

In the morning of March 20th 1970, in a room on the second floor, a clock stopped at 2:43 a.m. It had melted to the point of no longer being able to run. In the 13 minutes prior to that moment, and in the 50 minutes that the fire was fought, many lives were saved and many lives were lost to the second worst fire (the worst arson fire) in Seattle history. A fire that came to be known as the Ozark Hotel Fire.

The Ozark Hotel fire had long lasting effects in the community of Seattle Washington. The hotel was known to the fire department, prior to the fire, and was considered high risk. The night it burned there were many things that led to the casualties that occurred. The political aftermath of the fire created both positive and negative effects upon the community and in the end no one was ever brought to justice for this great misdeed.

The Ozark Hotel stood at 2030 West Lake Ave and Lenora St. It was constructed of wood and stood 5 stories high. There were 62 rooms in the building (42 of which were occupied during the fire), each with a bed, a hot plate and a bathroom down the hall. The building was 60 years old and had become a flophouse; where for a couple of bucks a night many destitute and elderly people were able to live their lives in some semblance of comfort. The building even had an open core, a large shaft that extended down to the 2nd floor. It provided light for many of the rooms and a skylight, in the first floor roof, that eventually became an escape path for two lucky survivors (Norman Burlingame and Judith Chibante). There were two stairways in the building, the main one on the north side and the secondary one on the south. Within the building was also housed a couple of other businesses. Ann's Tavern and Mike Fazio's coffee shop were entered off of the street. These two establishments paid their rent to Lula Vossos who leased the building from Marcuss Wiederkehr. Lula Vossos had surely been in contact with the fire department at some point or another, prior to the fire, as Chief Gordon F. Vickery said, "The Hotel had been checked six times since February 6th." in 1970. The building was well known to the fire department and was considered a high-risk facility. It was generally inspected once a week and had been inspected within a 24-hour period prior to the fire.

At approximately 2:30 a.m. on the night of the fire an arsonist set two fires in the hotel, one on the first floor in the main stairwell and one on the second floor in the rear stairwell. It was never determined what was used to start the fire, though it was speculated that flammable liquid or normal combustible materials were used. It is sure that it was an arson fire because of circumstantial and situational evidence. The circumstantial evidence came from the fact that between January and March of 1970 there was an extremely high incendiary and arson fire period in the Seattle area. In the first 3 months of '70 there were 233 fires compared to 75 in the first 3 months of '69. Mayor Wes Uhlman said "This appears to be one of a developing pattern of downtown hotel fires across the nation." Arson appeared to be a trend during 1970. The situational evidence is noted by Chief Vickery when he said the fire had a "sudden, furious nature and ... broke out in two places at once." Fire fighter McNerney is known to have said, "This could not have been better planned for complete destruction." The fire simultaneously engulfed two staircases that were separated by a lobby. Within that lobby had been no materials that could account for the speed of the spread from one staircase to

another. The only thing that could account for that speed is that the fires were deliberately set.

Once the fires were set there was no turning back. The Ozark Hotel was a matchbox just waiting to be ignited. The fire shot up the inside of the building, in the two staircases, to the top floors. There it burned to the outside of the building and began to burn down. It engulfed all the exits from the building except windows and fire escapes. Eventually the roof collapsed and the top two floors were completely consumed. The fire spread within the building quickly because of the transoms above doors, which should have been sealed, that when left open or destroyed by fire, became a ventilation system which moved flame, smoke and heat. The damage was heaviest in rooms where the transoms had broken out. A room with wood replacing the transom had remained untouched. The building also had hollow core doors that eventually blew up from the intense heat, thereby allowing the fire to escape from the staircases into the hallways and provided little extra time for occupants to escape from their rooms.

The fire was first reported by a man to a fire crew fighting a dumpster fire (also arson set) 3 blocks from the hotel. He saved 15 lives by providing time for them to escape with the help of the fire department. His name is not known; he never came forward. Perhaps he was the arsonist and realized to late what he had done or just an innocent bystander who didn't want to get involved. Six minutes after the arrival of the first fire crew the flames had burst through the roof and people were coming down the fire escapes. Unfortunately, many were not able to reach the fire escapes and took the only way out they could find. The windows, where smoke billowed out to the sky, became the last hope of escape for 6 people. 14 engines and 4 ladders (over 100 firemen and 20 units) finally extinguished this three-alarm fire after approximately 50 minutes. Placing the end of the fire at 3:20 a.m.

“In terms of loss of life it was the worst fire in Seattle since 1943 when a B29 crashed...killed 11 persons and (started) a fire that killed 21.” The final casualty accounts of the fire are not consistent. It appears that 14 men and 6 women died that night and between 10 and 14 residents ended up in the hospital. Also 2 firefighters were injured. The causes of death and injury were smoke inhalation, burns, cuts and injuries sustained from jumping (back fracture, multiple fractures, spinal injuries, etc...). The financial loss was estimated at \$100,000.

In the investigation that followed this fire, the biggest city investigation to that date, no arrests were ever made. Even with a total of 38 police and fire inspectors on the job it was never determined exactly what started the fire. The use of “sniffers” (aromatic hydrocarbon indicators) was questionable due to the intensity and heat of the fire, which would have consumed any vapor remnants of a flammable liquid that could have been used to start it. The investigation was made even more difficult since any other evidence would have been consumed and any possible witnesses were deceased (except the one man who never came forward). Even the search for bodies was complicated by the fact that the 4th and 5th floors had collapsed and burned out completely. In the end all that remained was 150 photos and a 300+ page file.

The after affects of the Ozark Hotel Fire were three fold. New ordinances were put into place, the circumstances that began the creation of Seattle's homeless population were manifest and legal action was brought against parties involved with the hotel and the city.

The Ozark Ordinance is the best thing and the worst thing to come out of the political upheaval that followed this fire. The good part about it is the standards that were set for fire safety within buildings. These consist of:

-All apartment houses, apartment hotels and hotels 4 stories or more in height shall have 2 fully enclosed, 1 hour, fire resistant stairways.

-All interior corridors and egress ways, including doors and transoms, also shall have 1-hour fire resistance.

-A sprinkler system may be installed in lieu of the fire resistant material.

The negative effect of the ordinance derived from the fact that those buildings that were in violation of the ordinance had to either update or close. This caused 2000+ rooms in the city of Seattle to become unavailable due to conversion or abandonment of many single room occupancy hotels and gentrification of the downtown area. The loss of these rooms began the process that created a permanent homeless population in Seattle, by the mid 1980's, by putting 4-5000 people (many old) onto the streets.

The last effects of the fire seem like almost an insulting afterthought to such an atrocity. Legal action was brought, in 9 lawsuits, by survivors and victim relatives against Wiederkehr and Lulu Vossos. 13 claims were filed against the city totaling over \$2 million. The fire and police departments could not agree as to whether it was a homicide case. Police refused to acknowledge the fire as arson and the fire department knew it was so.

Fire Chief Vickery said, "Seal off transoms, install fire doors and make the separations history shows are needed for fire safety." If this had been done, surely the Ozark Hotel fire would not have claimed so many lives. But if the fire had not taken its toll, the ordinance that now requires these things may never have come into existence. A cruel circle it seems. A building known to be deadly, a fire starter with the wickedest of unknown intentions and death to many was the key that unlocked the political stagnation preventing the prevention of fire. The remnants of the Ozark Hotel were demolished over the weekend of October 21st, 1972.

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