, Frank Balyim, ran back into the flames time after time to drag out anyone he could find. In the end, he collapsed and died of exhaustion.

The Hollywood cowboy, Buck Jones, made a heroic stand, worthy of a movie script, as he desperately tried to force open what he thought was a door leading to the outside. But, in the end, he and most of his party died from burns and suffocation.

Among the few survivors of his party was a Boston journalist, Martin Sheridan, who later gave this account: "It was smokey, noisy and uncom-



Buck Jones, famed Hollywood cowboy star, who staged a heroic fight to lead his 30 or so guests to safety — but he and most of them perished.

fortably warm in the club. We had just been served with an oyster cocktail when, above the babble... suddenly someone at the end of our table screamed 'fire'. Then I heard the loud crackling of flames consuming the tropical decorations. A cloud of black smoke surged across the room like a tidal wave.

"No need to get excited. I thought. Just keep calm, get up casually and walk to the nearest exit. But where was the nearest exit?"

"The exits were not identified or illuminated. I stood up, advised the others to 'take it easy' and took a couple of steps. Then the lights went out for me and many others, literally and figuratively. I began to choke from the toxic fumes which swept through the place.

"I felt myself sinking slowly to the floor, falling on the people in front of me. The last thing I recall were the chilling screams and cries of nearly 1000 horrified men and women, and the crash and clatter from breaking dishes and over-turned tables.

"The world caved in on me in a matter of seconds."

It took 40 minutes before the fire was brought under control and, as the firemen smashed their way inside, they came across the most horrific scenes. Behind the revolving door, the entrance was blocked by a pile of crushed, broken and charred bodies almost three metres deep and stretching back almost five metres.

At the bar, they were shocked to see a group of customers sitting on their stools, their hands wrapped around their drinks. By torchlight, amid the smouldering and water-glistening charcoal ruins that was now the club, they looked so relaxed that it took the firemen a second or two to realise that they were not alive but perfectly preserved victims of asphyxiation by smoke and fumes.

Elsewhere, the inside of the club was utter devastation. The main floor had collapsed into the basement, taking hundreds of both the living and the dead to a temporary grave.

Outside the club pandemonium reigned. Martial law was immediately declared for the whole area, with every available serviceman called in for duty. Ambulances had raced from nearby Charlestown Naval Yard and Chelsea Hospital, but they weren't enough, so huge post office trucks and lorries were pressed into service, as well as taxis and private cars.

Motorists were flagged down and asked to give blood for immediate transfusions. In Shawmutt Street, a garage was turned into a temporary morgue, with bodies stacked

two deep, while scores of other victims were piled in hospital lobbies. As victims were being delivered every 11 seconds, hospital staff checked for vital signs then quickly turned aside to tend to those who still had the chance to live.

By dawn, the official number of dead was given as 300, but there were almost another 200 who were dying of their shocking injuries. By the time the toll finally reached 491, the Cocoanut Grove tragedy was ranked as the third worst fire disaster in American history after the 603 who were incinerated in Chicago's Iriquo Theatre fire in 1903 and the estimated 500 who perished in the fires that followed the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

The subsequent investigation of the Cocoanut Grove fire revealed an appalling saga of negligence by city officials and the owner, Barney Welansky. The Melody Lounge had been built without planning permission, electrical work had been carried out by unlicensed workers, there were no exit signs, no emergency lighting and no automatic fire sprinklers.

Nor did the club carry public liability insurance. The fire sent it broke and those companies owed money waived their claims so that whatever assets remained could go to the victims or their families. It didn't amount to much, with the average compensation being only \$80.

Several city officials, including high-ranking fire and police officers, were indicted but the only person who went to jail was Welansky, who got 12 to 15 years for manslaughter. He served only three years, seven months, however, and was released in November, 1946, to die four months later of cancer.

Soon after, the rubble of the Cocoanut Grove was cleared and turned into a car park — as though the people of Boston wanted to erase the haunting memory of those screams of terror on that dreadful Saturday night.