

# NFPA: ALERT BULLETIN™



Research & Fire Information Services  
National Fire Protection Association  
1 Batterymarch Park, PO Box 9101  
Quincy, Massachusetts 02269-9101

For More Information  
Contact: Tom Klem, Director  
NFPA Fire Investigations Division  
(617) 984-7475

Number 90-2

May, 1990

## Social Club Fire Bronx, New York March 25, 1990 • 87 Fatalities

An early morning fire at the Happy Land Social Club in New York City's Bronx borough, resulted in 87 fatalities. The club was an establishment where patrons, mostly from the immediate neighborhood, could listen to music, dance, and purchase alcohol. However, the club was operating in violation of the city's regulations and was ordered to vacate the premises based on building and fire code deficiencies. This incident was the worst fatal fire in New York City since the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in 1911 and the worst in the United States since the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire in 1977. The National Fire Protection Association is cooperating with the New York City Fire Department in documenting this incident.

The building was of ordinary construction, and its overall dimensions were approximately 24 feet X 60 feet. Access for fire fighting was from the front (street side) where two entrance doors were located. This structure was among a row of similarly constructed single-story occupancies occupying most of the city block. Construction arrangements suggest that the building may have once been subdivided at its center into two separate tenant areas. Furthermore, at one time the structure was one-story in height with a 20-foot ceiling, but a second floor was later added. Floor/ceiling joists for the added second floor were installed at approximately the 10-foot level. When this alteration was done, the existing automatic sprinkler system was not extended to the first floor, and one of the branch lines on the second floor was plugged, further limiting coverage on the second floor.

Doorways from the building were positioned at the north and south ends of the front of the club and discharged onto the sidewalk. Each exterior opening had a 36-inch metal clad door which could be covered during nonbusiness hours by a steel roll-up security door. At the time of the fire, the steel door at the north door was down but apparently unlocked. Further, the doorway was not marked and its presence was most likely

not known except to employees. In addition, the doors were reportedly locked at the time of the fire making it an unusable exit for patrons. Each exterior door opened into a foyer containing an additional metal clad door that led to patron areas. All four doors swung in the direction of exit travel and each had dead bolt latches. The south door was the main entrance and the only available exit for patrons. Under this arrangement, patrons flowed into the 15-foot long foyer where they paid an admission fee before moving into the club proper. Payment was made to a club employee located in the coat check room through an opening in the frame partition wall. Once inside the club, patrons could check their coats from the club interior side of the coat check room. The temperature on the night of the fire was cold, and a substantial number of coats were located in the coat check room.

Beyond the coat check area, several tables and chairs were provided in the approximately 12-foot wide area beyond which the area doubled in width. Located in this area were a bar, the rear stairway to the second floor, and a room (separated by an interior partition having openings) containing tables and chairs.

Similar to the first floor, the second floor was divided into two parts. The south side of the floor contained a bar, tables and chairs, and a small office at the front of the building. The north side had a dance floor, a sitting area, stage, and a disc jockey booth.

Two unenclosed stairways provided access to and egress from the second floor; one located at the front of the building close to the coat check room and one at the rear of the building. At the base of the front stairway was a hollow core wood door which suggests that primary patron access to the second floor was by means of this rear stairway. The front stairway was comprised of a steep "ship's ladder" stair arrangement with very narrow treads. Access to the stairway from the second floor was in the vicinity of the disc jockey booth. The floor

opening created by the stair shaft at this level was surrounded by an iron railing with a gate. An exit sign was mounted over the stairway.

Access to the rear stairway from the second floor was located near the bar area. In addition to uneven riser heights encountered, travel over this stair required a 90° turn, and the width of the stairway narrowed to approximately 19 inches at one point.

All interior walls including the entrance enclosures, were covered with 3/16-inch wood paneling nailed mainly to wood studs. The ceiling finish throughout most of the building was gypsum material; however, cellulose fiber ceiling tiles were located in the first floor bar area. A manual fire alarm system was installed in the building; its operational status has not been determined. The partial automatic sprinkler system, mentioned earlier, covered only one-half of the second floor, which was not in the area of fire origin. Its operation was not a significant factor in the outcome of the fire.

Investigators from the New York City Fire Department have listed the cause of the fire as arson; early reports indicate that an accelerant was poured in the main entrance area and ignited. Apparently, the fire was first observed by an employee in the coat check room adjacent to the entranceway who shouted "fire." She and another employee in the coat check room then left the room and were joined by two patrons who were waiting for their coats. Because she knew of an alternate way out and since she had a key to unlock the doors, the four left the building by the north exterior door. Another employee, believed to be a "bouncer," went to the second floor to notify patrons of the developing fire. Two survivors, the only known survivors from the second floor, apparently left immediately down the front stairway. One survivor left by way of the north exterior door (which was in the open position because of prior use), and the other reportedly ran through the flaming main entrance, sustaining critical burns. During this time, the fire spread to the combustible interior finish materials spreading heat and smoke throughout the club and to the second floor, mostly by way of the rear stairway.

At about 3:41 a.m., the fire was reported to the fire department via an Emergency Response System (E.R.S.) box, which incorporated an interactive voice reporting system. The first units to arrive were Engine 45, Ladder 58 (which arrived in 2:25 minutes because it was returning from another alarm), and Battalion Chief 18. Upon their arrival, they reported that the fire was venting from both doors. An initial attack was begun with a 2 1/2-inch handline, and the fire quickly was "knocked down." This rapid response and attack by the fire department limited the fire damage to the front portion of the first floor.

Fire fighters then began searching the interior and discovered several bodies located near the entrance and on the second floor. As the search continued, they realized the severity of the loss of life. Investigators determined that a total of 18 patrons were found at various locations on the first floor, and 69 patrons were found at various locations on the second floor.

The New York Fire Department's investigation of this tragic fire is continuing. Following the fire, task force groups made up of representatives from New York City's police, fire, and building departments, began a city wide sweep to identify illegal clubs, inspect them for compliance with building and fire code regulations, and to vacate those found to have deficiencies or to be unlicensed.

The Happy Land Social Club did not meet the applicable portions of the New York City Building Code, and prior to the fire an order to vacate the property had been issued to the club.

Based on preliminary information, it appears that the incendiary fire located at the entrance immediately blocked the only available exit from the club. In addition to the accelerant, combustible interior finish was a factor in fire and smoke spread beyond the area of origin. As a result, smoke and heat quickly spread to the second floor, via open stairs, where most of the victims were found.

This deadly scenario has been documented in other lounge and social club fires investigated by the NFPA including the Bronx, NY Social Club fire of October 23, 1976<sup>1</sup> (25 killed) and the Upstairs Lounge fire, New Orleans, LA, June 24, 1973<sup>2</sup> (32 killed).

Building and fire officials responsible for code enforcement in this and similar types of occupancies need to closely review the level of fire protection prescribed by applicable building and fire codes that cover similar occupancies to ensure that adequate levels of protection are provided.

<sup>1</sup> Best, Richard, "Social Club Fire, Bronx, NY," *Fire Journal*, May 1977, National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA.  
<sup>2</sup> Willey, A. Elwood, "The Upstairs Lounge Fire, New Orleans, Louisiana," *Fire Journal*, January 1974, National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA.