

## ***They shrieked, they screamed, they cried.***

### **The Arundel Park Fire – 50 Years Later**

by Joseph B. Ross Jr.

Copyright 2005 by Joseph B. Ross, Jr., Linthicum, Maryland

Imagine yourself in a sea of frantic uncertainty. You are just one whitecap, one body, in waves made up of hundreds of panic stricken people. You are bonded together by only one fearful thought – get out now! But unlike a sea there is no water-just fear. Fear prevails over the frantic scampering bodies, as bright orange and red flames interwoven with dark deadly acrid smoke roll unopposed over your head across a massive ceiling.

Your fear is only compounded when you find that your closest exit door is locked. Behind you, in front of you, and all around you men, women, and children are pushing, screaming, and knocking one another to the floor. Finally you are within 20 feet of another exit door, however no one is moving. A horde of fleeing frantic bodies has jammed up the doorway. You now feel the heat from the fire. Your elbows sting as if you have a severe case of sunburn. The aching pit in the middle of your stomach is telling you that something is dreadfully wrong.

Breaking glass and the crackling fire intermixed with the screaming and crying are all the sounds you hear as the anxious and frightened make a last desperate attempt to climb out the building's windows. Within the thick deadly haze of the eye watering smoke you now feel your heart pounding vigorously against the inside of your ribcage. Then as if the past 30 seconds haven't been frightening enough, the lights go out.

The fire described above occurred approximately 50 years ago just outside of the southern portion of the Baltimore City line in the Brooklyn Park area of Northern Anne Arundel County, Maryland. This tragic and devastating fire occurred at the Arundel Park Hall on Belle Grove Road at approximately 5:05 p.m. on a cold Sunday evening, January 29, 1956.

The Saint Rose Lima Church, located in Brooklyn, was sponsoring an oyster roast that day where ten people perished and an eleventh died later from severe burns. Hundreds were injured as a result of the fire. The Arundel Park fire is one of the most deadly fires to ever occur in the State of Maryland. Even to this day, fifty years later, many questions still exist. What was really the cause of the fire? Why the delay to evacuate people and call the fire department? Why the mass panic? How come exits were locked? Why did people, after making a clean escape from the burning building go back inside only to die in the calamity? Why couldn't fire fighters put out the fire? What were the contributing factors that resulted in the deaths and injuries?

On January 21, 1956, Rae Clark, would like to do a huge favor for her oldest sister, Peg Ross, on this cold dark Saturday evening. Rae decides to take her brother Jack, age 10 and Peg's oldest son Joey, age 5 down to Arundel Park. Peg, just a month short of her 29<sup>th</sup> birthday, is eight months pregnant and has been craving a cheeseburger and milkshake all day. Jack and Joey have been wrestling and roughhousing on the living room floor of Peg's two-story row home located on Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn Park. Almost knocking over a floor lamp, the two boys have tried Peg's patience for the last time. Peg's husband Joe, a part-time musician is playing piano in a band at a dance somewhere in Baltimore City and Rae is Peg's only hope for a little sanity.

Rae puts the boys in her big red Ford Fairlane and they travel the short quarter mile to Arundel Park just south of the Fifth Avenue row home. Rae, maneuvers the big car into a parking space not far from the Belle Grove Road side of the building. Jack and Joey marvel at all the bright, multi-colored neon lights flashing throughout the building's exterior. Joey is especially attracted to one huge sign that looks like a giant wheel revolving around and around. "Look Jack, the sign is moving," exclaimed an excited Joey. "No its not," replied Jack, "its just the blinking lights that make you think that." "It is to moving!" "No its not." "Okay, Okay you two." replied Rae, "Hush up and I'll buy the both of you sodas."

As Rae, Jack, and Joey walked towards the front door of the Arundel Park's milk bar, Joey could not get over the size of the huge high quonset constructed roof over the main hall. A one time skating rink, the one story cinder block building served as the area's amusement center and was best known for its crab feasts, bull and oyster roasts, and nightly bingo.

"Oh I forgot," said Rae,  
"Saturday night is bingo night,  
I hope the milk bar isn't too  
crowded."



A couple of gentlemen seated at the milk bar's huge serving counter, took notice of the very attractive 23 year old Rae, as she walked over to drop a couple of nickels into the one arm bandit slot machine located against the wall near the restroom doors. In the 1950s, "Milk Bar" was a term for a small restaurant that prioritized in the serving of dairy products such as ice cream, milkshakes, ice cream sodas along with hamburgers, hot dogs and fries. As the girl behind the counter cooked the cheeseburger and mixed the milkshake, Jack and Joey quickly finished their sodas. Jack was spinning himself around on one of the bar stools and Joey walked over to the large entrance door separating the milk bar from the main hall.

Joey could see many wooden tables with attached metal legs. The tables were arranged end to end throughout the hall with very little aisle space. Each table had metal chairs with people sitting in them playing bingo. Amazed at the number of people, Joey just

stared curiously at the large gathering as a gray colored cloud of cigar and cigarette smoke hovered over head under the high massive fluorescent-lighted fiberboard ceiling.



Little did Joey know that approximately one week later, this major exit doorway would be closed and pad locked shut the evening of the fire. As Rae, picked up the bag of food and paid the girl, she motioned for Jack and Joey to follow her out. “What a great place,” thought Joey as he walked toward the double exterior doors of the milkbar, “I hope I come back here again,” he said to himself. Joey, then stopped short of the exterior doors and

ran back through the milkbar to make sure there were no nickels left in the bottom of the slot machine.

It was on a rainy Saturday morning that Joey did come back. On this day, less than a week since the ravaging fire, the once enchanting Arundel Park looked totally different. As Joey’s dad Joe drove the big 1949 Chrysler Plymouth slowly across the parking lot with Peg and little brother Jimmy, they were astonished by the deplorable scene before them.

They could see a thick barricade rope encircling what was left of the structure to keep people away. Joey noticed that the once white concrete block walls of the building were now covered with black scorched marks around the tops where the roof had been and around what was left of the windows. The former red and white metal window and door awnings were collapsed against the building or on the ground. Inside the building perimeter, there was nothing left but ashes and burned timbers. Peg, turned to Joe and said, “I had no idea that a fire could be so destructive.”



The big electric neon sign that Jack and Joey had marveled at only two weeks before was nowhere to be found and must have been consumed in the superheated flames. Investigators would later discover that the fire inside the building reached temperatures of 1860 degrees F. Hot enough to melt glass.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon, the following spring, Joe Ross took Joey down to the fire site for one last look. Now all the walls had been pulled down and debris picked up and hauled away. The only traces left of the building were the tops of the eight inch

concrete block that protruded from the ground about six inches and outlined the entire perimeter of where the building once stood.

The scorched concrete floor was still there, but it was swept clean. Joey just sat on one of the concrete blocks trying to figure out what happened to the one arm bandit slot machine as his dad walked around observing the few remaining traces of what was once “Northern Anne Arundel County’s largest covered floor area for public use.”<sup>(1)</sup> Eventually all of the remains were dug up and covered with asphalt.



Within a year, a new structure would be constructed that sits further back towards the woods than the original building did. The original structure sat very close to Belle Grove Road; the new structure, renamed the Arundel Arena for many years after, is still there today and is now the Bingo World.

### **Cause of Fire**

Although a concealed ceiling space over the kitchen seems to be the area of where the fire started, there are a number of theories about its cause. These theories are well documented in a number of reports resulting from investigations that were conducted shortly after the fire. The Anne Arundel County Police Department, Fire Prevention Bureau, and Maryland State Police Department Report provides two theories concerning the origin of the fire. The combined agencies’ report states spontaneous combustion or a short in electrical equipment that was located in the ceiling/roof area were the possible causes of this fire.

Harry W. Klasmeier, who was the county’s only fire marshal at the time of the fire and later the first chief and fire administrator of the Anne Arundel County Fire Department, had conducted an inspection of the building approximately ten months earlier. Chief Klasmeier, who responded to the fire scene the evening of the fire, was also a member of the task force assembled to investigate and report on the tragedy for the county commissioners.

In a recent interview with Chief Klasmeier, regarding the fire cause, he proposed a third possibility at the time, which was dismissed by the law enforcement officials as a long shot. He leans heavily toward the fire starting from an outside fireplace, which was used

for roasting oysters on the exterior wall behind the kitchen near the southeast corner of the building. His reasoning for this theory is that at approximately 4:55 P.M. the evening of the fire, a very small flame was observed burning through the exterior cornice around where the wooden roof met the concrete block wall near the fireplace flue.<sup>(2)</sup>

Seeing the burning cornice, Mr. Charles Johnson of Brooklyn, “who was standing outside near the event’s raw bar, [grabbed] a small garden hose, located near the oyster steamer.” “He then climbed on the rear deck of a pick up truck that was parked very [close] to the kitchen, and played the stream on the fire.” Mr. Johnson, from his vantage point, could “see through the burning hole [that much of the concealed area] between the ceiling and the roof above the kitchen was [heavily involved with fire].” Almost simultaneously with Mr. Johnson’s actions, fire was discovered in the interior of the kitchen ceiling in the same general area.<sup>(3)</sup>

The morning after the fire, while investigating the kitchen area of the building, a neon light electrical transformer was examined among the debris on the floor. Originally this transformer was mounted on the roof of the kitchen and on that morning indicated strong evidence of a short circuit. Although Chief Klasmeier does not rule out the possibility of the short circuit starting the fire, his fireplace cause theory is further substantiated from a report produced shortly afterwards by the National Fire Protection Association.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), an international association, dedicated to preventing loss of life and property from fire, develops and sets fire protection standards. It routinely sends out experts to investigate large life loss fires and fires that result in large property loss. From these investigations, recommendations are made to bring about positive change in fire safety codes and fire fighting practices.

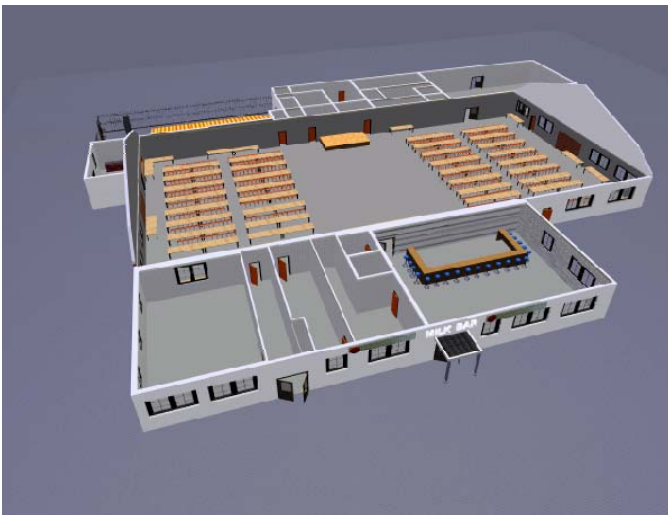
In the aftermath of the Arundel Park fire, the NFPA sent out Mr. Richard Stevens to investigate and report on the incident. Mr. Steven’s report stated “the sparks from the fireplace or the neon tube transformer were the most probable ignition sources.”<sup>(4)</sup> Chief Klasmeier and Mr. Stevens discussed the fire at great length. Both lean very heavily on the possibility that sparks from the fire place chimney may have landed in this area of the roof eaves earlier in the day, smoldered for hours in the wooden cornice, and were the original cause of the fire.

We will never know what started the tragic fire, but we do know that it started in the ceiling of the kitchen; and perhaps enhanced by a five mile per hour wind from the southeast, slowly worked its way in a subversive snake like fashion into the large concealed space over the main assembly hall. The huge hall, where approximately 1,200 people were drinking, eating, dancing, gambling, talking and generally having a good time totally unaware of the impinging inferno developing in the large concealed space over top of their heads!

## Eight minutes of delay

Delay of alarm is not uncommon during a fire situation. Often people confronted with fire make an attempt to extinguish it themselves. Sometimes these attempts are successful; many times the fire suppression effort is futile, wasting precious minutes of time that would have been better spent alerting occupants and notifying the fire department.

Delay was no exception at the Arundel Park Hall on that dreadful Sunday evening. Since there was no manual fire alarm system, automatic fire protection and detection systems available, which are required in today's larger public assembly occupancies, all critical communications were conducted through word of mouth. Approximately five minutes had elapsed since the fire was first spotted burning in the exterior cornice between the top of the concrete block wall and the roof. Yet, no one contacted the fire department and no one notified the occupants.



Mr. Walt Zylka, of Brooklyn, who had joined the fire suppression attempts on the exterior of the building, redirected his efforts to the kitchen after hearing the commotion regarding the fire in the kitchen ceiling. He quickly knocked down the fire penetrating from the ceiling with a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher. It was at this time he looked up into the ceiling where he observed a fire glow moving towards the main hall.<sup>(5)</sup> Still no one called the fire

department or initiated an evacuation of the crowd.

Since the event was scheduled to end at 6:00 P.M., the approximately 1,200 people in the hall were still dancing, talking, eating and enjoying their last hour of the festivities. For some it would be their last ten minutes of life on this earth and for many; it would be the start of gruesome physical scars and horrible memories that would last a lifetime!

Mr. James Babicky, chief cook of the affair, closed the door between the kitchen and the hall to reduce the spread of the fire and told a Mr. Leonard Anderson to notify Mr. Helms, who was working in his office at the front of the building adjacent to the milkbar.<sup>(6)</sup> Mr. Helms, an officer of the Arundel Park Corporation, Inc., immediately responded to the area near the southeast corner of the hall. He could now see smoke emanating from the ceiling around the vent pipe attached to the ceiling-mounted gas-fired heater located there. Standing on top of one of the tables, Mr. Helms quickly shut off the gas supply to the unit. Even at this point, the fire department was never called.

Obtaining a ladder, Mr. Helms climbed to the top and opened a ceiling trap door near the heating unit to investigate. Observing a red smoldering fire throughout the enclosed space, Mr. Helms closed the trap door, descended back down the ladder, and told one of his assistants to telephone the fire department.

According to the L.Miller-J.Mullikin article in the *News American* paper, an announcement was made from the microphone at the bandstand that “there was a slight fire caused by a short circuit, [but nobody was told to leave] and the band continued to play.” (7) This announcement was never mentioned in any of the official reports.

### **Smoke but no fire**

Outside as the evening dusk settled on the huge Arundel Park complex, the people in cars driving up and down the two lane Belle Grove Road took little notice. They may have commented on all the cars parked and packed into the 500 capacity parking lot, many parked in rows of twos right up to and against the building. The passers-by might have even seen the smoke. However, because of the melting snow that covered the area earlier in the week and frequent barbeques, the evening was foggy. If they would have noticed smoke in the southeast corner of the building, so what! Smoke hovering around the Arundel Park building was not an uncommon sight!

In a recent interview with Harry Zlotowski, a retired division chief with the Anne Arundel County Fire Department and one of the volunteer fire fighters on the first engine responding from the Brooklyn station on the night of the fire he stated “There was always something burning in the area. Between the barbeque pits, oyster roasts, and the incinerator fires, the area always contained a strong odor of smoke and the sight of smoke in the rear of the building was very common.” (8)

Unlike the peaceful, solemn outside, almost like the calm before the storm, there was a completely opposite environment developing on the inside. Individuals and small groups of people began noticing the serious activity being conducted around the trap door. They could see the smoke penetrating and puffing around the vent pipe for the ceiling-mounted gas-fired heater. Others now saw smoke issuing from the hall ceiling where it attached to the wall between the hall and the kitchen. Although some made a decision to leave, no one became particularly excited and the festivities of the event continued.

Mr. Charles Ecker, an off duty Baltimore City Fire Fighter assigned to Ladder Truck 28 in Fairfield watched as Mr. Helms descended the ladder. Mr. Ecker then made an attempt to extinguish the fire with a carbon dioxide extinguisher. He now climbed the ladder and opened the ceiling trapdoor. A flashing fireball blasted out with the force of a huge blowtorch burning his head and knocking him off the ladder. Simultaneously with Ecker’s actions, a large overhead door, on the east side of the hall, not far from the trapdoor, was opened to rid this area of the smoke. (9)

Now the fire received what it had been waiting for as it smoldered for hours quietly and undetected up above in the large combustible attic space between the roof and the ceiling.

With the blast of fresh oxygen from the opened overhead door and the opening of the trap door, the fire lashed out from its lair and rolled through and raced across the combustible fiberboard ceiling with all of the power of a run away freight train!

Mr. Ecker got back up and again grabbed the extinguisher and he valiantly discharged carbon dioxide at this fiery monster charging out of the ceiling until the cylinder was completely empty. Moments later, burned severely on his hands, arms and upper body, Mr. Ecker abandoned the attack and concentrated on the evacuation of the occupants.

### **Mass Panic**

Now approximately 40 seconds after Mr. Helms had opened the trap door, powerful large ferocious bright balls of orange and red flame burst through the ceiling in the southeast corner of the main hall.<sup>(10)</sup> Caught completely off guard, the 1,200 people in attendance were surprised and astonished!

As people started to scream and rush towards the exit doors, folding tables and metal chairs, along with glass pitchers of beer and soda crashed to the floor. The fire was now billowing across the east and south wall ceiling areas, with the intensity of a wildfire, consuming everything in its path. The deadly smoke was now piercing the lungs of the people who moments earlier were dancing in the arms of loved ones or significant others to the music of a live band playing the song “Tea for Two.”<sup>(11)</sup>

In the frenzy, fathers and mothers searched for children, spouses searched for their partners, older people searched for relatives and accompanying friends. Mrs. Doris Gorrick, as she attempted to evacuate the building, could now hear the house siren wailing on top of the Brooklyn Park Fire Station, less than a mile away, and realized that the fire fighters were now alerted to this nightmare.<sup>(12)</sup> She had lived in Brooklyn Park for years and had heard this siren hundreds of times. Now the siren was for her and the hundreds of others trapped in what seemed like a burning “box of egg crates” disintegrating by the second.<sup>(13)</sup>

Mrs. Gorrick was not the only one who heard the fire station siren. Anne Arundel County Police Officer Joseph Jager, who drove his patrol car to the north parking lot stopped and got out of his vehicle. He could see the flames from the rear of the building as he was cruising along Belle Grove Road. Officer Jager could hear the fire station siren in the distance. There were people injured and burned throughout the parking lot. Officer Jager picked up his two-way radio and requested his dispatch center, located in Ferndale, “to send every available ambulance and police officer to the scene.”<sup>(14)</sup>

Now back inside the large crowd, described by many as a “tide of humanity,”<sup>(15)</sup> forced its way towards the main entrance door of the facility. “Since this doorway was the way in it must be the quickest way out,” thought many.<sup>(16)</sup> Some tried to retrieve their coats from the cloakroom adjacent to the exit, as a result people started stacking up at this location creating a huge “bottleneck effect” on the evacuating crowd.

As the choking smoke enveloped the building's interior and the red flames rolled overhead, many people started pushing and shoving their way to the exits. Tables and chairs were overturned, broken glass was everywhere, all contributing to many of the occupant's injuries and obstructing attempts to exit quickly. A couple of the men stood on tables and made attempts to calm the people down, but it was of little use; the frantic crowd was totally out of control.

Suddenly as if matters were not bad enough, all of the lights in the hall went out. Now the panic increased tenfold as hundreds pushed, shoved and fought their way to the exit doors. People were actually trampled on the floor. The *News American* reported the next day stated that survivors were still trembling hours after their escape. One described the holocaust as "the most terrible thing imaginable." Another said, "they shrieked, they screamed, they cried. I'll never forget it!"<sup>(17)</sup>

### **Locked Exits**

The largest exit opening, designed to move 250 people per minute, was located between the milkbar and the huge hall. In order to keep non-paying customers from entering the event, the door was locked on this evening.<sup>(18)</sup> There was no panic hardware attached such as a bar that when depressed pops and releases the locking bolt. Mr. Thomas Hare, of Brooklyn, somehow broke open the doors saving the lives of hundreds of people.<sup>(19)</sup> As if a dam burst, people stampeded out of this opening through and over the counters of the milkbar; finally exiting from the milkbar door and windows.

As people started to take matters into their own hands, the cloakroom was overrun and people started exiting through its windows. Many broke out windowpanes with their fist, severely cutting their hands. Mr. Helms' office door was broken down and the crowd swarmed through this area to escape through the office windows. Many found a doorway located between the office and milkbar and joined the mass evacuation there.

Someone unlocked the exit door through the cocktail lounge and many people exited through this area, as well as the kitchen, the north, south and west exit doors, and the large opened overhead door on the east wall.

There was a second overhead door located on the west wall of the hall. Because of the number of people pushing up against it, the door concaved outward, which hampered its operation. To make matters worse the door was still locked. As a result, many people broke windows on the west wall and climbed out. Finally, Mr. Frank Kvech of Brooklyn fought his way to the overhead door and finding the latching mechanism, released it. He was able to open the large door despite its distortion, enabling many more to escape the hellish inferno.<sup>(20)</sup>

## **Some Reentered**

Fear stricken patrons, fought, pushed, and shoved to make their way to the outside to safety and the fresh air. Now some started to reenter, obstructing the masses trying to get out, causing additional confusion and panic. Professor John L. Bryan, head of the Fire Protection Curriculum at the University of Maryland, at the time, conducted research to study the Arundel Park panic behavior. He attributes the reentry to people looking for or to assist friends and family.<sup>(21)</sup>

His study also reveals that in the early stages of the fire when persons who realized that there was a problem and went back to their groups to alert them, they were laughed at. Many believed that the fire was an isolated problem and was not life threatening. Dr. Bryan also conveys that the large consumption of alcohol throughout the afternoon by the patrons undoubtedly affected their judgment and perception of the impending fire situation.

One of the people who safely made her way out was Miss Stella Kozlowski of Baltimore. However for some unknown reason that only she knew, Stella re-entered the ravaging inferno! <sup>(22)</sup>

## **Fire Fighting**

At the Brooklyn Park Volunteer Fire Station, located at the corner of Ritchie Highway and Eleventh Avenue, it seemed like the start of another quiet Sunday evening. Harry Zlotowski remembers completing a Maryland Fire & Rescue Institute fireman's training class that afternoon at the station. Apparently, there were a number of volunteers on hand. <sup>(23)</sup>



The Brooklyn Park Fire Station received the call from Arundel Park at 5:08 P.M. According to Volunteer Lieutenant Charles Doegen, who would later become Brooklyn's fire chief, the party calling said "we have a small fire down here at Arundel Park. Will you send us a fire truck?" <sup>(24)</sup>

Eddie Utz, the career pump operator on duty, who would later retire as a division chief of the Anne Arundel County Fire Department and have the new Brooklyn fire station dedicated to his career posthumously in 2004, started up the US Fire Apparatus built open cab fire pumper. Ed, turning on the engine's red flashing lights while pulling out of the station door with Lieutenant Charles Doegen riding in the right front officer's seat along with Harry Zlotowski, Ron Hasse, Jim File, and others hanging

on the back step, took off for Belle Grove Road. Engines from the Linthicum, Ferndale, and Glen Burnie Fire Departments were also responding. (25)

As the pumper turned on to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue from Ritchie Highway and approached the crest of 5th Avenue hill, the fire fighting crew could see a huge column of black smoke. When the bright red engine descended down to Belle Grove Road, Joe and Peg Ross of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, along with many others in the Brooklyn Park community, heard the sirens, went outside, looked around, and saw the smoke from the fire. Joe and Peg stated, “On that day we never saw or heard so many fire engines and ambulances in our life.” (26)

The Brooklyn pumper made its way south past 6th Avenue and started down the hill towards Arundel Park and nothing could have prepared the fire fighting crew for what they were about to confront!

Utz maneuvered the pumper along Belle Grove Road, now cluttered and backed up with car loads of people estimated to be in the thousands who were trying to help with or watch the fire. Lieutenant Doegen could see large flames penetrating from the rear of the building. Before the fire fighters could make any attempt to fight the fire they were first required to deal with a multitude of obstacles such as hundreds of parked vehicles and cars trying to drive out of the lot. To make matters worse, hoards of the severely injured were milling around in shock.

After much maneuvering and time, Ed Utz was able to position the pumper midway between the burning structure and the fire hydrant located approximately 300 feet south of the building. It was at this point that fire attack hose lines were pulled and advanced to the fire. These lines initially were supplied from the 750-gallon tank on the pumper. Larger hose lines were dragged back and hooked up to the fire hydrant to augment the water supply. (27)



In order to release the brakes and move the cars away from the fire hydrant, many car windows were smashed. Gary Utz, presently a fire fighter for the Anne Arundel County Fire Department, remembers his dad Ed, telling him stories of breaking the windows on vehicles that couldn't be moved and running hose lines through the interior of the cars, just like in the 1991 movie, “Backdraft.” (28) At approximately 5:11 P.M., three minutes from the time the fire department was alerted, Lieutenant Doegen could see that the interior was completely engulfed and fire was breaking through

the building's huge quonset hut style roof.(29) As the other engines started to arrive, they were positioned in the rear of the building and along a dirt road west of Belle Grove Road to draft-suction water from a pond in a gravel quarry. Eventually a general alarm was requested, bringing ambulances, fire apparatus, and equipment north from Pikesville, Baltimore City, and as far away as Deale in southern Anne Arundel County.

Now, the only thing the fire fighters could do was to direct their hose lines to the windows and doorways in the event someone, who could have possibly made it to that point inside the burning building, could be protected and make their escape. However, all the people who were going to get out were now out. No one would be able to survive the deadly smoke and superheated temperatures as the fire raced on, consuming the entire structure.

Three extremely brave fire fighters tied to ropes quickly crawled into the back of the building to search the bathrooms for reports of people trapped there. (30) However, they did not find anyone. Other arriving fire fighters along with numerous county and state police officers directed their efforts to provide first aid to the hundreds of victims who were suffering from severe cuts and burns and the effects of shock.

Frank Homberg, the other career pump operator assigned to the Brooklyn Park Station, at the time, was also the Volunteer Deputy Chief. His son, Frank Homberg, Jr., a retired Anne Arundel County Fire Department Division Chief, remembers that on the evening of the fire his dad was sick in bed with the flu. Upon hearing about the fire and being alerted of the massive traffic jam around the burning assembly hall, the elder Frank got out of bed, dressed and the two of them walked across 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue from their house to the fire station to retrieve Frank Sr.'s fire fighting protective gear. (31)

Father and son walked about a quarter mile through the Brooklyn Park neighborhood and through the snow-covered woods to assist with the fire. They worked the scene through and into the early hours of the morning. Although Frank Jr. was not yet a member with the department, he assisted his father by running messages between the chiefs and the crews working with the hose lines and searching for victims.

As additional fire engines arrived, hose lines were stretched to a fire hydrant at 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Belle Grove Road. Other engines were used to shuttle water from other hydrants back down to the fire scene. Altogether, Baltimore City, Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Howard, and Prince Georges counties along with the airport sent a total of 34 fire engines, two ladder trucks, seven rescue trucks, and 15 ambulances to the fire.(32)

It was later estimated that approximately 5,000 spectators arrived at the scene with numerous vehicles.(33) The spectators and vehicles hampered the access of the responding emergency equipment. It was a major challenge for police to keep a traffic lane open to bring the ambulances in and to move them out. The newspapers quoted Chief Fire Marshal Harry Klasmeier as saying "The citizens mobilized quicker than the fire departments did!" (34)

Based on the building's dimensions, combustible construction, and fire involvement, over 4,000 gallons of water per minute would have been needed immediately to extinguish it.(35) This would have required over 50 fire fighters and seventeen large hose lines over and above what the Brooklyn fire station crew could provide. In addition, there is no guarantee that any lives would have been saved. The ability to acquire the

necessary water and apply it to the fire in sufficient quantities in the time required would be impossible even with today's technology, standards, and capabilities.

### **Deaths and Injuries**

Because of the confusion and panic many people were separated from loved ones, friends and groups. It would take hours before they were reunited. Mr. Albert Evans of Brooklyn, who had his wife's arm in the initial scramble to the exits, became separated and was knocked to the floor. He managed to get back up and exit the building.<sup>(36)</sup> About two hours later he found his wife, Arbutus, at South Baltimore Hospital with a leg injury. Not everyone was so lucky. Mrs. Anna Brandt of Baltimore was attending her first oyster roast and celebrating her sixtieth birthday.

According to newspaper accounts of the fire, Mrs. Brandt, upon observing Mr. Ecker operating the fire extinguisher, said to her daughter Mary, "Lets get out of here." As people began the mad rush to the exits, they knocked down anyone in their way. Mary and her mother became separated.<sup>(37)</sup> Mary was able to exit the building. Unfortunately, her mom, Mrs. Anna Brandt, was later found with the eight other deceased located on the west side of the building. All the bodies were women ranging in age from 28 to 82 years. The cause of death was carbon monoxide. Miss Stella Kozlowski's body was among them.

Joseph (Rozmarynowski) Ross in a recent interview stated that Miss Kozlowski was a good friend of his mother Mary. Joe remembers Miss Kozlowski singing in the choir at Saint Adalbert Catholic Church in Wagner's Point not far from Curtis Bay. As a teenager, he played the church organ there and has fond memories of Stella and her sister Elizabeth singing soprano at mass and at other church activities.<sup>(38)</sup> A tenth body, also a woman, was found later by fire fighters conducting overhaul of the debris. The body was found in the area of the building between the bandstand and the kitchen.

What had been panic and pandemonium inside was now mass confusion outside. Many of the injured had collapsed or fainted throughout the parking lot and along Belle Grove Road. Many were wandering around as if in a daze. The temperature was only 38 degrees F that evening and most people who had evacuated were without coats and hats. Some had even lost their shoes. One woman stated that she had shoes burned off of her feet!

Mr. Frederick Evans, one of the ambulance drivers, said that many of the injured were transported to the hospitals in private autos. He remembers rendering first aid and transporting five patients on his first trip to South Baltimore General Hospital. He made seven complete trips in all transporting a total of 35 patients.<sup>(39)</sup>

Two outstanding emergency care providers that evening were Dr. Leonard Flax and Mrs. Julia Bowen, both of Brooklyn Park. Mrs. Bowen, a nurse who was visiting the event to collect for "March of Dimes," assisted Dr. Flax in triaging victims and administering morphine to the severely burned. Overall they provided care for some 75 victims.

Due to the severity of the victim's burns, the doctor quickly went through two bottles of morphine before he could treat all of the patients. Dr. Flax was brought to the location by an Anne Arundel County Police Officer.<sup>(40)</sup>

Over 250 victims were treated at area hospitals. Fortunately only 14 of the victims needed to be admitted and all the others were sent home. Unfortunately, on February 4, 1956, Mr. Andrew Brady, a retired Baltimore City Fire Department Fire Fighter, died from his severe burns at South Baltimore Hospital. Mr. Brady, 57 years old, who lived in Brooklyn Park was working the event in the main hall as a special policeman. He would be the eleventh victim to die from this tragedy. It was said that he was the last person out, making sure to the best of his abilities that no one was left behind.<sup>(41)</sup>

### **Contributing Factors**

The NFPA's report cites the following six contributing factors to the large life loss and injuries that resulted from this fire. They are listed in order of importance: Delay in evacuation and alarm transmission, combustible concealed attic, panic, failure of current supply to exit signs, congestion of materials in the hall, lack of fire alarm system and employee training in fire emergencies.<sup>(42)</sup>

Today, there is no memorial, no flag, no plaque, nothing to remind people of the tragedy and devastation that took place on that horrific Sunday evening. There is just an asphalt-covered parking lot at the site where Mrs. Anna Brandt and Miss Stella Kozlowski and eight other beautiful people took their last breath. It is the ground where Mr. Andrew Brady would unselfishly commit his last final act of public service.

It is hard to imagine that in a span of three minutes, the time it takes to count to 180, so many bad things happened to so many good people, changing their lives forever. Three minutes is all it took from the time the fire first burst through the huge ceiling until the Brooklyn engine arrived on the scene and found the entire interior engulfed in flames. However, during those three minutes many rose to the occasion to take charge and do the right thing.

The brave and unselfish tried to fight the fire, they opened huge overhead doors, they broke through locked exit doors that should never have been locked, they broke windows, and they tried to calm people down. As stated before and trying times, "never so many owed so few." <sup>(43)</sup> It must be remembered that approximately 1,190 people managed to escape the building in those precious three minutes, many scarred for life, but just the same they had a life left to live.

The wise move was to remain vigilant. A number of people made observations of what was going on around them. As they saw men running with fire extinguishers and smoke puffing from the ceiling, there was no question! They followed their intuition, their gut; they made a decision to leave, whether they were being laughed at or not. Some even found time to pick up their coats and wraps from the cloakroom before they departed.

Similar precautionary decision-making was very prevalent at New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, where many occupants of the South tower took matters into their own hands. Moments after the terrorist's hijacked jet struck the North tower, multitudes began exiting the South tower. Authorities fearing that exiting occupants would walk outside and be struck from debris and bodies falling from the North tower, directed occupants to report back to their offices. Many disregarded the directive. because of their gut feelings and intuition, they evacuated anyway. Many who were directed back up into the upper floors of the south tower were killed or injured when the second plane crashed into the structure minutes later!

If there is one lesson of the many to be learned and remembered here, it is vigilance. Today, with most buildings constructed of non-combustible building materials and protected by automatic sprinkler systems, automatic smoke detection, fire alarm systems, and elaborate 911 systems, it is still not uncommon to take fire protection and safety for granted.

However in light of the many fire tragedies that have occurred throughout the nation over the past fifty years, it proves that none of us are totally safe. It is up to us as citizens to question authorities, and to inquire about unsafe conditions, locked exit doors, and lack of sprinklers, detectors, and alarms in today's existing structures.

In the future, while you are attending an event in a building that seems overcrowded and you notice that one of the exit doors is padlocked shut, what will you do? Or if you are enjoying the festivities at the same event and you notice smoke or people running around with fire extinguishers, what will you do? And finally, if you are in a fire situation where the crowd is running towards the exits, shrieking, screaming or crying, how will you act? Think about it. Be vigilant: observe, plan, be prepared, take appropriate action and survive!

## **Acknowledgments**

*I would like to thank the following for their contributions and assistance to this article. Harry W. Klasmeier, Harry Zlotowski, Charles Doegen, Gary Utz, Frank Homberg Jr., Harry Steiner, Les Helfrich, Iris "Peg" and Joseph B. (Rozmarynowski) Ross.*

*In addition, I would like to thank the following for their assistance in the review and editing of the material: Gloria Bizjak, Karen Haje, and Kathy Ross.*

## **Author:**

*Joseph B. Ross Jr. is a NFPA Certified Fire Protection Specialist. He holds a bachelor's degree in Fire Science from the University of Maryland University College. A retired division chief from the Anne Arundel County Fire Department, he has completed the Executive Fire Officer's Course at the National Fire Academy.*

*Currently he is the National Incident Management System/Incident Command System coordinator for the Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute and has written a number of articles in the fire and rescue arena.*

### **Pictures:**

Page 2: Scaled graphic of Arundel Park based on building information obtained from the official reports. View is looking south from Belle Grove Road-Drawing by Harry Steiner. 11/05

Page 3-Top: Fire aftermath-front entrance of building looking Southwest. The “Arundel Park” sign located in the parking lot near Belle Grove Road can barely be seen in the distance-Photo taken by Les Helfrich, 1/56; courtesy of Charles Doegen.

Page 3-Bottom: Fire aftermath-milkbar interior. The metal floor post are all that remains of the bar stools that the author and his uncle sat on only two weeks before the fire. Photo - 1/56; Courtesy of Gary Utz.

Page 4: Fire aftermath-looking east at the building from Belle Grove Road. Site of overhead door that became stuck from all of the people shoved against it trying to exit from the fire. Photo – 1/56; Courtesy of Gary Utz.

Page 6: Scaled graphic of the building interior looking south from the main entrance. The fire started in the left rear corner of the structure where the kitchen is attached to the main building. Drawing by Harry Steiner. 11/05

Page 11: Fire aftermath-looking west, closest fire hydrant. The remaining walls of the Arundel Park structure can barely be seen in the distance. Photo taken by Les Helfrich, 1/56; courtesy of Charles Doegen.

### **Notes:**

- (1) Fire Engineering, Church Supper Fire-Panic, p.315.
- (2) Harry Klasmeier Interview by JBR, 1/19/05.
- (3) AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.10.
- (4) NFPA, Church Oyster Roast Panic, p.282.
- (5) AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.11.
- (6) Ibid, p.11.
- (7) Baltimore News American, Miller & Mullikin, 1/30/56.
- (8) Harry Zlotowski Interview by JBR, 4/8/05.
- (9) AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.12.
- (10) Ibid, p.11.
- (11) Baltimore News American, Miller & Mullikin, 1/30/56.
- (12) AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.18.

- (13) Baltimore News American, Miller & Mullikin, 1/30/56.
- (14) AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.15.
- (15) Ibid, Summary.
- (16) Ibid, p.13.
- (17) Baltimore News American, Miller & Mullikin, 1/30/56.
- (18) NFPA, Church Oyster Roast Panic, p.277-78.
- (19) AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.13.
- (20) Ibid, p. 14.
- (21) Bryan, Study of Survivor's Reports-Arundel Park, 1957.
- (22) Joe and Peg Ross Interview by JBR, 5/1/05.
- (23) Harry Zlotowski Interview by JBR, 4/8/05.
- (24) Charlie Doegen Interview by JBR, 4/8/05.  
AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.14.
- (25) Harry Zlotowski Interview by JBR, 4/8/05.
- (26) Joe and Peg Ross Interview by JBR, 5/1/05.
- (27) Charlie Doegen Interview by JBR, 4/8/05.
- (28) Gary Utz Interview by JBR, 4/8/05.
- (29) Charlie Doegen Interview by JBR, 4/8/05.
- (30) Ibid.
- (31) Frank Homberg Jr. Interview by JBR, 9/1/05.
- (32) AACo Fire & Police/MSP Report, p.6-7.
- (33) Baltimore News American, Miller & Mullikin, 1/30/56.
- (34) Fire Engineering, Church Supper Fire-Panic, p.317.
- (35) MFRI Fire Officer I, Lesson 17-1, p.6.
- (36) Baltimore News American, Miller & Mullikin, 1/30/56.
- (37) Ibid.
- (38) Joe and Peg Ross Interview by JBR, 5/1/05.
- (39) Baltimore News American, Miller & Mullikin, 1/30/56.
- (40) Ibid.
- (41) Murray, Unheard Heros, p.156-57.
- (42) NFPA, Church Oyster Roast Panic, p.277-78.
- (43) Winston Church Hill Qoute.

### **Bibliography:**

1. Anne Arundel County Police Department, Anne Arundel County Fire Prevention Bureau, Maryland State Police [combined report}. (1956). **Report of the Arundel Park Fire.**
2. Stevens, R.E. (1956). "Church Oyster Roast Fire Panic." **Quarterly-National Fire Protection Association**, XLIX, 277 – 285.
3. Miller, L., Mullikin, J. (1/30/56). "10 Dead in Fire Here, 250 Hurt as Crowd Panics." **Baltimore News American.**

4. Bryan, J.L., "A Study of the Survivors Reports on the Panic in the Fire at the Arundel Park in Brooklyn, Maryland, 1/29/56," Fire Protection Curriculum, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 1957.
5. Howard, R. (1991). **Backdraft** movie.
6. **Fire Engineering**. (1956, April), "Church supper fire-panic brings death to 11, injuries over 200." Author
7. Maryland Fire & Rescue Institute. (1999). **Fire Officer II Curriculum**. Lesson 12-1, p7. Author
8. Murray, B. (1969). **The Unherald Heros**. E.John Schmitz & Sons, Inc., p.156-157.
9. National Fire Protection Association. (2003). **NFPA 101: Life Safety Code**. Quincy, MA: Author
10. Winston Churchill. (1943) Quote from speech to the people thanking the armed forces after the Battle of Britain during World War II..