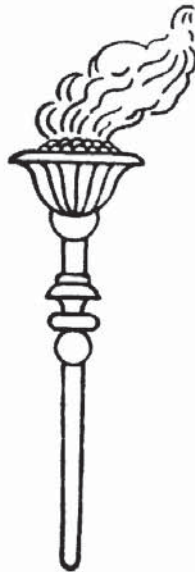


QUARTERLY

OF THE

National Fire Protection Association



*Entered as second-class matter May 1, 1911, at the Post Office at Boston, Mass.,
under act of July 16th, 1894.*

40 CENTRAL STREET, BOSTON, MASS.

The Hobart School Fire.

Another chapter was added on Christmas Eve to the already long story of schoolhouse tragedies. Thirty-two men, women and children lost their lives when flames swept this Oklahoma rural school. Nearly every element favorable to fire was present. It is hardly conceivable that conditions could have been worse, even in so rudimentary a structure as this one-story building.

The Story of the Fire.

(United Press Account.)

Hobart, Oklahoma, December 25.—Christmas dawned a day of wailing and weeping for Babb Switch, seven miles south of Hobart.

Horror-stricken families huddled in groups around the blackened embers of a country schoolhouse, in which 32 men, women and children of Babb Switch gave up their lives Wednesday night.

Rescue workers beat through the charred timbers Thursday, seeking other bodies.

Thirty-seven wounded were in hospitals at Hobart Thursday. Many of these, it is feared, will die.

More than half of those who died in the flames were children. Identification of the cremated bodies in many cases was impossible.

A mass meeting of the countryside was called in Hobart to decide upon funeral and relief arrangements. Officials in Oklahoma City and Tulsa were preparing to send aid.

The Miles sanitarium and the Physicians and Surgeons hospital at Hobart were filled to capacity.

Dozens of the living bore burns and bruises as mementoes of the nightmare night.

The youth and age of Babb Switch were gathered in the little frame schoolhouse Christmas Eve.

"Fire!"

There was a hush, an ominous rumble. High up on the spangled Christmas tree, close to the glittering Star of Bethlehem, a candle had toppled into tissue-papered gifts.

Those nearest rushed to put out the flame, sweeping the tree.

Too intent on their task they struck the tree to the floor.

There was panic and stampede. Mothers fought to reach their children. Men shouted for order.

Data for this report was furnished by C. T. Ingalls, Manager, Oklahoma Inspection Bureau. (Member N. F. P. A.)



This building is exactly like the Babb Switch school in which 33 persons were burned to death. The building shown is two miles from the one which burned. The two schools were built at the same time, from the same plans. Over 200 persons were jammed into the building for the Christmas tree celebration. Men, women and children piled their bodies against the one door and were burned to death. At the extreme right of the photograph is the cloak room and entrance to the school, the door opening inward. At the left is a garage for the teacher's car.

The flames leaped to the ceiling, and in the glare and smoke the happy garb of Saint Nicholas was snatched aside, revealing the gaping figure of Death.

Single Exit is Jammed.

There was only one exit from the frame building. It was jammed with shrieking, fainting men and women.

Victims trampled upon each other. Women guarded their children with their own bodies. Men strove heroically—and vainly.

Survivors could not remember today all of the things that happened in the doomed schoolhouse during these hectic minutes.

The teacher of the little school was among the missing and survivors told a story of seeing her battling amid the flames to get her children to safety.

Helps Many to Safety.

One of the men nearest the door stood at the exit pulling his neighbors to safety until finally bodies became so jammed across the sill that he was helpless.

Those who gained safety tore frantically at the wire covering of the windows of the building. Sleet and snow had stiffened the wire like tempered steel.

Some sped for barn-yard axes. But before they had returned the scythes of Death already had made axes futile.

More than 200 persons were in the schoolhouse when the flames broke. The room measured only 25 by 36 feet.

Hardly a family in the little community was left untouched by the catastrophe.



Some of the charred bodies of victims resting in the Hobart morgue pending identification. Most of the bodies are of little children.

The injured lay in the snow banks surrounding the school, while the uninjured vainly fought the flames.

Later automobiles were turned into improvised ambulances, and the injured were carried across sleet-covered roads to Hobart.

A telephone call to Hobart was the first intimation of Oklahoma's worst Christmas catastrophe. Ambulances and fire apparatus were hurried to Babb Switch.

The fire broke out in the schoolhouse just as Santa Claus, ruddy and cheerful, had begun handing out presents to the children gathered there.

It was the second fire disaster for Oklahoma in the last few years. At 3 A. M., April 13, 1918, fire broke out in the hospital for the insane at Norman, and 39 patients lost their lives.

Every Precaution Neglected.

Nearly every precaution for safety to life and against fire was neglected in the building where this appalling tragedy occurred. The newspaper account and the accompanying pictures make most of them apparent. Some of these were:

1. The building itself was of the lightest kind of frame construction—the least fire-resistive type of building.
2. For illumination gasoline lamps were provided. During the first moments of the fire these exploded, accelerating the already swift progress of the flames throughout the wooden crematory.
3. Open flame candles swung from the boughs of the tinder-dry cedar Christmas tree. Here was a hazard so well known that it is astound-



Here is a close view of one of the steel window screens which resisted all efforts to tear them from the windows of the burning school, and which are held in part responsible for the large loss of life. An Oklahoma (City) News reporter who took these pictures states that by exerting his utmost strength he was barely able to bend this screen, so heavy is the steel of which it is made.

ing that no one present recognized the danger. This was the fatal hazard.

4. The building was crowded beyond reason. Reports set the number of people in it at between 200 and 250 persons. Even 200 in a room 25 by 36 feet is several times what any law would permit.

5. The one door opened inward. It was a veritable "check-valve," making it next to impossible for a surging crowd to pass through. The state fire marshal had vigorously condemned such construction in schools, but could not act because not backed up by any building code.

6. But one exit was provided to the building. The windows, which might have been used for emergency means of egress, were nearly as heavily barred as a prison. These barriers were placed at the direction of the school board to keep campers from breaking into the building and to protect the panes from youthful ravagers. They were deliberately and securely bolted in place.

7. Not a single provision to take care of a fire should one start had been made. There was not even a fire pail. The blaze was attacked in its incipiency by wraps and bare hands, and was probably spread rather than checked.

8. Finally, those who had escaped from the building had to stand by and see the fire burn unhindered, for there was not a hose line or even a drop of water in the vicinity.

So far the list is of factors that had a bearing on this particular fire. Two others perhaps bear mention, as either might have been a contributory factor:

9. A frame shed was built adjacent to the school building as a garage to house the teacher's car.

10. The building was heated with an ordinary stove. The overheating of a similar stove had destroyed the schoolhouse once before. On that occasion teacher and pupils escaped.

This is a partial list of the points that were neglected. There were probably others which have not come to light. Any one of the above in itself was serious. With all of these hazards, it is no wonder that the flames were able to do their worst.

"The tragedy of the schoolhouse could have been prevented if Oklahoma had enacted a state building code," said Fire Marshal Connolly, but, he reported, time after time, the Oklahoma Legislature had killed such a code in its committees. He will ask the next legislature to pass such a law.

Film Fire in Boston Subway.

A burlap bag filled with scraps of motion picture film caught fire from a heater underneath a seat and burned explosively in a car in a Boston subway on January 3, 1925. More than 50 passengers were burned, 27 of them so seriously that they had to be taken to hospitals.

The car was crowded and a wild panic ensued as sheets of flame swept the car from end to end.

No lives were lost, and only one, in all probability, will suffer permanent injuries although physicians fear many will bear scars for life.

The Story of the Fire.

A 70-year-old employee of John F. Bowditch, brush manufacturer, the man who was carrying the film in a manner strictly against the law, lies dangerously ill at the hospital, and physicians fear his eyesight may be impaired or entirely lost.

He obtained the film at the studio of the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, and was en route to the place of his employment with it when the accident occurred.

The Bowditch Company had been using scrap film to make cement used in the manufacture of their brushes. It was the second time, the head of the firm admitted, that scrap film had been transported in burlap bags through the streets of Boston.