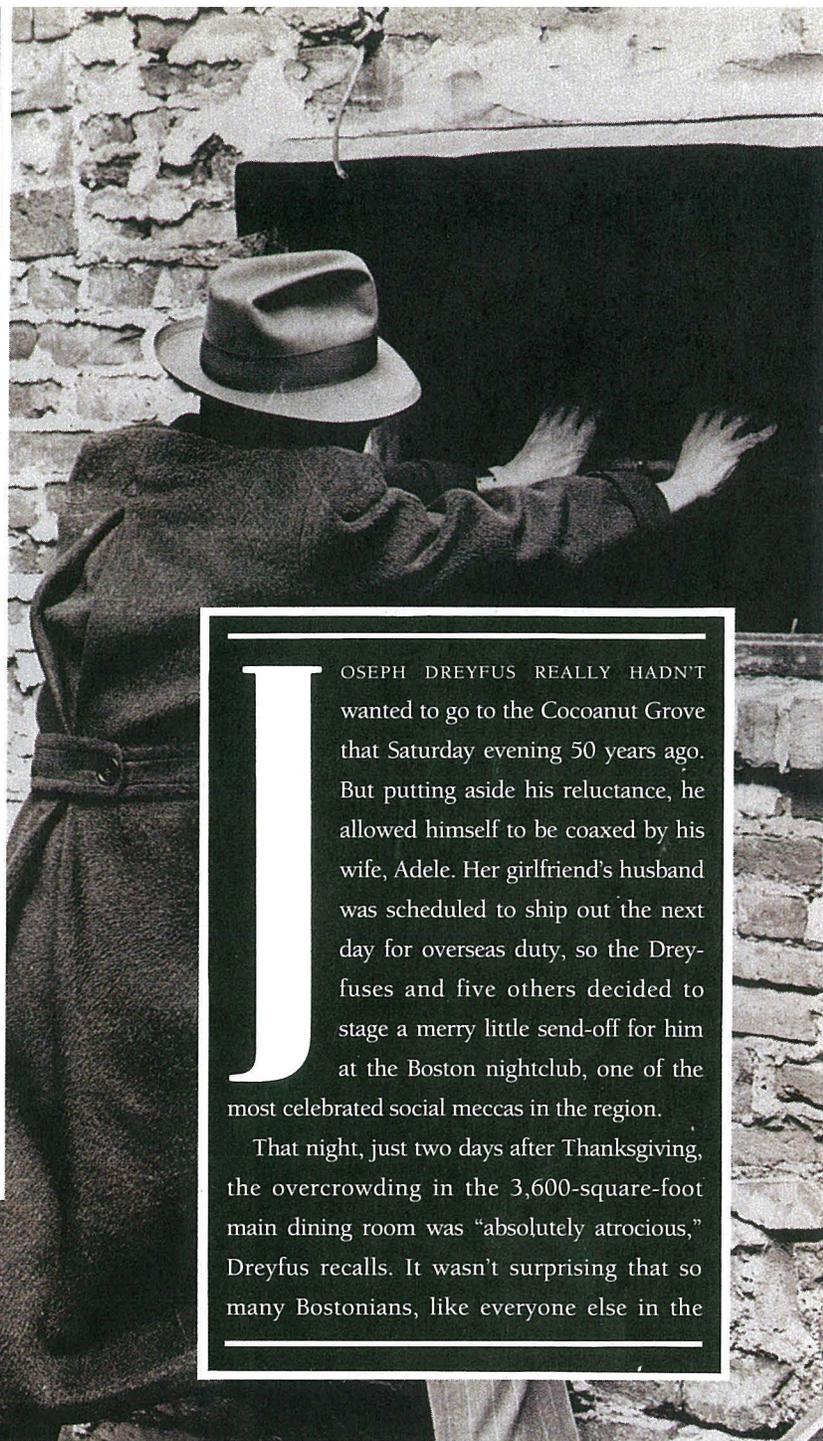


# No Way Out

Fifty years ago,  
Boston was stunned by one  
of the worst disasters in the  
nation's history: the fire  
at the Coconut Grove, where for  
492 men and women a night  
of merrymaking ended in death.

BY JUDY BASS





**J**OSEPH DREYFUS REALLY HADN'T wanted to go to the Cocoanut Grove that Saturday evening 50 years ago. But putting aside his reluctance, he allowed himself to be coaxed by his wife, Adele. Her girlfriend's husband was scheduled to ship out the next day for overseas duty, so the Dreyfuses and five others decided to stage a merry little send-off for him at the Boston nightclub, one of the most celebrated social meccas in the region.

That night, just two days after Thanksgiving, the overcrowding in the 3,600-square-foot main dining room was "absolutely atrocious," Dreyfus recalls. It wasn't surprising that so many Bostonians, like everyone else in the

AFTER THE FIRE, DEBRIS LITTERS THE SIDEWALK OUTSIDE THE COCOANUT GROVE (LEFT). THE DEAD AND THE DYING (ABOVE, LEFT). A REPORTER EXAMINES A BASEMENT WINDOW THROUGH WHICH SEVERAL PEOPLE ESCAPED (ABOVE, RIGHT). A MOTHER ASKS AFTER HER SON, WHO DIDN'T COME HOME (BELOW, RIGHT).





THE SOOT AROUND THE NOSES AND MOUTHS OF THESE VICTIMS IS RESIDUE FROM TOXIC DUST THAT CAUSED MANY DEATHS.

country, were seeking lighthearted entertainment to escape momentarily from the rigors of World War II, which had darkened everyone's life.

With the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor a little more than a week away, the revelers at the Cocoanut Grove were looking for an evening away from such realities as the rationing of sugar, butter, and coffee. The usually abundant supply of Thanksgiving turkeys had been scarce and was yet another reminder of how nothing could any longer be taken for granted. On area shorelines, volunteers were maintaining vigils to guard against approaching enemy aircraft or naval forces.

In those days before television, football weekends were carefree times filled with the smell of fall and a flourish of romance. With the war on, a heightened sense of immediacy added to the excitement and made those weekends even more precious.

The day had begun on a jubilant note as thousands of sports fans flocked to Fenway Park to witness the season's foremost collegiate football matchup, which pitted the Boston College Eagles against the Holy Cross Crusaders. BC's undefeated squad had seemed certain to trounce its opponents, and an official celebration had been planned at the Cocoanut Grove.

Instead, the Eagles took a 55-12 drubbing. The Grove gala was canceled, of course, but many of the spectators went there anyway.

There were plenty of diversions in Boston that weekend. The other nightclubs, the Latin Quarter and the Mayfair, were busy, as were the Scollay Square burlesque houses and the local movie theaters where *Flying Tigers*, with John Wayne, and *Road to Morocco*, starring Bob Hope, were playing.

As the evening progressed at the Cocoanut Grove, an ebullient mood prevailed despite the crowded conditions. Although the Dreyfus party had reserved its table in advance, they had a frustrating wait while the Grove staff worked to seat the people still pouring in for the delayed 10 o'clock floor show. Over on

the bandstand, the men of Mickey Alpert's orchestra had been restlessly fidgeting for 20 minutes while extra tables were set up for the incoming throng. It seemed absurd, Joseph Dreyfus reflected, to put eight adults at a table suited for two . . .

At that precise minute, 10:20 p.m., Dreyfus and the hundreds of other fun seekers had no warning that in the next few moments the second-deadliest fire in American history would engulf them and leave 492 dead. (Only the 1903 Iroquois Theater fire, in Chicago, with 602 fatalities, was more devastating.)

The cataclysmic blaze first stunned and then outraged the public, instigated a massive nationwide revamping of fire codes, and superseded all the wartime headlines for weeks, especially

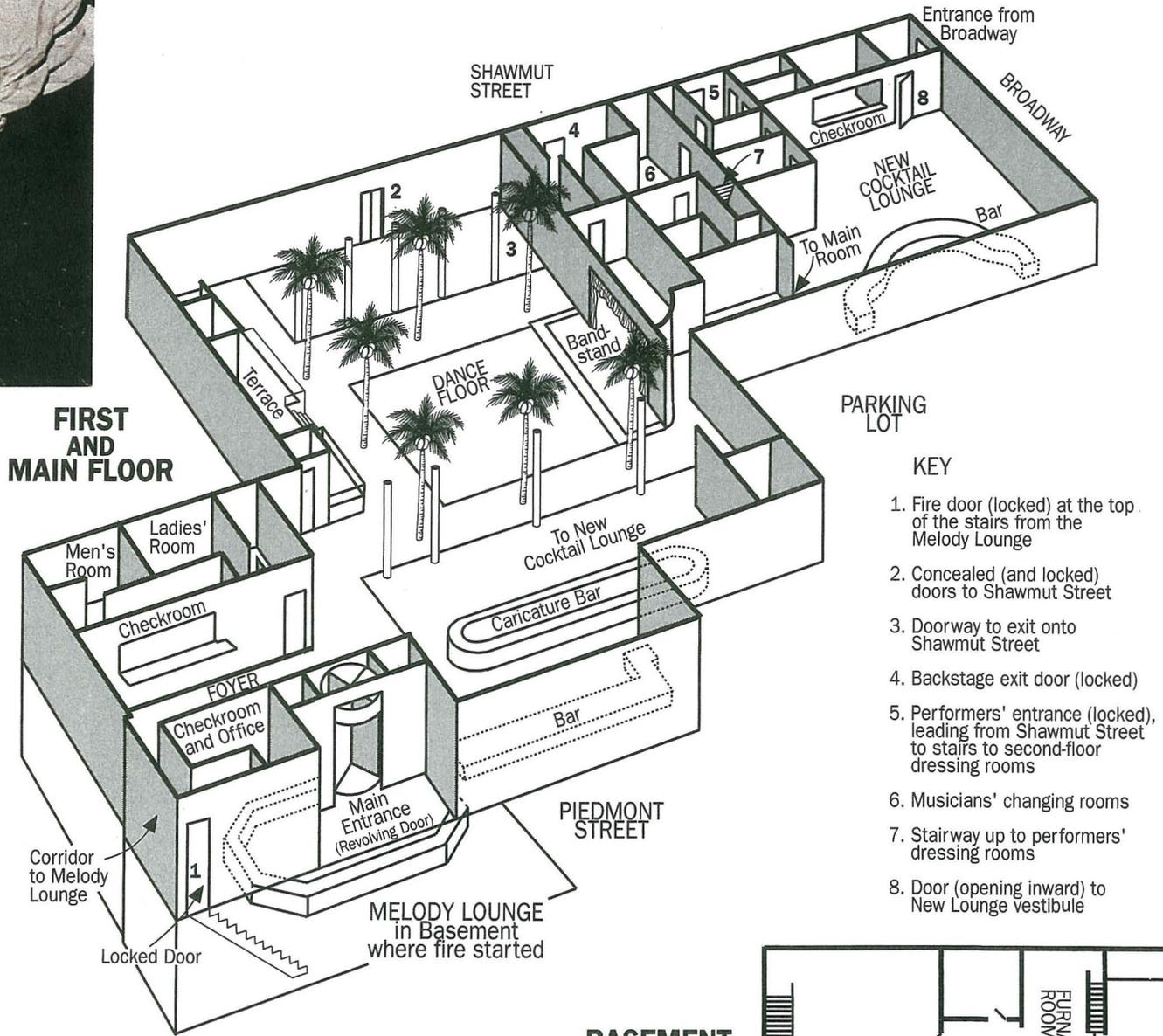
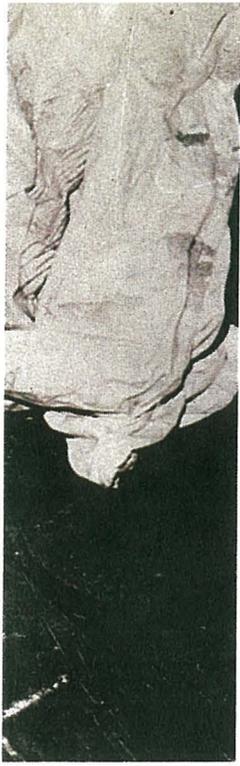
## Inevitably, someone tripped, and the next person fell, and then it was impossible to get out.

in Massachusetts. And as the details became known, a widespread perception developed that the disaster might have been minimized or even averted if the Cocoanut Grove's management had been more prudent.

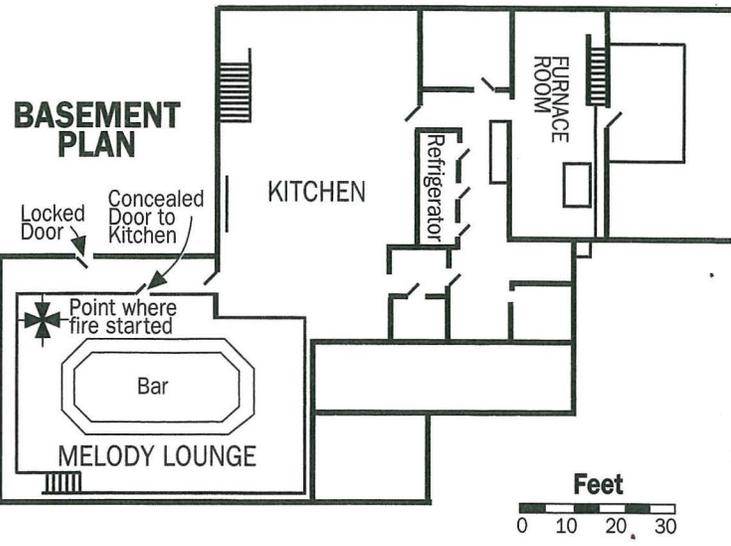
Why had approximately 1,000 people been allowed to enter an establishment licensed to seat 460? Why were six exits either locked or impassable? Why hadn't the safety of the Grove's furnishings been a priority? "The draperies, [artificial] trees, and all the stuff we had there was flammable," recalled the late Henrietta Siegel, who danced at the Cocoanut Grove under the name Pepper Russell. "How did we know? Who thought about drapes?"

After November 28, 1942, a bereaved and angry city would think of little else but such questions.

# Blueprint for an Inferno



- KEY**
1. Fire door (locked) at the top of the stairs from the Melody Lounge
  2. Concealed (and locked) doors to Shawmut Street
  3. Doorway to exit onto Shawmut Street
  4. Backstage exit door (locked)
  5. Performers' entrance (locked), leading from Shawmut Street to stairs to second-floor dressing rooms
  6. Musicians' changing rooms
  7. Stairway up to performers' dressing rooms
  8. Door (opening inward) to New Lounge vestibule



LOCATED AT 17 PIEDMONT STREET, ON THE EDGE OF BOSTON'S South End, the sprawling one-story nightclub showcased renowned performers in an atmosphere characterized by exotic tropical motifs, offbeat touches, and opulent glamour. It was a prospering place. Only a few days earlier, the Grove had opened an inviting new cocktail lounge on its Broadway side.

Passing beneath the Grove's front-entrance marquee through a revolving door, patrons walked into the main dining room. Seven tall fake palm trees ringed the dance floor, and to the right stood the 48-foot-long Caricature Bar, bedecked with whimsical drawings of notable people. Bassist Jack Lesberg, who was a member of the orchestra that night and is still a working musician, remembers the palm trees as being "dry as tinderboxes."

On the ceiling, yards and yards of billowing blue satin concealed a retractable roof that could be rolled back to reveal nighttime skies during balmy weather.

That Saturday, the club's usual clientele was joined by scores of giddy postgame sports buffs, military men on Thanksgiving furlough, and war workers toting overtime paychecks. Whenever influential patrons arrived, says Lesberg, the Grove's staff

cial coconut husk on a palm tree. He used a match to find the socket, then blew it out and carefully stamped it under his foot. Immediately afterward, a tiny halo of flame blossomed in the cloth-draped ceiling right above the tree.

Suddenly, the Melody Lounge's congenial hubbub was disrupted by someone shrieking, "There's a fire in that corner over there!" Weiss glanced up, noticed the enlarging flames, and hastily armed Tomaszewski with glasses of water to douse them. Unfortunately, few others were aware of what was happening, so the oblivious group barely parted to let him pass.

"Within one or two minutes," Weiss says, "people in the whole room began to know it was bad, and they began stampeding to the stairway. Inevitably, someone tripped, and then the next one fell on top of that one, and then it was impossible."

## The draperies, the artificial trees, everything was flammable. How did they know? Who thought about drapes?

would somehow or other find room to shoehorn them in. On this particular occasion, chorus-line captain Jackie Maver recalls, she crept downstairs from her dressing room just before show time to see how much floor space would be available for her dancers. The answer was, not much. Bustling waiters were adding so many tables and chairs that the dance floor was partially obscured.

In the Grove's basement gathering spot called the Melody Lounge, cashier Daniel Weiss, nephew of club owner Barnet Welansky, hurried to keep pace with the overflow crowd. Amid the crush of people, 16-year-old busboy Stanley Tomaszewski took a minute to replace a small light bulb encased in an arti-

Panicked customers kept darting frantically toward the narrow stairs that were the Melody Lounge's single direct means of reaching the first floor—shoving, toppling furniture, and wailing in alarm as they ran. Screams erupted when the fire streaked across the ceiling, igniting everything overhead. Finally, the lights failed, plunging the hellish scene into terrifying blackness.

Safety eluded almost all of them. Like many of the Coconut Grove's doors, an emergency exit onto Piedmont Street at the top of the stairs was firmly bolted shut, and a heavy-tongue brass lock had been added for further security. Permanently sealing off doorways ensured that no riffraff gained entry to the

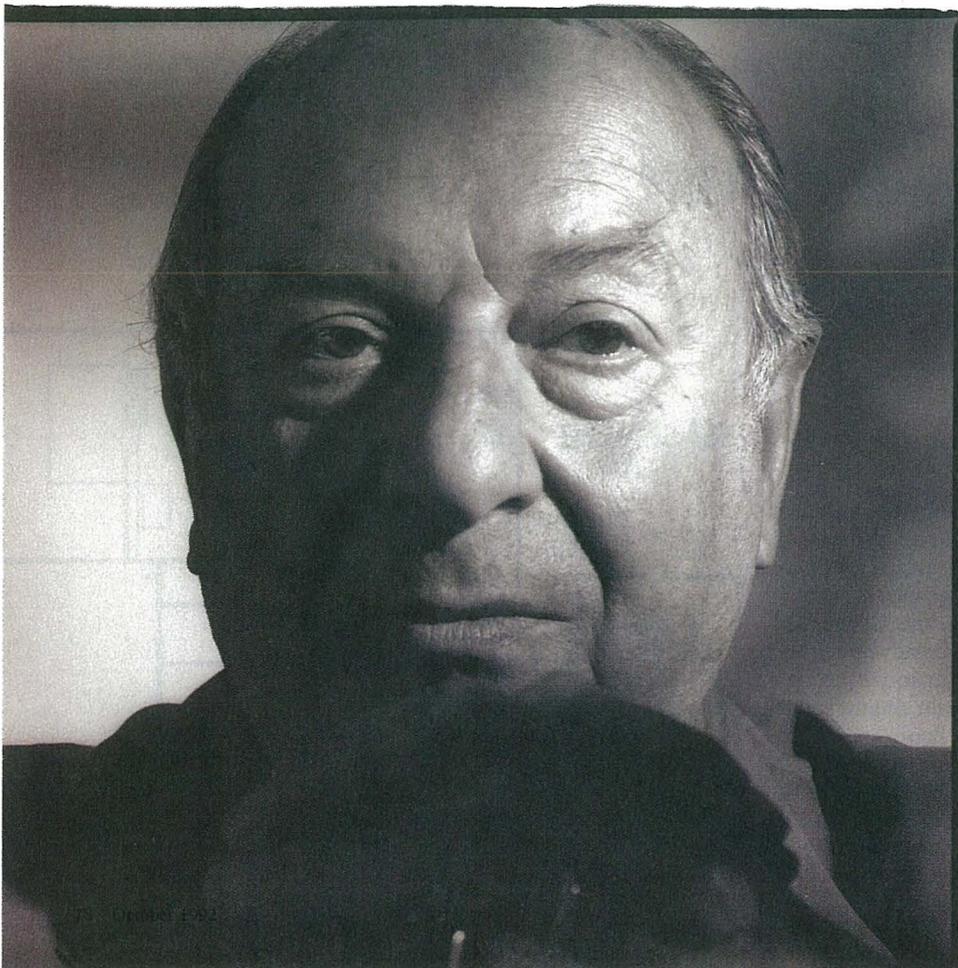
Grove and that customers couldn't meander out before paying the tab. Also, it permitted 4,100 cases of liquor upon which federal taxes hadn't been paid to remain undetected in the basement. The place was closed as tight as a coffin.

Nothing emphasized this more clearly than the horrendous scenario playing itself out in the Melody Lounge. Surrounded by choking black smoke, people struggled for their last breath as they limply fell on the stairs or near the locked door. The fire, however, burgeoned after claiming its first fatalities. Constituted wholly of burning gases including carbon monoxide, a blazing mass hovered at ceiling level devouring oxygen. The tremendous heat and pressure built up under the confined conditions drove that fiery cloud to its sole possible outlet—the stairwell, which served as an ideal chimney.

Throughout those first three minutes of bedlam, Daniel Weiss crouched near the floor inside the bar, a wet cloth held over his face so he could breathe. With

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SURVIVOR DANIEL WEISS, NOW A PSYCHIATRIST IN WELLESLEY, WORKED AS A CASHIER IN THE CLUB'S MELODY LOUNGE.





THERE WAS NO INCRIMINATING EVIDENCE AGAINST BUSBOY STANLEY TOMASZEWSKI, WHO WAS SAID TO HAVE ACCIDENTALLY STARTED THE FIRE.

a shudder, he tried not to think about what might be happening in the main dining room.

"THERE WAS A HUM IN THE ROOM ABOUT TRYING TO GET GOING BECAUSE we were running so late," says Jack Lesberg. "The orchestra was finally standing up and at attention, ready to start quickly. The first thing I noticed was some unusual excitement near the lobby. It was hard to tell what it was."

Perilously unaware of the cause of this commotion, musical director and violinist Bernie Fazioli instructed the musicians to play something peppy—like "Alexander's Ragtime Band"—to distract the audience. No sooner had they started than a garbled shout sounding like "Fight!" was heard near the Piedmont Street front entrance. Within moments, a sizzling fireball barreled across the foyer from downstairs. "People seemed to be really rushing around then," Lesberg recalls. "Men were standing up, exclaiming, 'What is it? Which way do we go?' Nobody knew which way was out."

There weren't many ways out for those fright-stricken patrons. Overwhelmed by the fiercely jostling mob trying to thrust itself onto Piedmont Street, the revolving door jammed, trapping 200 human beings in and behind it. A set of double doors at the main dining room's rear wall, facing Shawmut Street, was locked. Decorative plywood screens masked the club's windows. As they realized the impossibility of escape, hysterical men and women rampaged about in crazed panic while a tide of fire and smoke enveloped them.

Three of the band members fled to the left of the stage, through a door opening into a small vestibule leading to Shawmut Street. One, Fazioli, died the next day.

"There was pandemonium," says saxophonist Al Willet, now retired and living in California. "The lights had dimmed due to thick smoke permeating the place. I saw people get up on the

Caricature Bar and dive into the windows only to find they were mirrors. Men were screaming. It was animal sounds, like a jungle."

"By the time I got into that little room," says Lesberg, "it was jammed up in there." The lights were still on, he remembers, revealing approximately 40 people swarming inside a vestibule that measured only 7 by 12 feet. All of them surged wildly toward the door to no avail—a double steel plate, Lesberg asserts, protected the lock.

Right before the lights went out, Lesberg considered dashing back onstage to retrieve his bass but decided against it. "I could see pieces of flaming material falling [from the ceiling] and women totally delirious," he says. "The fire had started to catch trees around the dance floor. I saw flames shoot up the Caricature Bar like a flash of lightning. After that, I didn't want to see any more."

Now shrouded in total darkness, Lesberg, Willet, Fazioli, and dozens of others were solidly wedged together in the vestibule, waiting for either rescue or doom. "The women were frantic, grabbing, pulling, tugging me," Lesberg recollects. "It was hopeless—there was nothing to do."

"I pulled out a handkerchief to try to breathe," Willet says, "and I told Jack, 'I guess this is it.'" Overcome by acrid smoke and a strange sweetish odor, both men sagged unconscious to the floor.

Downstairs in the Melody Lounge, a shaken Daniel Weiss groped through the smoky stillness until he located a passageway leading to an adjacent kitchen. There, illuminated by two light bulbs, he found head cashier Katherine Swett at her usual post safeguarding the night's take. With her were 20 female customers who had stumbled down to this flame-free sanctuary via a back staircase. Petrified by what they had just seen in the main dining room, these women (Continued on page 105)

# Cocoanut Grove

(Continued from page 79)

cowered together, fear etched on their faces.

"Shut up, everybody!" Weiss hollered. "I can get you out of here, I know the way. Everybody hold hands and follow me!"

Skittish from their ordeal, the women reluctantly started to go with Weiss twice before scurrying back to the kitchen for good. His route out was through the adjacent furnace room, which was hotter than the kitchen and thus seemed to them more dangerous.

"None of them followed me," says Weiss, "including Katherine." All were found dead in the kitchen.

Patrons on the Cocoanut Grove's first floor met equally wretched fates. The new lounge on Broadway had one exit, reachable through an inward-opening door. A thrashing horde of people desperately clustered in front of it, barred from the clear, subfreezing night air by this quirk of construction. Three dozen people fell in a heap there, scant feet from freedom.

Joseph Dreyfus lost consciousness after what he estimates to have been 15 seconds. Rescuers evacuated him almost four hours later. "I looked like I had just dragged myself out of an atomic bomb blast," he says. "There was nothing left of my hands except tendons and bones. I wasn't recognizable because of the burns."

Dreyfus, now 72, is a psychiatrist in Wellesley. That night he lost his wife, Adele, in the fire. She died of pneumonia caused by her burns. Two of the six others who had been crowded around their table to celebrate a serviceman's last night before shipping out also perished in the blaze.

It was only after several years of treatment and skin grafts that Dreyfus regained the use of his hands. Today, looking back on his experience, he says: "The only thing the fire did that I can be sure of was that it gave me better insight into people, especially those in pain and who are suffering. I made sure that it did not color my life and what I did. I figured I was here for a purpose. Otherwise, I would have been gone that night."

"TWELVE MINUTES AFTER THE TREE CAUGHT fire," writes Paul Benzaquin in his superb 1959 book, *Holocaust* (reissued in 1967 as *Fire in Boston's Cocoanut Grove*), "everyone who was to die was dead or mortally burned."

By 11:02, the Cocoanut Grove was a five-alarm catastrophe, with fire vehicles from Boston and elsewhere forming a log-jam throughout the neighborhood. George Graney of Engine Company 35 was one of the first fire fighters on the scene. By uncanny coincidence, he and his partners

were responding to a minor automobile blaze on Stuart Street, one block from the Grove, at the very moment when flames initially appeared in the Melody Lounge.

"I looked skyward," Graney says. "Heavy black smoke was coming up over the tops of the buildings. People were running in the streets." The men speedily hoisted their gear on the fire truck and raced to the club's Broadway side. Aghast, Graney watched as "the whole front of the building became a ball of fire." He recalls that "there was a human form by the Broadway entrance and nothing but fire all around him."

Lugging his hose, Graney, who is now retired from the Boston Fire Department, hastened to the Shawmut Street doorway, which was blocked by a four-foot-high mound of bodies with black smudges of the fire's extremely heavy soot on their lips and noses. Another tangle of corpses packed a small hatchback room just to the right.

Stunned by these grotesque discoveries, Graney gingerly edged his way into the main dining room, its charred, water-saturated interior now bereft of elegance. Customers remained seated at the tables, Graney says, but their lifelike postures were misleading: every single one was dead, instantly felled by smoke and fumes. Toiling wordlessly, he and a policeman passed those bodies to rescuers waiting outside.

Others removed seven or eight severely burned corpses on wire litters. "The only way you could tell men from women was probably by weight," Graney recalls. "They were gray." A Roman Catholic priest, his head solemnly bowed, did what he could for their souls.

Boston's press corps mobilized quickly. Harried editors at the Hub's six metropolitan dailies and the *Christian Science Monitor* dispatched all their available personnel to the chaotic fire site, including many who had never covered a major breaking story.

Office boys accustomed to mundane chores wearily trudged into Boston City Hospital to double-check the swelling death toll, for it rose by the minute. Sportswriters and political journalists wound up shoulder to shoulder with veteran news reporters at the scene as they gently extracted a few coherent details from survivors almost too dazed to speak. Upon learning the first sketchy, gruesome facts, reporters scrambled to phones in the area's hotels and clubs, astounding their bosses as they reeled off graphic descriptions of the scene.

Jack McLean, night city editor at the *Boston American*, and his now-deceased brother, George, then a *Boston Globe* staffer, picked through the wreckage of the Melody Lounge, where they jointly counted scores of bodies. "I flashed a light

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## Cocoanut Grove

around, and there they were," McLean says, "all sitting at the tables, dead. A lot of men had taken coats and put them over their women friends' or wives' heads. But it was too late."

Back at the newspapers' offices, those responsible for assembling such fragments into accurate features could barely keep up with the flow of information.

**T**HE TUMULTUOUS AFTERMATH CONTINUED at a breakneck pace as 80 percent of the victims were rushed to Boston City and Massachusetts General hospitals in a motley fleet of vehicles largely commandeered on the spot—cars, vans, trucks, Red Cross ambulances, auxiliary station wagons, and even taxis. What one official termed "an epic in medical history" had begun.

During the peak of the crisis, estimates

*Why were there so many toxic fumes inside the Cocoanut Grove? Fire authorities would have to wait for an answer.*

author Edward Keyes in his 1984 *Cocoanut Grove*, an individual was brought into Boston City Hospital every 11 seconds for an hour and a quarter, a startling admission rate surpassing those recorded at London hospitals during the wartime blitz. More than 400 people injured at the Grove ended up at BCH that evening; almost 300 of them were dead on arrival.

At Mass. General, the situation wasn't quite so numerically overwhelming. Francis D. Moore, one of two residents in charge of the hospital's emergency ward that night, learned about the Cocoanut Grove catastrophe when he heard the din of ambulance sirens at 10:30. When he arrived at the large central room that connects the wings of MGH, says Moore, "there were already a lot of dead people lying on the floor. They weren't burned at all. I was in such a rush to get to some of the severely burned patients that I certainly didn't stop to do postmortem examinations on those dead bodies."

The facial discolorations of the corpses neatly lined up in the room suggested what had killed them. Some had bluish skin, a telltale sign of asphyxiation. These men and women had suffocated when the flaming ceiling draperies consumed much of the oxygen in the nightclub. Others had cherry red complexions, indicating poisoning from carbon monoxide, one of the lethal by-products of the fire. There were

also some who had been frothing from the mouth and nose, reminding Moore of descriptions of soldiers felled by deadly phosgene gas in World War I.

Why would great quantities of toxic fumes be present at a place like the Cocoanut Grove? That baffling question had to wait to be answered.

Of the 114 victims taken to MGH, 75 died within two hours, leaving 39 distraught, badly burned individuals in urgent need of expert care. Doctors and nurses rapidly undressed them, evaluated their condition in mere seconds, administered morphine, and supplied oxygen to anyone gasping for breath because of lung injuries from poisonous vapors.

Ghastly third-degree burns afflicted many Cocoanut Grove survivors. Since the mid-twenties, the widely accepted method of treating burns that penetrated the skin's full thickness had been to coat them with tannic acid. This substance formed a rugged protective covering over the scorched area while it healed. Theoretically, it was a sound idea. In practice, it had major drawbacks.

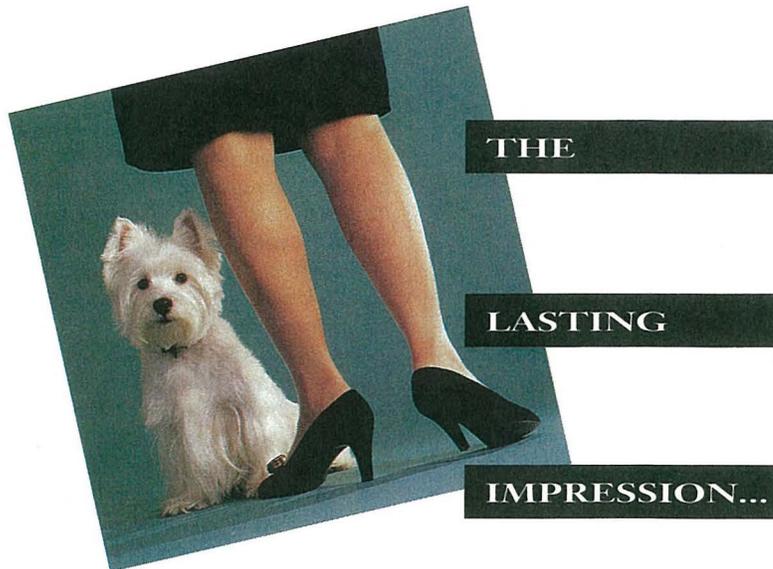
Before tannic acid could be applied, the burned tissues had to be vigorously scrubbed to remove dirt particles. Not only was this process excruciating, it also allowed time for the patient's internal fluids to seep out, sometimes leading to shock and death. Additionally, tannic acid was usually absorbed into the bloodstream, a highly dangerous side effect.

Oliver Cope, an MGH surgeon, had long believed there must be a safer, more humane method of dealing with burns. Nearly a year before the Cocoanut Grove fire, he had received a \$100,000 grant from the National Research Council to develop a new burn treatment that might benefit U.S. servicemen. The approach Cope pioneered may seem basic today, but it was actually a significant medical advance, one that gently fostered the skin's natural regeneration without harsh chemicals or undue pain.

Cope, who is now 90 and in failing health, simply applied petroleum jelly containing a bit of boric acid to the seared flesh, then dressed the wound with sterile gauze. His procedure had already proved enormously successful with relatively superficial skin damage, but before the fire he had never given it a large-scale test on life-threatening burns.

The Cocoanut Grove tragedy gave Cope his chance, and the results totally vindicated his technique. Seven people from the surviving group of 39 at MGH died of pulmonary injuries; no one died simply from the burns themselves.

A meager amount of penicillin, a revolutionary new antibiotic then being perfected



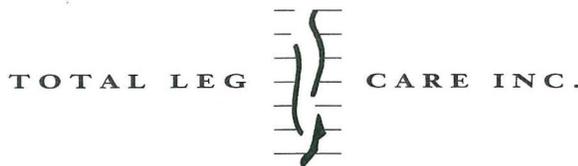
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## Cocoanut Grove

by military order under top-secret conditions, was prepared for Boston hospitals treating Cocoanut Grove cases. This marked the first recorded occasion it had ever been used to treat severely burned people. Although the dosage given was minuscule—just a small fraction of what would be administered now—the naturally fermented “experimental serum” probably did help those beset by staphylococcus microorganisms.

Lung difficulties snuffed out far more lives than any other ailment. The inhalation of an unidentified gas or combination of gases inside the nightclub produced lesions on the tender lining of the bronchial tree. Those lesions frequently oozed fluid that filled patients’ lungs, drowning them in their own secretions. At least one consolation arose from those deaths. Medical experts gleaned so much knowledge from studying the lung problems of Grove victims that Dr. Moore deems the fire a “pivot point of our understanding” of pulmonary burn injuries. Moore, now a Harvard Medical School emeritus professor of surgery, ascribes full credit to Dr. Oliver Cope for much of that increased understanding.

Three years later, Harvard Medical School researchers precisely identified the cause of the peculiar sweet smell at the gutted Grove. A highly combustible imitation leather covered some of the club’s walls and furniture. When subjected to extreme heat, this material emitted lethal fumes generated by the decomposition of one of its ingredients—acrolein, a substance found in tear gas. Other wall coverings gave off nitrous oxide vapors, which anesthetized people almost at once.

**B**OSTON FIRE COMMISSIONER WILLIAM Arthur Reilly issued a comprehensive report on the Cocoanut Grove disaster in 1943 after seven weeks of public hearings. Reilly declared that, since he did not find definitive incriminating evidence against busboy Stanley Tomaszewski, the fire was of unknown origin. (Tomaszewski nevertheless bore the brunt of much local anger and criticism for many years. Now retired and living near Framingham, he was recently quoted as saying, “The phone calls, I’m happy to say, have almost ceased.”)

That same year, Grove owner Welansky was tried and convicted of manslaughter in connection with the blaze. He was pardoned in 1946 because of terminal illness and died four months later. Today his nephew Daniel Weiss, the cashier that night and now a psychiatrist in Wellesley, defends his uncle, noting that the club’s fire and safety licenses were renewed a month before the fire. Weiss believes his

uncle was a convenient scapegoat for an enraged public. Interestingly, other surviving employees of the Cocoanut Grove unequivocally agree.

In the ensuing few years, the Massachusetts legislature substantially overhauled the commonwealth’s fire codes pertaining to exits, emergency lights, and flammable decorations in public buildings, and other states across America followed suit. Most of the regulations now posted in public places were formulated after the disaster. To enforce them, plainclothes fire department inspectors make unannounced evening visits to such establishments as restaurants, nightclubs, and movie theaters.

Plans are under way to install a commemorative plaque on the site of the Cocoanut Grove, now occupied by a parking lot and the Howard Johnson’s 57 Park Plaza Hotel. But the utter needlessness of the entire calamity practically defies memorialization. As survivor Jack Lesberg puts it: “Imagine being trapped on the street floor of a place and you die. Those people didn’t stand a chance—and for such a stupid reason.”

There are countless stories associated with the Cocoanut Grove disaster, which inevitably played a role in the lives of its survivors. One of them concerns Al Willet and Henrietta Siegel, the dancer known as Pepper Russell.

The two had been dating steadily for more than a year before the fire. That night, as chance would have it, the female performers were in a dressing room that was detached from the club, so they were able to escape the fire unscathed.

Panicked and fearful for Willet’s safety, Siegel searched for him in various places for many hours. Finally, she went to the place she dreaded the most: the Southern Mortuary, near Boston City Hospital, where she approached a young priest who was administering last rites. As they were talking, they heard a groan.

There, among the many corpses but still living, was Al Willet, who had been found unconscious and presumed dead.

Willet’s recovery was long, not from his superficial burns but from complications caused by his inhalation of smoke and fumes. Later he found work in New York. But although Siegel and Willet would eventually marry other people, they remained stalwart friends for more than 50 years.

This past summer, a few months after being interviewed for this article, Siegel, who lived in Weymouth, died suddenly. In the last years of her life, her memories of the Cocoanut Grove focused more on the camaraderie that had existed among the employees than on the events of a night that Boston will never forget. □