



Belmont Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

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Coconut Grove Fire 1942

Last month marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the fire that swept through the popular Coconut Grove supper club in Boston resulting in close to 500 fatalities. The tragedy remains the second deadliest single building fire in American history. This newsletter will recall the events surrounding that fateful night, as well as highlight the story of several local Belmont residents that were directly touched by those events.

The Cocoanut Grove was situated near Park Square in Boston on Piedmont Street which runs from Arlington to Broadway. The location in close proximity to Boston's theatre district made it a great place to stop in, for a bite to eat before, or a drink after a show. "The restaurant was visited on occasion by movie and music stars, who would have their entrance announced by the maitre d." The retractable roof could be opened in the summer months for dancing under the stars to live show bands. The interior was decorated in the style of a south seas "tropical paradise" with support columns in the main area made to look like palm trees and the light fixtures disguised as coconuts.



The "Grove" originally opened in the late 1920's as a partnership between two orchestra leaders. After several years in decline the establishment became popular again during the early 1940's featuring a restaurant, regular floor show entertainment and piano playing in the downstairs Melody Lounge.

The events that took place on the evening of November 28, 1942 are well documented. Being thanksgiving weekend, football was taking place everywhere, including a match up between Boston College, hoping to secure a bowl game invitation, with a predicted win over Holy Cross. The stadium was packed and parties were all planned for players and fans ready to meet at the Cocoanut Grove to celebrate. Servicemen and draftees were in town for a chance to get together with friends before being shipped out to aid in the war efforts and the theatre crowd was on hand including Hollywood cowboy star Buck Jones, who was visiting Boston as part of a cross country tour promoting War Bonds. The total number of patrons that evening was estimated to be about 1000 all gathered in a space with an official capacity of 460. Only one in four would escape the flames, smoke and stampede without injury or death.

The large crowd was waiting for the start of the 10pm show when the fire which began in the lower level inside the Melody Lounge, spread upstairs and exploded like a fireball across the dining room. Reports from the scene described the panic as patrons rushed to find exits in the blackout that was created by an immediate power outage.

The escape was complicated by the deadly combination of the rapid spread of the flames, intense heat and toxic smoke. First hand accounts confirm the chaos was immediate. Many became unconscious in minutes after breathing in the thick smoke that was generated from the combustible decorations, cloth draperies, and highly flammable furnishings. It is estimated that more people died from respiratory failure than were killed from burns. Despite the fact that the five alarm fire was said to have been extinguished quickly, piles of bodies were crushed inside the single revolving door and had to be stacked outside on the streets to engage in rescue efforts. A temporary morgue was set up in a nearby building where volunteers worked to identify the deceased. The task was made more difficult because most of the women's purses were found separated from their bodies.



The cause of the blaze was officially listed as of "unknown origin" but several theories exist. The most widely circulated seems to be that a sixteen year old busboy was ordered by the bartender to replace a light bulb near the ceiling in the Melody Lounge. The bulb was believed to have been unscrewed by a patron to create more privacy for him and his sweetheart in a back booth. The busboy lit a match to help find the socket and flames were seen immediately after that in the artificial palm tree branches and quickly spread up the stairway to the main floor. Despite the fact that the teenager was later exonerated, Stanley Tomaszewski was ostracized for the rest of his life. Other theories include faulty electrical work done in the Melody Lounge a few weeks earlier by non-licensed personnel or a short circuit in the neon tubing running along the bar creating spontaneous combustion. Attempts were said to have been made by the club's employees to extinguish the flames with water but the blaze was described as "no ordinary fire."

Ironically, the night of the Cocoanut Grove fire the club's owner Mr. Barney Welansky was recovering from a heart attack at Mass General Hospital where many of the victims were brought to be treated following the disaster. It was said that as a property owner Welansky would: "lock exits, conceal others with draperies, and even

bricked up one emergency exit to prevent customers from leaving without paying." Mr. Welansky was later charged and convicted of manslaughter in the deaths of 492 people and with numerous building code and safety violations. He served four years of his 12-15 year prison sentence before being parolled.

The events of that night at the Cocoanut Grove brought together responders from the following departments who all worked tirelessly: firefighters from 39 units, 930 police officers, volunteers from the Coast Guard and Military Police, Civil Defense workers, members of the Red Cross, taxi cab drivers to transport the survivors and priests to administer last rites to the deceased.

The majority of the victims were taken to the Boston City Hospital, with others transported to Massachusetts General Hospital. As a result of the disaster experimental methods were implemented for the treatment of wounds suffered by burn victims and the administration of the "new" antibiotic penecillin to fight infections, was prescribed with success.

The Cocoanut Grove fire of November 28, 1942 left its mark on a generation and it was reported that: "in the aftermath following the holocaust, funerals were held throughout New England and many families and communities struggled to regain their sense of well being after such a tragedy." Belmont was also personally touched by the events that took place at the popular Cocoanut Grove. The following stories of the members of this community seemed quite representative of the larger effects that were felt all across the region.



Belmont residents Oliver and Josephine St. Pierre were among those who perished as a result of the Cocoanut Grove disaster leaving their two young daughters, Lorraine (14) and Barbara (12) as orphans. Mr. St. Pierre died at the scene although his body was not positively identified until two days later. The cause on his Death Certificate was listed as "carbon monoxide poison and inhalation of smoke at the holocaust." The couple previously lived at 76 Tobey Road, but at the time of the fire their address was 64 Statler Road. Belmont Resident Lists identify Mr. St. Pierre as a commercial artist who worked as the Director of the

Art Department in the the Metropolitan Theatre in Boston for fifteen years. Known at the time as "the Met", the theatre was considered "a vital part of Boston's cultural life and the anchor of Boston's theatre district." Built in 1925 the historic building is located on Tremont Street and since 1983 has been known as The Wang Theatre. His wake was held at his home on Statler Road with funeral services following at Saint Joseph's Church on Common Street. Mr. St. Pierre was also a member of the Massachusetts State Guard and members of that organization served as pallbearers for the casket. Oliver was survived by two sisters from Fall River and two brothers, one who lived in Milton and the other in Saugus.

Oliver's wife, Josephine, who suffered burns and smoke inhalation, survived in the hospital for about ten days before she succumbed to acute hemorrhage and nephritis. She died on Decemer 7, 1942 and following arrangements made by funeral director William Hickey and services at St Joseph's Church, Mrs. St. Pierre was buried with her husband in Lot 92, Section J in the Belmont Cemetery. Before she died she told family members that on the night of the fire she watched in horror as her husband seemed to "burst into flames." Josephine St. Pierre had one brother and four sisters, who lived in the surrounding towns of Malden, Wakefield, Reading and Melrose. Her sister, Mrs. Helen Frank (of Wakefield) was tasked with picking up Josephine's personal belongings and reported her platinum wristwatch, five diamond wedding ring and engagement ring were all missing.



The St. Pierre's were part of a group who were attending a dinner for motion picture star Buck Jones, who was persuaded by his agent to go to the Cocoanut Grove that night. Jones who appeared in more than 160 films throughout the 1920's, 30's and early 40's was later honored by movie actor John Wayne. In a statement made in 1970, we learn that according to Wayne, on the night of November 28, 1942, Jones "went into the fire to help people." Buck Jones survived for two days after the Cocoanut Grove fire before finally succumbing to burns he suffered that night.

Charles S. Hirtle of 673 Belmont Street also died as a result of the Cocoanut Grove fire on November 28, 1942. The cause of death was listed as "flame burns-conflagration." It was his sister Margurite who was later called to Massachusetts General Hosptal to identify the body. Charles, who had lived in Belmont for nine years, was a 1935



graduate of near-by Waltham High School before attending Bryant and Stratton Business School in Boston. At age 26 Hirtle worked as an accountant in the food processing industry and was actively employed by the Colonial Provision Company. Born in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Charles and his Canadian family had decided to resettle to Belmont, Massachusetts. Charles entered the Cocoanut Grove establishment on the fateful night with his fiancé Sirkka Lindgren of 51 Riverdale Street in Allston who also died in the tragedy. Funeral arrangements were made for Mr. Hirtle by Short and Williamson, but the couple was eulogized in a joint service on Wednesday December 3rd at the University Lutheran Church in Cambridge with the Reverend Edmund Steinlie officiating. Charles Hirtel was scheduled to enter the Army the following week and be shipped out for basic training.



Joining the couple that evening was Marjorie Thompson who also resided at the time in Belmont. Originally from Minnesota, Marjorie was living at 70 Bow Road with her aunt and uncle. Professor Harry Tosdal and his wife Ruth were relieved to find that following the fire Marjorie was reported in fair condition by officials at Boston City Hospital. Marjorie, who was on the east coast to attend business school at Bryant and Stratton, miraculously survived the ordeal. When interviewed about the events, Miss Thompson said that she owed her life to the fact that she had just gone to the ladies room and was away from the flames and the worst of the thick smoke. Her date that night was Robert Derbyshire from neighboring Waltham who tragically lost his life. Robert Derbyshire was a graduate of Waltham High School's class of 1938 and later attended Lincoln Tech which was affiliated with Northeastern University. The family was well known in Waltham and both father and son were involved in the family business, F. W. Derbyshire Inc. The company manufactured tools and made lathe and precision parts for the watch industry in the City of Waltham. At the time of his death Robert was both Treasurer and General Manager and left behind his grieving father Frederick W. Derbyshire, mother Jessie (McCone) and siblings Richard and Donna.

Mr. and Mrs. Gibson of 40 Selwyn Road were a couple from Belmont that survived the Cocoanut Grove tragedy. No specific details are known about how they were able to exit the crowded building, but we do know that the couple was reported to have been transported to Massachusetts General Hospital where Montgomery, New England Sales Manager for Groveland Paper Company, and his wife Ruth were both treated for smoke inhalation and officially listed in fair condition.

Herbert W. Haines wasn't so lucky. Born in England near Windsor Castle he was the son of Henry and Edith (Watson) Haines of 21 Falmouth Street. Herbert graduated from Belmont High School as a member of the class of 1935 before going on to attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Haines was then employed by the General Electric Company in Lynn as a draftsman.



On November 28, 1942 Herbert arrived at the Cocoanut Grove Club after attending an office going away party for a co-worker who was scheduled to leave for the service, so his wife of less than a year, Edna (Nickerson) Haines, was not with him.

In the chaos that ensued following the outbreak of the fire, Herbert was killed when he was trapped in the crush of the revolving door that marked the main exit onto Peidmont Street. A funeral was held at the First Church in Belmont on December 3rd with Pastor Henry Wilder Foote conducting the service. Since Herbert was a member of the Belmont Chapter of DeMolay, a local delegation of members from that organization were in attendance. Herbert W. Haines was buried in Plot 119, Section J of the Belmont Cemetery.

Herbert's father Henry was a well known sculler in England who was at one time the record holder for the fastest time over a mile. He moved here in the 1920's when his uncle was the head coach of the sport at Harvard University in Cambridge. Henry went on to serve as the Assistant Coach at the institution for over thirty years.

Funeral services were also held here in Belmont for a couple of "out of towners" who died in the Cocoanut Grove fire. Mrs. T. Joseph O'Neil of 90 Chester Road held a wake at her home for her sister Mrs. Martha McDonough. A few days later on December 3rd a 10am Mass was conducted at Our Lady of Mercy Church by the Reverend Charles Maguire before Mrs. McDonough was buried in West Roxbury. Apparently Martha had also just arrived at the popular night spot when the fire broke out and was found still wearing her fur coat. Husband William McDonough, who was stationed at the Newport Naval Training Station in Rhode Island, was called to identify his wife and claim her possessions. Reported missing from her body were a \$200 diamond watch, a \$250 wedding ring and a \$1200 diamond engagement ring. Her purse was recovered with only 92 cents left in the wallet.

Miss Helen S. O'Brien was the nineteen year old sister of Belmont resident Mrs. Albert Hoban of 12 Burnham Street and the daughter of Dennis and Delia (Keane) O'Brien. Helen who died in the tragedy was survived by two brothers and seven sisters. Funeral services were held for the teenager on December 3rd with a 8:15am Mass at St. Patricks Church on Mt. Auburn Street in nearby Watertown and she was later buried in Waltham.

The Belmont Citizen published a few days after the fire on December 4th included an article on the front page that reported on the events of November 28th and the Belmont victims as follows: "Feeling its share of the horror of Saturday night's Cocoanut Grove mass tragedy, Belmont this week buried its dead, prayed for its injured and praised the aid given after the Boston night club fire by its nurses, doctors, civil defense workers and ordinary citizens."

Benjamin Wheaton of 86 Tobey Road was at the Cocoanut Grove with his wife and Arlington contractor Joseph Kelly when the fire broke out. He explained that it was his wife Frances who was the first to notice that something was wrong when she heard a commotion. Because the trio acted quickly before the general panic began, the Wheatons were able to "pass through the revolving door without much difficulty." Mr. Kelly however, who had stepped aside to allow Mrs. Wheaton to go first, was pushed over a railing and fell onto a table. The extra time that it took him to recover exposed him to the thick black smoke causing him to suffer respiratory distress as he fought to make his way out onto the street.

Mr. Benjamin Wheaton shared his account of the events that took place at the popular nightspot when he was asked to testify before Attorney General Robert Bushnell. In his own words we learn that: "We did not try to get a seat. We came in through a revolving door on Piedmont Street and passed along through the main room to the lounge bar, sat there a while and went into the main room to dance. Then Mrs. Wheaton said that she thought there was some type of an argument. I looked up and saw smoke coming from the Melody Lounge. Even then as we went to the exit on Broadway Street there was a jam of people. That smoke rolled up as a wave would roll in from the ocean." He also remembered the fire department using sledges to break through the glass windows and brick walls.

WHEATON MOTOR COMPANY	
Pontiac Sales	and Service
309 Trapelo Road	
	BELMONT, MASS.
Tel. Belmont 3528	Tel. Belmont 3528

JANUARY 1939						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
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8	9	10	11	12	13	14
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22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

Benjamin Wheaton was the owner of Wheaton Motor Company, Inc. located for many years at 307-311 Trapelo Road in Belmont. He and his wife were lucky to survive the ordeal. Frances was a lifelong resident of Belmont who had grown up on Henry Street as a "Murphy" before marrying Benjamin on September 6, 1926.

The Belmont Citizen reports, "Another person who missed death or serious injury by a matter of a few seconds was Miss Barbara Harrington of 76 Palfrey Road with her escort Paul Jones of Arlington. The couple dropped in at the Cocoanut Grove Saturday night to hear a special singer in the floor show. There were no tables available, and because the head waiter insisted that they check their coats they left for elsewhere. They had only reached the corner of the block when smoke and injured people began pouring from the nightclub door. The couple turned back to assist those who were burned and Barbara made several trips with the ambulance to various hospitals."

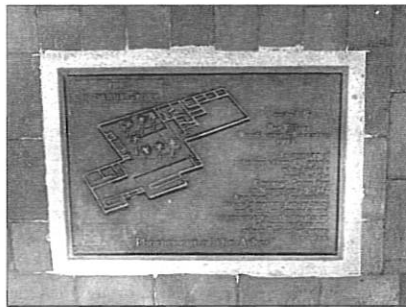
Belmont resident Dr. William Morrison of 31 Payson Terrace was on duty that Saturday night at the Boston City Hospital. As senior surgeon he described the scene as "worse than anything I saw at the base hospitals in France in World War I." Reports indicate that after one month, the survival rate for the dozens of people taken to Boston City Hospital for treatment that night was only about 30%.

George M. Packard remembers being told by his father about the Cocoanut Grove fire. George A. Packard, a long time Belmont resident who at the time lived in the Cushing Square area, was coming home from working late and was made aware of the events first hand as emergency crews were engaged in efforts to extinguish the blaze, rescue victims, transport the injured and identify the dead. The city was in an uproar! As a result of the Cocoanut Grove Fire many important fire safety laws were implemented. Doors leading to the street must open out, all revolving doors must be flanked by regular exit doors for ease of access, and lighting which illuminates the route to marked exits must be wired on separate circuits in case there is a power failure.

Another Belmont family touched by the events were George and Katheryn Winterson of 209 Trapelo Road. Their son Rick who was six years old at the time recently recalled that early the next morning his father, who was employed by U. S. Trust in Boston,

received a phone call that his boss Mr. Carl H. Thorpe who was Vice President of the bank had died in the fire. George was quite shaken by the news and always recalled how wonderful Mr. Thorpe had been to work for.

The night of November 28, 1942 the Town of Belmont received a “teletype” request around 10:45pm and immediately mobilized aid to help with the disaster. Police Chief William Heyd and several officers “went to the night club with the local ambulance and worked hard and long through the night at the gruesome task of helping move victims to morgues and hospitals.” Local reports also indicate that more than 20 nurses from Belmont offered their skills and were sent to Boston hospitals to help care for the injured. In addition Red Cross workers and members of Belmont’s Women’s Defense Corps. were mobilized.



In 1993 the Bay Village Neighborhood Association set a bronze plaque titled; “Phoenix out of the Ashes” in the sidewalk nearby the site of the once popular establishment in Boston. The inscription reads: “In Memory of the more than 490 people who died in the Cocoanut Grove fire on November 28, 1942.” In the lower left corner we find: “This monument was crafted by Anthony P. Marra, the youngest survivor.”

A second marker (at right) is attached to a building in the area and was placed by The Bostonian Society. It also commemorates the tragic events. More recently on November 30, 2013 the short cobblestone street running along the back of the buildings that now occupy the site was renamed Cocoanut Grove Lane. (back)



Although last month marked the seventy-fifth year since the tragic incident, stories like the ones in this newsletter remain fresh in the minds of the victims and their families who at the time were compensated a mere \$150.00. As a result of that terrible tragedy and the fire that has been called “the perfect storm,” major changes have been made in the fire codes and improvements in the treatment of burn victims, not only in Boston, but across the nation to ensure that in this case, history will not repeat itself.

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I would like to become a member of the Belmont Historical Society.

I enclose \$ _____ for a _____ membership.

Name: _____

Address _____

Phone _____ e-mail _____

Dues are paid annually. Individual Member, \$20.00; Family Membership, \$35.00; Sponsor, \$75.00; Corporate member, \$200.00; Life Membership, \$250.00
Please make checks payable to the Belmont Historical Society and mail to the same in care of the Belmont Memorial Library, P.O. Box 125, Belmont, MA 02478

POSTSCRIPT



This Newsletter would not have been possible without the hours of research and fact checking done by George M. Packard. His assistance has been invaluable.

He was aided by staff members at the Public Libraries in Belmont, Milton, Wakefield and Watertown and by Taylor Silva Head of Reference Services at Fall River Public Library. Additionally George was able to access vital records for this article with the help of those in the Belmont Town Clerk's Office. A big thank you goes out to all!

For more information about this article or to find out how you can become involved in the Belmont Historical Society, please contact us at www.belmonthistoricalsociety.org or belmonthistory1859@gmail.com

FROM THE EDITOR

Please send ideas, items of interest and bits of nostalgia for future issues of the Newsletter to your editor Viktoria Haase, P.O. Box 125, Belmont MA 02478