# RETROSPECTS

*by*

LOUIS GUENZEL

## "THE IROQUOIS THEATER FIRE"


"THE IROQUOIS THEATER"

*Chicago's Temple of Tragedy*

*December 30, 1903*

LOUIS GUENZEL

Louis Guenzel was born in Köslin, Prussia January 28, 1860. He came to Chicago on June 20, 1892 and joined Adler and Sullivan, architects, starting another partnership (Guenzel and Hibbard) in 1894. After 1897 Mr. Guenzel continued the practice alone, allowing one more change, a brief partnership of Guenzel and Drummond. Several noteworthy buildings are to his credit, including the former Red Star Inn; the Maryland (originally Eitel) Hotel, and many others. Reportedly a fiery personality, his designs ranged from Germanic appearing Victorian, then Art Nouveau, later Prairie School, and finally a very stylized Art Deco. He passed away in 1956 at age ninety-six. His son, Paul, graciously provided many copies of photos of his father's works, and much of the background information in this presentation. Louis' other pamphlet, which follows the Iroquois text, is on the tragic fire at the LaSalle Hotel. It relates the two tragedies. The LaSalle Hotel was reopened; the remodeling was done by the theatre architectural firm Rapp and Rapp, then operated by our late member Mason Rapp. They remodeled damaged portions of the LaSalle in Art Moderne style. It was demolished in the 1980's for a new, bland, office tower.

## INTRODUCTION:

On Wednesday, December the 30th, 1903, I had taken lunch at the Bismarck Restaurant on West Randolph street in company of Dr. Walter Wever, the German Consul, as my guest and left there with him at about 3:40 P.M., walking eastward towards State street to board a street car. In passing the Iroquois Theater, we noticed some commotion which we attributed to the ending of the afternoon performance, and since our view was obstructed by a row of delivery wagons backed up against the curb in front of the Theater, we paid no further attention to the matter.

Several hours later, "EXTRAS" announced all over the City, that a great fire had destroyed the interior of the Iroquois Theater causing in excess of 1000 casualties with close to 600 deaths. I had just obtained one of these papers, when Dr. Wever telephoned to me to inquire, whether I had heard of the great tragedy, and to express his belief that he would receive orders from his government to ascertain immediately the cause of the disaster. He also wanted to know, whether I would be willing to make a thorough examination of the premises and draw up a statement of my findings. I agreed to do so, provided I should be furnished a pass giving me free access to every part of the Theater at any reasonable time. The anticipated order duly arrived, and at 9 A.M. on December the 31st I met Dr. Wever at the City Hall, where he presented a cablegram and applied for the desired pass which was promptly issued. With that pass I entered the Theater at about 10 A.M. the same day and had my first glimpse of the interior of the place, where less than 19 hours before one of the most tragic happenings in American Theater history had taken place.

It was, of course, impossible to obtain plans or specifications of the structure, and I was compelled, therefore, to measure up the building, reconstruct plans and sections and take photgraphs, in order to properly illustrate my story. This made it necessary for me to spend several weeks in the Theater, which afforded me the opportunity to study conditions most thoroughly and to observe many things, which might have been overlooked at a more hurried inspection.

My narrative was not intended for publication. It was written in German and delivered to Dr. Wever in January 1904 without charge, as a matter of courtesy. But one of the owners of the Theater had heard that some kind of a report was in preparation and, knowing me personally, asked my permission to read it which I granted. He returned the copy forwarded to him "without comment".

I was naturally much interested in the various court proceedings resulting from the fire and was greatly surprised to see that, notwithstanding the many faults and defects in the planning of the Theater and the unparalleled negligence displayed in its supervision and operation, all of the suits ended in verdicts: "Not guilty".

In recent years I have repeatedly attended memorial meetings held annually on the date of the catastrophe in the Council Chambers of the City Hall. From observations made at these meetings, from conversations and discussions with eye-witnesses of the fire but, primarily, in consequence of the adverse court decisions rendered at the trials of the damage suits, I have arrived at the conclusion, that knowledge of the actual conditions prevalent in the Theater at the time of the fire has been maliciously withheld from the public by clever and successful manipulation.

For that reason and because of the fact that even today fire-hazards are plentiful in our community, as several occurrences have demonstrated of late, I have decided upon releasing my original report in translated form, together with plans and photos made by me at a time when firemen were still searching the smouldering and odorous ruins for undiscovered victims and lost apparel and other valuables.

Chicago, November the 30th, 1945.

LOUIS GUENZEL, Architect.

Chicago, January the 20th, 1904.

On Wednesday, December the 30th, 1903, at 3:30 P.M., a fire broke out in the Iroquois Theater during an afternoon performance which, inside of forty minutes, destroyed the whole stage scenery and appointments, a part of the auditorium and nearly 600 human lives. The erection of the Theater was started on May 1st, 1903, and the opening of this "most perfect Theater in America" took place on November the 23rd of the same year.

The building ground, situated in Chicago's most prominent business district, borders on two public streets and one alley, as plans and photographs indicate. The main entrance is located at the more frequented Randolph street, and its axis, running north and south, is perpendicular to the east-west axis of the Theater proper. On Dearborn street, the other thoroughfare, a strip of land, 40 feet deep, has been left vacant to be used some day, in connection with the adjoining corner lot, for a 12-story hotel building. Width and depth of the stage portion of the Theater are about 83 feet by 52 feet respectively (a small addition to the south not included), while the auditorium measures 83 by 66 feet and contains about 1700 seats (see Plate 1).

From Randolph street, entrance is gained through five 5 feet wide double door openings "a" into an oblong, 18 feet wide vestibule, in which at the west end are located the ticket offices, while at the east end a 3′9″ wide platform stair leads up to the Theater offices above the vestibule; said stairway serves at the same time as an emergency exit for the gallery, where its last run is narrowed down to 3 feet. From the vestibule one passes into the grand stair hall through three, 7 feet wide door openings "b" which are each fitted up with one double folding and one single door wing. Immediately inside these door openings, to the right and to the left, start two 8 feet wide main stairways,

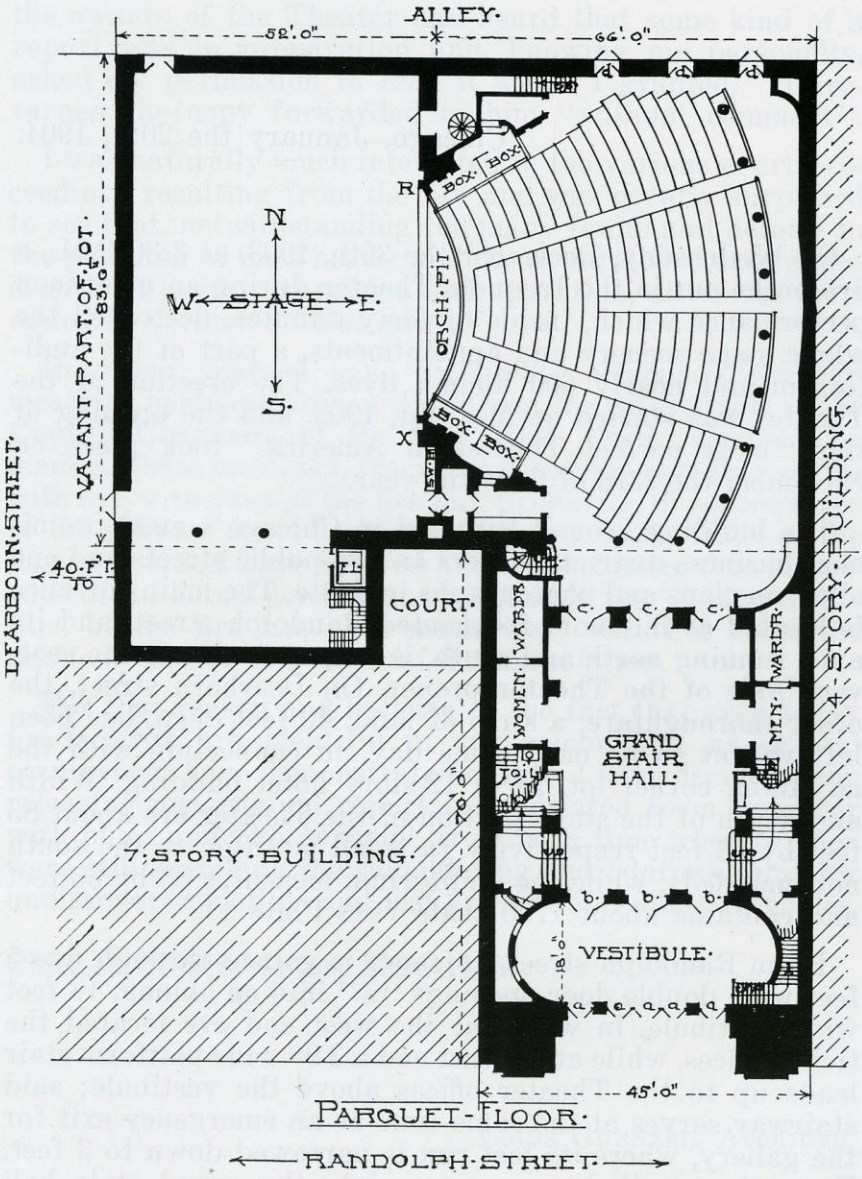
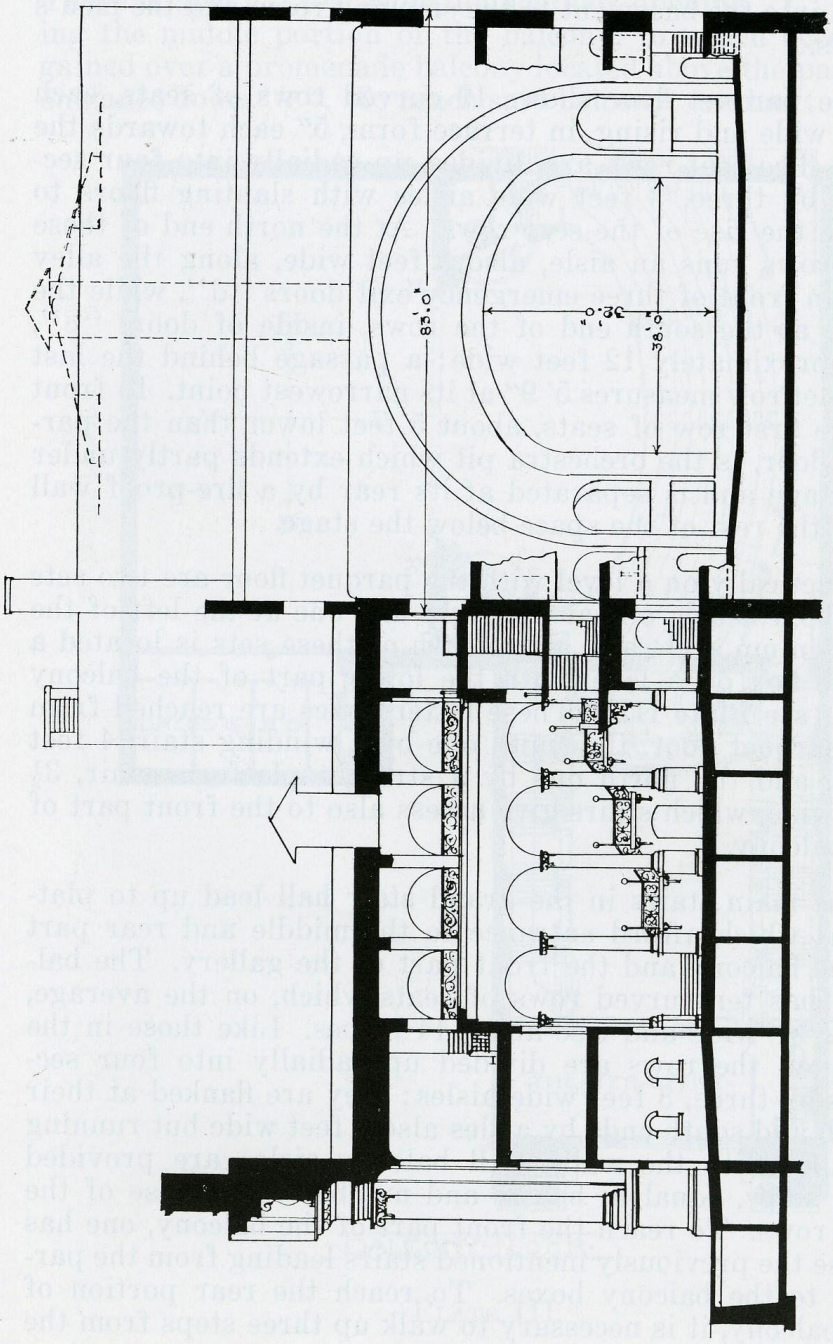

ALLEY.
52'.0"
66'.0"
N
W STAGE E
S.
R
X
BOX.
BOX.
BOX.
BOX.
ORCH. PIT
VACANT PART OF LOT.
83.0"
DEARBORN STREET.
40.0"
COURT.
WOMEN
WARDR.
WARDR.
MEN.
GRAND STAIR HALL.
70'.0"
7 STORY BUILDING.
VESTIBULE.
18'.0"
45'.0"
4 STORY BUILDING.
PARQUET FLOOR.
RANDOLPH STREET.

PLATE I.

extending up to the balcony floor (see Plate II), while straight ahead three similar door openings "c" give access




SECTION FOLLOWING MAIN AXIS OF GRAND STAIR HALL.

PLATE II.

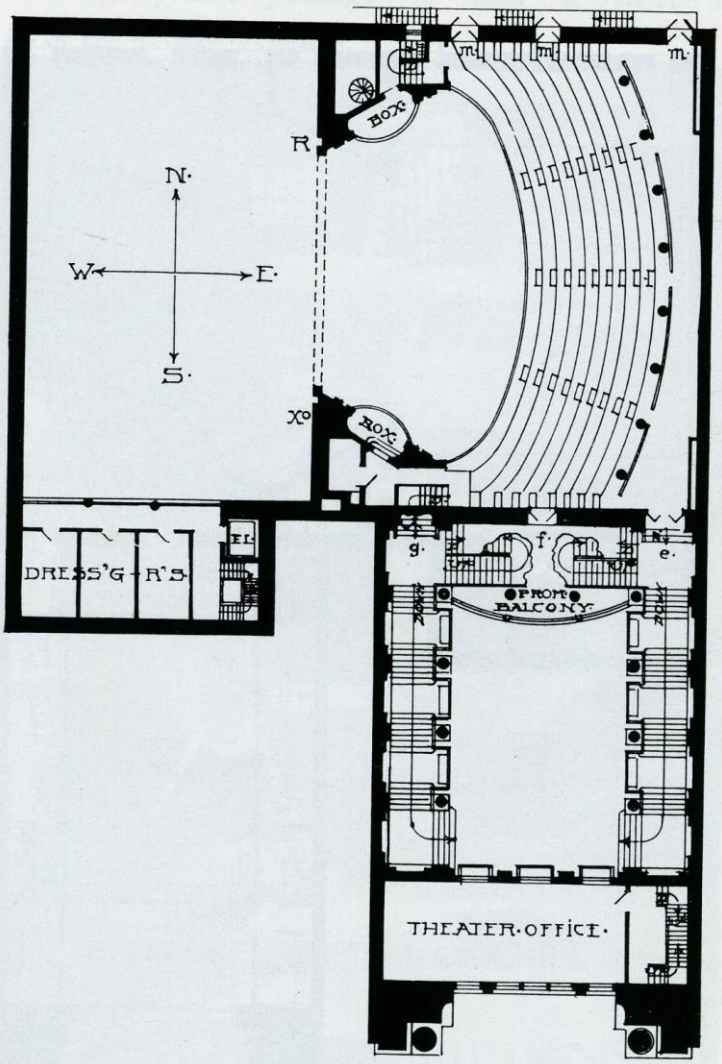
to the parquet. In this stair hall are located under the west flight of the stairs the ladies' coat and powder room, and under the east flight the men's coat room and a stair leading down into the basement to the smoking room and the men's toilets.

The parquet floor shows 19 curved rows of seats, each 2′ 9″ wide and rising, in terrace form, 5″ each towards the rear. The seat rows are divided up radially into four sections by three, 3 feet wide aisles with slanting floors to match the rise of the seat rows. At the north end of these seat rows runs an aisle, also 3 feet wide, along the alley wall in front of three emergency exit doors "d", while the space at the south end of the rows, inside of doors "c", is approximately 12 feet wide; a passage behind the last parquet row measures 5′ 9″ at its narrowest point. In front of the first row of seats, about 5 feet lower than the parquet floor, is the orchestra pit which extends partly under the stage and is separated at its rear by a fire-proof wall from the rest of the space below the stage.

Practically on a level with the parquet floor are two sets of 2 boxes each, one at the right and one at the left of the proscenium arch, and above each of these sets is located a single box on a level with the lower part of the balcony floor (see Plate III). These latter boxes are reached from the parquet floor, the south one by a winding stair, 4 feet wide, and the north one by a straight platform stair, $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide, which stairs give access also to the front part of the balcony.

The main stairs in the grand stair hall lead up to platforms which afford entrance to the middle and rear part of the balcony and the front part of the gallery. The balcony has ten curved rows of seats which, on the average, are 2′ 8″ wide and rise about 14 inches. Like those in the parquet, the rows are divided up radially into four sections by three, 3 feet wide aisles; they are flanked at their north and south ends by aisles also 3 feet wide but running parallel with the walls. All balcony aisles are provided with steps, equal in height and number to the rise of the seat rows. To reach the front part of the balcony, one has to use the previously mentioned stairs leading from the parquet to the balcony boxes. To reach the rear portion of the balcony, it is necessary to walk up three steps from the

top platform of the east wing of the main stairs. These steps are directly in front of the 7 feet wide door opening "e" which is fitted up with a pair of double folding doors. There is also a 5 feet wide double door opening "f", serving the middle portion of the balcony, to which access is gained over a promenade balcony located above the parquet entrance doors "c". To reach said balcony, one has to walk

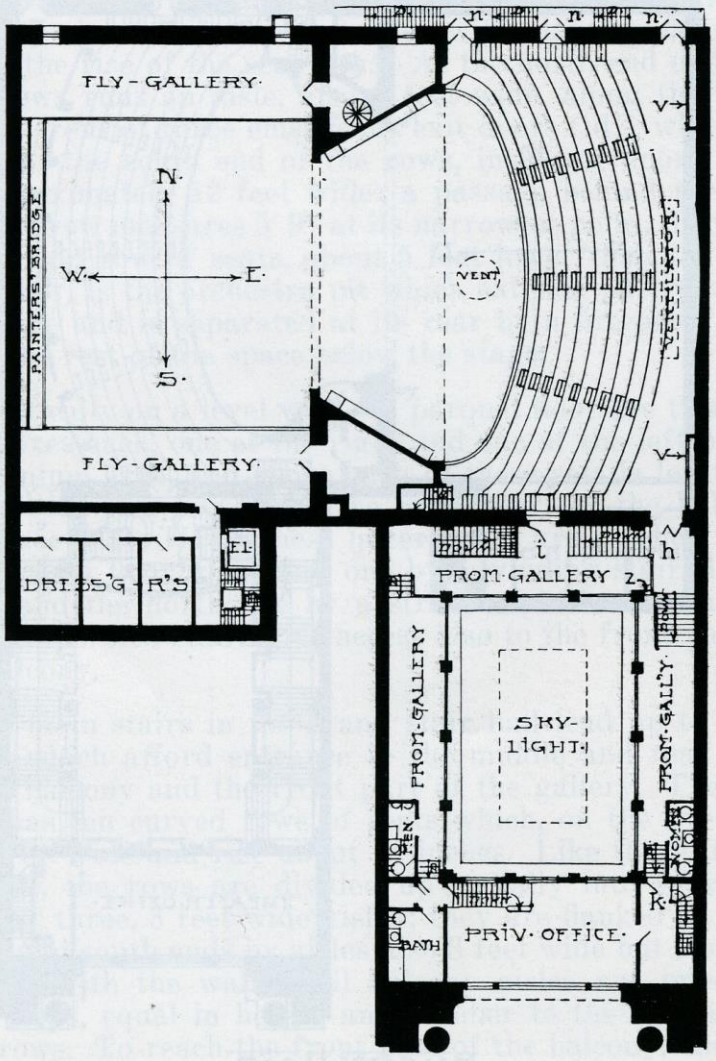



BALCONY-FLOOR.

PLATE III.

down four steps from either of the two top platforms of the main flights of stairs.

The gallery floor (see Plate IV) has also ten curved 2′ 8″ wide rows of seats and five 3 feet wide aisles similar to those in the balcony. The seat rows rise here 27 inches each, and the aisles are provided with steps to correspond with the rise of the seat rows. The front part of the gal-




GALLERY-FLOOR.

PLATE IV.

lery is reached through a door opening "g" by means of a platform stair starting northward from the top platform of the west flight of the main stairs. To the middle and rear entrance doors "i" and "h" of the gallery lead one double and one triple run of stairs, 5½ feet wide each and starting from the top platforms of both main stair wings (see Plate V). On the balcony and gallery floors are also three emergency exit openings "m" and "n" in the north

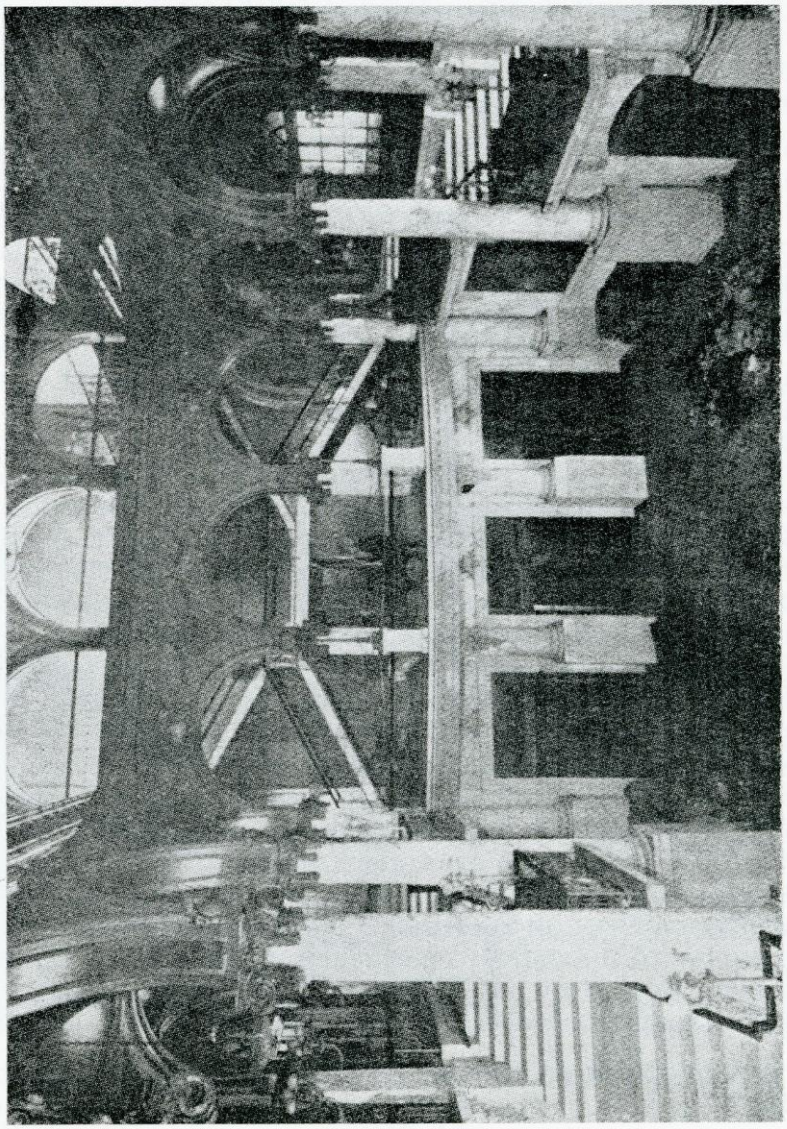


PLATE V.

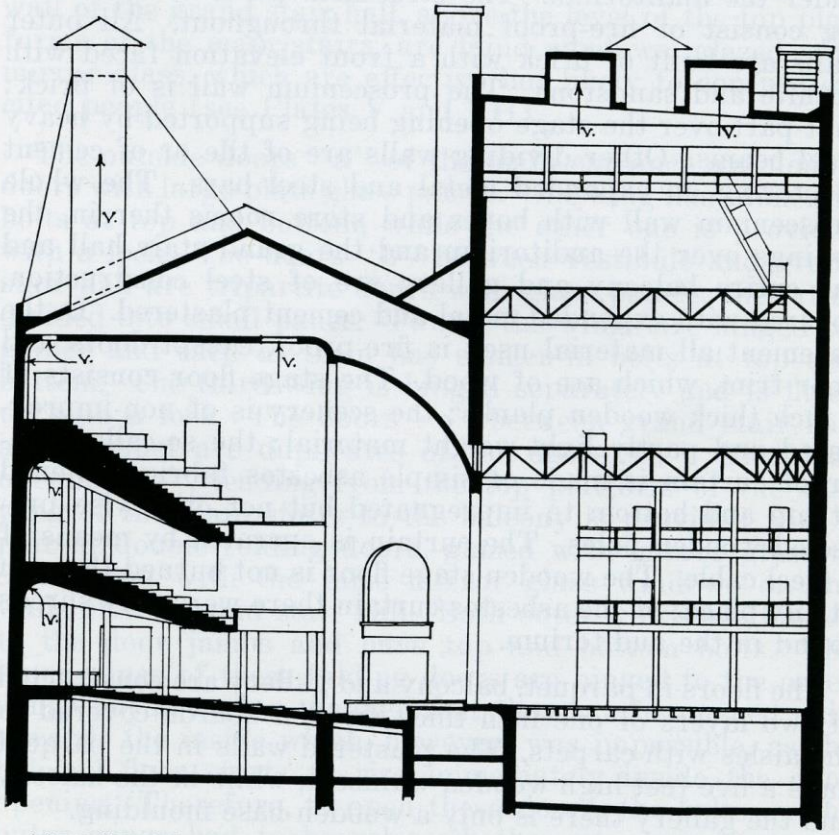
wall, leading to 3 feet wide fire escapes running down to the alley. All emergency exits in the alley wall are 4′ 6″ wide with double glass doors on the inside and double steel doors on the outside.

In the ceiling of the auditorium are in its main axis two ventilating openings, of which one, 7 feet in diameter, is located directly in front of the proscenium arch, while the second one, measuring 3 feet by 12 feet, runs parallel to and 3 feet inside of the east wall of the auditorium. Other ventilating openings are provided in the east wall at its north and south ends close to the ceiling, and near said wall under the balcony and the gallery. All these openings serve to extract the polluted air from the Theater.

At the top of the grand stair hall, where the gallery stairs end, there is on three sides an approximately 10 feet wide promenade for the gallery visitors. This promenade is interrupted at its northeast corner by an elevated platform in front of the gallery entrance "h", which platform is supported by a fireproof wall; it is reached over the third run of the $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide gallery stairs mentioned before as starting from the top platform of the east wing of the main stairs. From this elevated platform leads down in a southerly direction a $7\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide stair to the east portion of the gallery promenade. At the south end of same is the 3 feet wide emergency exit stair for the gallery, which has been described heretofore as starting from the vestibule upward to the business offices above the vestibule. At the bottom of the top run of this stair on the third floor, from where it leads up to the gallery promenade, is a door "k" which can be locked. A similar run of stairs, also 3 feet wide, leads down from the south end of the west portion of the promenade to a third floor private office, through which the emergency stair extending down to the vestibule could be reached, provided the private office doors are not locked. At the south ends of both the east and the west parts of the promenade are toilet facilities for gallery visitors, and at the west side is also a bath room for the business offices. These arrangements were responsible for the narrowness of the gallery emergency stairs. In the ceiling over the grand stair hall, inside the gallery promenade, is a skylight which occupies the greater part of the ceiling.

Stage and auditorium are connected by a passage at the southeast corner of the stage (see Plate I). This passage

has double doors of steel and close to it, on the stage side, is located the switchboard which controls the entire electric installation of the Theater. A door, about 20 feet high, in the northwest corner of the stage, leads from the latter to the alley. A second door, near the southwest corner of the stage, gives access to the vacant part of the building ground and from there to the alley or to Dearborn street. In the roof over the stage are two huge openings which were supposed to serve as ventilators (see Plate VI). On the stage side of the proscenium wall are two slit-like, vertical recesses in the wall for semi-circular reflectors, 20 feet high and 5 inches in diameter. These reflectors are fitted up with electric lamps and revolve around a vertical hinge, so that they can be turned to reflect the light in whatever direction desired.




SECTION FOLLOWING MAIN AXIS OF AUDITORIUM.

PLATE VI.

The previously mentioned addition to the stage contains in several stories dressing rooms with corridors in front of them. The latter are open to the stage up to the first fly-gallery but closed off completely with tile walls above same. With the southern fly-galleries these corridors are connected by iron doors. In the stage addition is also an elevator and an iron stairway leading down to rooms below the stage. Communication between the fly-galleries at the north and the south walls is available over a painters' bridge, extending along the west wall of the stage. From the stage floor, the fly-galleries at the north wall can be reached by a circular stair running up in a space behind the boxes on that side.

The basement contains, besides a smoking room and a men's toilet room, a number of dressing rooms located under the auditorium. The structural parts of the building consist of fire-proof material throughout. All outer walls are built of brick with a front elevation faced with granite and sandstone. The proscenium wall is of brick; that part over the stage opening being supported by heavy steel beams. Other dividing walls are of tile or of cement plastering on expanded metal and steel bars. The whole proscenium wall with boxes and store rooms therein, the ceilings over the auditorium and the grand stair hall and the entire balcony and gallery are of steel construction, covered with expanded metal and cement plastered. In the basement all material used is fire-proof, except doors and door trim, which are of wood. The stage floor consists of 4 inch thick wooden planks; the scenery is of non-impregnated and partly light-weight material; the so-called fire-proof curtain is made of simple asbestos fabric, fastened at top and bottom to impregnated but not otherwise protected wooden poles. The curtain is operated by means of a steel cable. The wooden stage floor is not burned through at any place; of the asbestos curtain there were only shreds found in the auditorium.

The floors in parquet, balcony and gallery are constructed of two layers of one inch thick wooden boards covered in the aisles with carpets. The plastered walls in the parquet have a five feet high wooden wainscot, while in the balcony and the gallery there is only a wooden base moulding.

The seat rows consist of individual, 22 inches wide cast iron frames with wooden arm supports and upholstering,

all plush covered. For the upholstering there was used a kind of hemp which, when burning, emitted a dense and suffocating smoke.

The back walls of the boxes were also covered with heavy plush, and the exit openings, not being marked as such, were draped with the same material, making them look more like windows than door openings.

Floors in vestibule and grand stair hall are of mosaic; walls and ceiling in the former and the lower part of the walls in the latter are covered with white marble slabs. The remainder of the walls in the grand stair hall is plastered. All stairs are built of steel and marble with wrought iron railings but wooden hand rails, the latter plush covered. Nothing could burn, therefore, in that part of the Theater but hand rails and wooden doors. In east and west wall of the grand stair hall, above the level of the top platforms of the main stairs, are blind windows, glazed with mirror glass, which are effective but likely to confuse excited people (see Plates V and VII).

The outside doors "a" of the main entrance are double doors with large plate glass panels. One wing has sunken-in bolts at top and bottom, while the other one is provided with a lock. The doors "b" between vestibule and grand stair hall are tripartite doors with glass panels, the latter divided into small panes. Two of the wings are hinged together and each of them has sunken-in bolts at top and bottom. The third wing is hinged separately and is fitted up with a lock. The doors "c" between grand stair hall and parquet are duplicates of the doors "b". The door opening "e", leading from the top platform of the east wing of the main stairs to the balcony is provided with a pair of double folding doors, glazed with mirror glass to correspond with the false mirror glass windows on the walls of the grand stair hall. Both outer wings are hinged to the door jambs and have top and bottom bolts. The inner wings of these folding doors are hinged to the outer wings but in such a manner that they can be opened only towards the inside which, however, was impossible, as the balcony floor starts to rise immediately inside the door opening. Therefore, to open these doors, the bolts on the outer wings had to be released, the outer wings opened outside and the pair of wings then folded up. The inner wings were provided with lock and lock plate. The balcony

door "f" has two wings opening outwards. They have mirror glass panels to match the false windows. One wing is fitted up with top and bottom bolts and the other with a lock. The door opening "g", which connects the top platform of the west wing of the main stairs with the lower part of the gallery, has a tripartite door with mirror glass

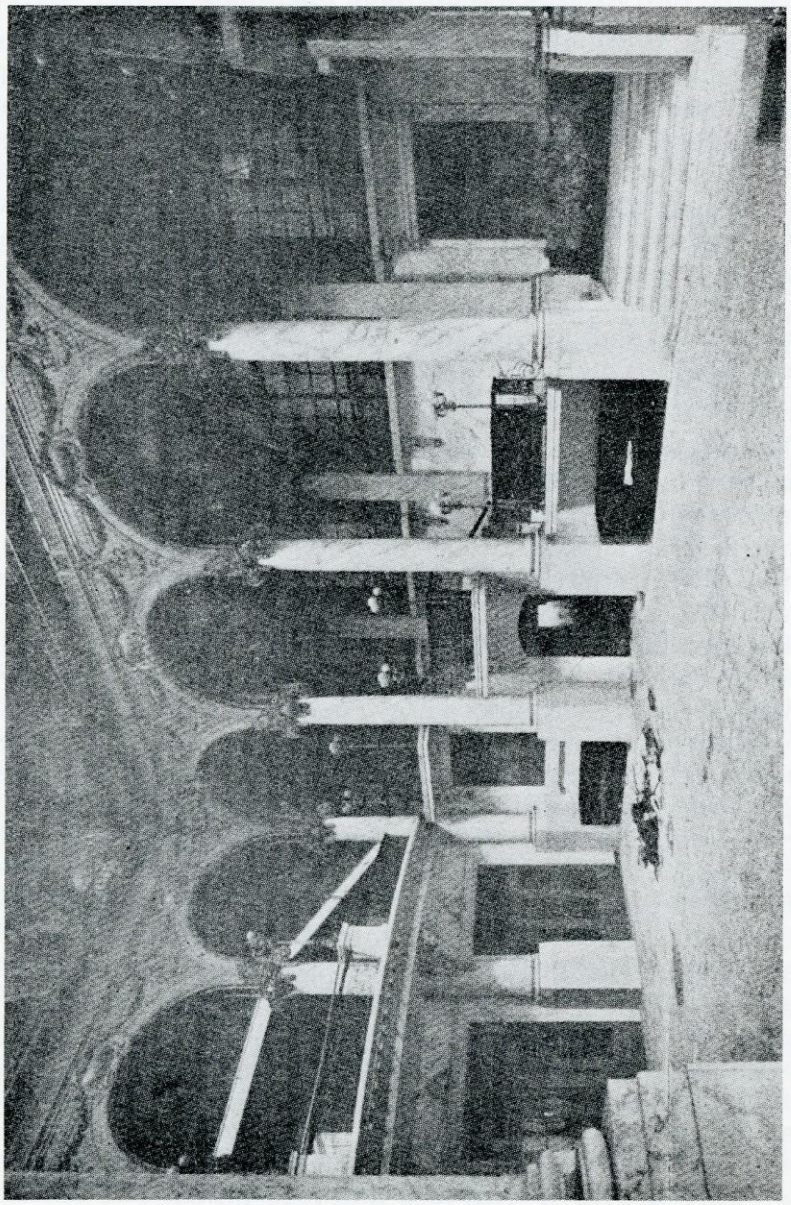


PLATE VII.

panels. All three wings hang together and only the west wing is hinged to the west jamb of the door frame. This door, after the first onrush, covered up half of the door opening because of the fact that the weight of the three wings proved too much for the jamb hinges to carry.

Of the other two gallery entrance doors, which are completely destroyed, the top one at "h" was apparently tripartite and only hinged to the door jamb at one side. Of the same kind was probably the middle one at "i". Special attention deserves the step arrangement at this entrance "i" and at the opposite emergency exit "n" in the alley wall. All emergency exits "d", "m" and "n" in the alley wall have, as previously stated, inner and outer double doors. The inner doors are glass doors, fitted up with so-called bascule locks, rather commonly used in Europe. The locks consist of top and bottom bolts attached to one wing and operated by means of a handle on the same wing which handle, when turned, releases both bolts. The installation is little known in America and the public was, therefore, not familiar with them.

The outer doors are of steel, provided at top and bottom with flat irons rotating around bolts and connected at their ends by a vertical grip-rod. Both flat irons fit into hooks attached to the second door wing. These contrivances worked inefficiently, as the badly bent grip-rods plainly show, because the doors had either been seldom opened or the flat irons stuck to the hooks on account of paint or ice. Very unpractical for public places, because seldom easily functioning, are the other bolts which were generally used on the doors. They are sunk into the wood of the door and closed or released by the operation of a usually rather weak lever.

The fire was started by a flood-light used for illuminating purposes. This flood-light was set up on a scaffold directly above the switchboard on the stage, at a point marked "X"on Plate I. The flood-light ignited a drapery in its immediate vicinity.

In court, the stage-hand operating said flood-light testified that he had repeatedly called his superior's attention to the danger of the nearness of said drapery, but that nothing had been done in the matter. The fire was at its beginning so insignificant, that the operator had tried to quench it with his hands. It could have been easily stopped,

if only minor safety devices had been at hand. But the entire fire extinguishing utensils available were two tubes, $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter and 3 feet long, containing some powder. There was only one private fireman on the stage who tried to throw that powder at the fire, but before the tubes were opened, the flames had made such headway that they could not be reached with the powder any more. On the stage were standpipes with arrangements for hose connections, but there were not only no hoses, but there was no water in the pipes, because the water supply system had not yet been completed, though the Theater had been in operation for five weeks. The fire captain in charge of the district had complained to the Theater-management as well as to his superiors, that fire-fighting appliances in the Theater were entirely lacking, but his admonition had not been heeded. There was only one hope, therefore, to stop the fire, and that was through action of the fire department. However, the nearest fire alarm box was several hundred feet away, and when the fire department had been finally reached and the fire brigade appeared, stage and auditorium were already fully aflame.

As soon as the actors had become aware of the fire, one of them stepped up to the footlights and, advising the people of the fire-proof construction of the building, cautioned them to remain quiet, signaling at the same time to drop the curtain. The rest of the actors lost no time to rush to safety through the stage exits. The opening of these doors created a strong draught which caused the light curtain to swell out and be pressed against the proscenium wall. There it got stuck on the north side about twenty feet above the stage floor on the reflector "R" (see Plate 1) from which it could not be loosened, while it slid down at the south side of the opening to about 5 feet. If at this moment the two great ventilators in the stage ceiling had opened, the whole fire column could have escaped there, but even this so immensely important precautionary measure was, like everything else, "not ready". The counterweights, necessary to open the wings, were missing, and for that reason the latter had been "temporarily" nailed up. Since fire and hot air could not find a way out in that direction, they were forced to get out somewhere else, and that was into the auditorium through the space under the curtain. This change of direction was first facilitated by the opening of the exit doors on the stage, then by the

ventilating openings in the ceiling and in and at the east wall of the auditorium and, finally, by the open doors in the latter. A blazing flame rushed suddenly forward under the curtain and swept in a spiral curve over the heads of the people to the ceiling ventilators, affecting particularly those seated in the balcony and gallery, spreading death and destruction and driving the lucky ones who escaped the flame to a desperate flight.

While the foregoing shows that criminal negligence displayed in the installation of fire-fighting appliances and safety devices on the stage has caused the beginning of the fire, it will be seen from the following, that utter lack of intelligence and common sense in planning the Theater, coupled with the most slovenly management, are responsible for the sorrowful and seldom surpassed destruction of life.

At the moment the fire started, there was a moonlight scene performed on the stage, and on that account all lights in the auditorium had been turned out with emergency lights missing. On the stage, nobody seems to have thought of turning the lights on again by throwing the switch, and from no other place could that be done; therefore, everything remained dark with the exception of the light produced by the fire itself.

When the flames reached the auditorium, the exits were in the following condition: Of the five exit doors "a", leading from the vestibule to Randolph street, there were three apparently open, while the other two were broken open later. Of the three doors "b" between vestibule and grand stair hall and the three doors "c" between the latter and the parquet, only one door was open in each case and of their three wings only two. Here it seems to have been possible finally to open, with or without force, two wings of the other two openings too, but of the six third wings only two yielded to force during the scramble, while the remaining four remained closed. The three emergency exit doors "d" in the north wall of the parquet were all shut, and it was only possible to open the east and the west one.

Of the south exits in the balcony, the middle one "f", leading to the balcony over the parquet entrance doors "c", was closed and withstood all efforts to be opened. At the

eastern exit "e" only one of the double wings was open, while the other one remained closed. Of the three emergency exits "m" in the north wall of the balcony only the lowest, the west one could be opened. Of the southern gallery exits was the lower one "g", leading to the top platform of the west wing of the main stairs, also closed but later opened by force. The middle exit "i" was never opened but was destroyed by the fire. The uppermost, eastern exit was open. Of the emergency exits "n" in the north wall of the gallery all three seem to have been opened.

On the third office floor, the door "k" at the bottom of the top run of the emergency stair leading down to the vestibule was locked. The management had given out the order, not to open any door before the end of the act preceding the last, and some of the ushers had faithfully obeyed that order even after the whole stage was ablaze. Of these ushers there were 2 or 3 in the balcony and the gallery and 5 in the parquet. According to their own testimony, they had never been instructed what to do in case of a fire, and only one of them had any idea, how to operate the bascule locks on the emergency exit doors in the alley wall, because he had at one time opened one of them "out of curiosity". The other Theater employees had received as little instruction as to their duties in emergency cases as the ushers.

The people in the parquet suffered comparatively few casualties. Those killed or maimed there perished either by the unexpected flame shooting forth under the curtain, by frightened people jumping down from the balcony or gallery, or in the frantic scramble for the exit doors.

In the balcony only those people seem to have been able to save themselves who could reach either the stairs leading down to the parquet or the lowest emergency exit door "m" in the alley wall. Three balcony doors remained tightly closed, while of the fourth one at exit "e" only one double wing was open. An usher stated, that he could have opened the other wing too, and he really could not say why he had not done it.

The three steps in front of said exit "e" were the cause that in the darkness and in the terrific throng the first people fell, and police and firemen, when entering the building, could not understand, why so few people were coming down the east wing of the main stairs. They found the

explanation when reaching the top platform. There were lying in and behind the door opening an inextricable heap of human corpses, and inside of that door the dead were piled up 6 feet high, which is evidenced by the fact that up to that point the wooden door jamb shows hardly any damage, while above it it is completely destroyed by the fire. Similar conditions could be observed at the other closed exits, especially at the top exit "m" in the alley wall, and in the passage back of the top row of the seats. In all the aisles people were caught by the conflagration, and many were found in their seats, staring into space with open eyes.

Greater havoc still was caused in the gallery. There the chance to escape was the slightest because of the sharp ascent of the seat rows and the infernal heat. Death, therefore, reaped its greatest harvest there and only those escaped who had taken to flight before the flames entered the auditorium, or who had been fortunate enough to be near the south exit "g" and the lowest emergency exit "n" in the north wall. From this exit, however, the flames soon burst forth and trapped those, who had fled onto the fire escapes through the upper exits "n". Some of them were saved by painters accidentally working in a building across the 12 feet wide alley. They improvised a bridge by pushing ladders and boards out of the window to the fire escape.

As previously stated, the door "i" remained closed, but not many people would have been able to get out that way anyhow on account of a rather foolish step arrangement. The mass of the people crowded through the exit "h" and from there not sideways, over the $5\frac{1}{2}$ wide stair down to the promenade balcony in front of the balcony door "f", but naturally straight ahead over the $7\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide run of stairs to the promenade and on to the 3 feet wide emergency stair leading down to the vestibule. These poor people were frightfully disappointed, because they found on the third floor the door "k" locked, while meanwhile the flames had reached the opening "h", preventing them from getting back to the $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet stair they had just passed. If there had been at "Z" (see Plate IV) an iron railing instead of a wholly unnecessary tile wall, many of the pitifully trapped people might have escaped in that direction.

The Theater was erected by one of the largest contract-

ing firms in America in accordance with plans produced by a young and, as the layout shows, rather inexperienced architect, whose sacred duty should have been to prevent by all means the opening of a public building in an unfinished condition.

The owners of the Theater are people who have operated American Theaters for decades.

LOUIS GUENZEL, *Architect.*

# "THE LASALLE HOTEL FIRE"

## IN CHICAGO

## A CRITICAL COMMENT

BY


## LOUIS GUENZEL

ARCHITECT

# THE LA SALLE HOTEL FIRE

About eight months ago, I published a detailed report on the Iroquois Theater Fire, which had occurred in Chicago on December the 30th, 1903, at 3:30 P. M. This report had been prepared in January 1904 after a close inspection of that fateful building. The inspection had been started at 10:00 A. M. on December 31st and was carried on for several weeks.

The report was made at the request of a Foreign Government, and on that account I had been granted a pass by the City Hall, giving me access to every part of the structure. For that reason I considered my work confidential and abstained from letting the findings be known in Chicago, where they might have decidedly influenced the outcome of the various law-suits resulting from that conflagration.

That I determined in 1945, after almost forty-two years, to make said report available to the public was due to the realization on my part, that the terrible consequences of that disaster seemed to have been nearly forgotten, and that fire hazards of a serious nature still abounded in our community, where they were carelessly disregarded by the authorities. This had been proved by casualties that happened in a number of smaller fires and became more evident through a fire in the General Clark Hotel, at 217 North Clark Street, in January 1945, where over a dozen people died and many more were maimed. It has also been demonstrated recently by the fire in the La Salle Hotel, where sixty-one people lost their lives and scores were injured. This last occurrence has stirred up a wave of excitement, followed by condemnations of other hotels, old peoples' homes and places of amusement, where fire laws had been recklessly ignored.

When I noticed the frantic efforts being made to pin down the culprit or culprits responsible for the La Salle Hotel disaster, I was vividly reminded of the fury with which people in 1904 had demanded rigid prosecution of every person guilty for that unparalleled destruction of human life and the permanent closing of the defective

structure for any but sacred purposes. But I also recollected, that within less than a year, after the building had been quietly overhauled and repaired, the place was reopened "as a Theater", drawing capacity audiences for months, not on account of the attraction, but because the masses were eager to view the auditorium, in which 575 women and children had perished and a similar number had been more or less seriously harmed.

Previous to the Iroquois fire, performances had been staged in that Theater for about five weeks, while on the day after the fire it was found, that stand-pipes on the stage had been without hoses and that the pipes themselves had not contained any water, due to an unfinished water-pipe system. It was also discovered that two ventilators in the stage roof, the most vital safeguard in the event of any stage fire, had been tightly nailed down for lack of counterweights, which were intended to cause the ventilators to be opened automatically to let gas formations escape. It was the explosion of such accumulated gas, which was mainly responsible for the gruesome effect of the fire and its rapid spreading to the auditorium.

Sad as the loss of life at the La Salle Hotel Fire has been, there was no reason for hysterics, because what has happened there is liable to happen again in most of our modern hotels, not to mention the antiquated ones. If it was possible, that a fire on the main floor of such a fireproof structure could emit a dense smoke which was able to travel upward so quickly, that the people on all upper floors to the 18th were compelled to flee for their lives, without a chance to pick up more than a trifle of their belongings, then there must be something radically wrong with our building ordinances, which have permitted such a building to be erected and operated.

Fifty years ago, building heights in our downtown district were limited to an equivalent of about twelve stories, whereafter gluttonous property owners managed to have that height raised to sixteen and later on to twenty stories. Gradually, the sky has become the limit with the result, that our whole transportation system to, from and in the loop, which had never been anything to brag about, has been thrown into such utter confusion that it can never be unraveled, unless at least three major changes are undertaken:

a) complete elimination of the elevated loop structure:

b) curtailment of the building height, especially for structures temporarily or permanently inhabited by people, whose safety should be of paramount consideration;

c) removal of the three railroad stations south of Van Buren street to a point sufficiently far southward, to provide ample space for at least a century for the enlargement of the business district, as that is the only logical direction in which such expansion is economically and physically possible.

In consideration of present conditions, I venture to say, that some day we shall be faced with a serious catastrophe in one of our multi-story apartment buildings, where all-too-often means of escape for the occupants are sadly inadequate, if a fire should get a good start on a lower floor and spread as fast as it did in the La Salle Hotel, which is not at all unlikely.

According to information available, it was not the fire but the smoke that caused the large majority of the La Salle Hotel fatalities, and it is nothing short of criminal, to permit habitable buildings to be constructed, where such a misfortune can come to pass. But of what avail can even the best of ordinances be, if supervision of their observance is entrusted to incompetent and unreliable officials who, as in the case of the Iroquois Fire, allow a building to be opened to the public and operated for weeks with the most outrageous violations of the fire protection laws obvious to and detectable at a glance by any half-way alert building inspector, fireman or police officer; and when courts are so demoralized, that greedy and unscrupulous Theater owners and heedless or corrupted City employees can get away with "murder", without being taken to account for their lawlessness.

There have been ordinances demanding, that stairhalls in apartment buildings must be surrounded in their full height by fireproof walls. Why has such an arrangement not been insisted upon in hotels as well, where conditions are practically the same? And why are office buildings exempt from such a provision which, during the day-time, are often more crowded with people than dwelling houses? The same fire-proof enclosures should be required for every elevator shaft and not merely for banks of elevators, in which all elevators would be out of commission, as soon as one of them would be reached by smoke or fire. That

elevator and stairhall doors should be fire-proof and tight-fitting permits of no argument.

It has been pointed out, that many people in the La Salle Hotel were rescued by descending on the fire-escapes, but that was accidental, because those fire-escapes pass doors and windows on every floor, and if the fire had advanced to any one of these openings, people on all floors above would have been trapped as surely as the gallery people were trapped in the Iroquois Theater. Fire-escapes are a nuisance and should not be permitted on any building, unless they are arranged in such a manner, that they do not pass openings, and that the use of them cannot be endangered by fire on any floor. Even then, they should not be tolerated on buildings exceeding a certain height. An inspection of fire-escapes throughout the City will prove, that the vast majority of them would become fire-traps, if a fire were to engulf a lower floor. Moreover, they have always furnished an ideal approach for prowlers and burglars.

In all apartment buildings up to and including four stories in height, there should be at least one absolutely fire-proof stairway, with fire-proof enclosures and fire-proof doors on each floor and directly accessible from each apartment. For apartment buildings of more than four stories, the use of fire-escapes should be strictly forbidden, because for women, children and invalids they would be practically useless, especially in winter. In all such buildings, apartments should have access to two stairways, as widely separated as possible. Such stairways should be fire-proof in every respect, with fire-proof enclosures and fire-proof doors, and all apartment entrance doors should likewise be fire-proof. In all public halls and hallways of multi-story apartment buildings, floors, walls, ceilings, steps and doors should be of strictly fire-proof materials, and the same regulations should apply to hotels.

It seems to have been agreed upon, that the fire in the La Salle Hotel originated in the Cocktail Lounge, behind an inflammable false-ceiling and wall covering. These "joints" have sprung up of late like mushrooms, and the interior construction of them is generally of a combustible nature. This should never be allowed, where such flimsiness is liable to endanger the building, in which they are located.

CHICAGO, the 15th of August, 1946.

LOUIS GUENZEL, *Architect.*

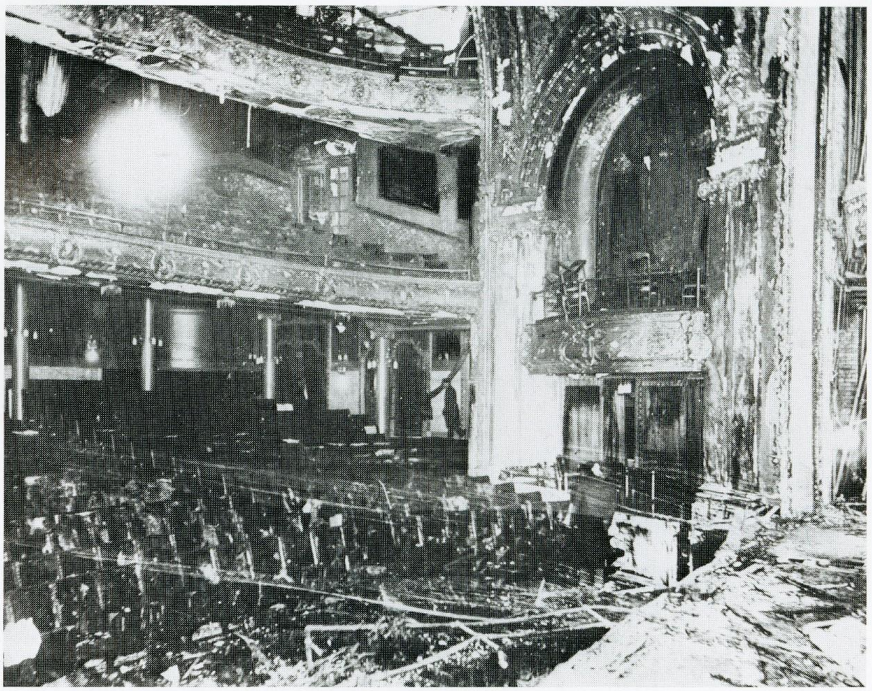

Randolph and Dearborn streets in the spring of 1904. The back stage wall of the *IROQUOIS* is seen with 'VAUDE—' visible. This is now the same location of the backstage wall of the *ORIENTAL.* Only the building on the corner (central to this photograph) remains. It was damaged by the weight of the thick granite front wall of the IROQUOIS, as evidenced by scaffolding in the cover photo. When the *IROQUOIS* was demolished for the *ORIENTAL,* the right portion, (furthest five windows) of this building was also removed to accommodate the bulk of the ORIENTAL building. In spite of the tragedy, the citizens eventually let life go on.

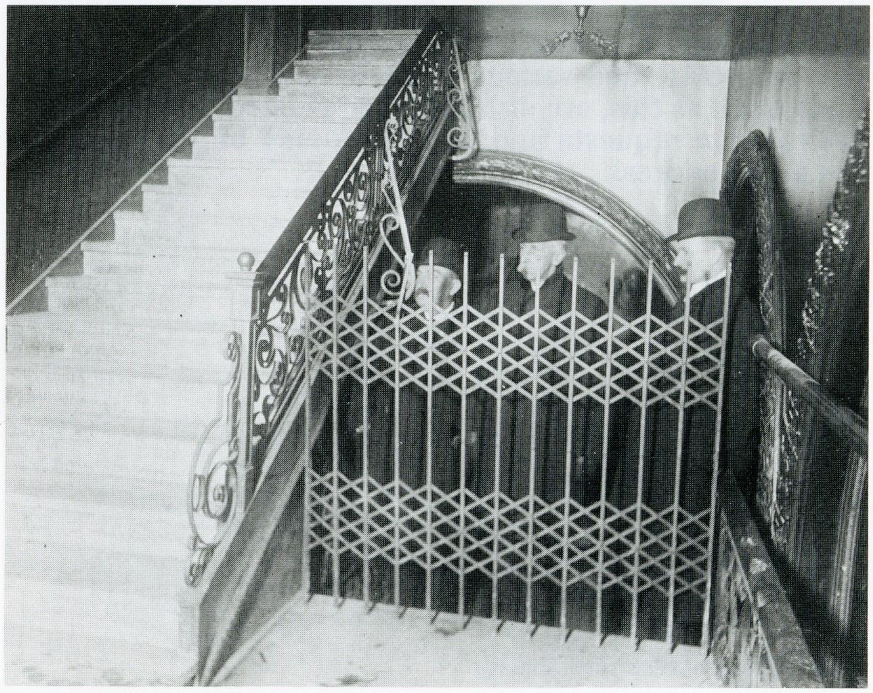
## ADDENDUM

The materials in this special publication are the result of the courtesy of Paul W. Guenzel. His substantial contribution of photographs, information, background, and funding has considerably enhanced the quality of information contained herein. Additional information of this subject is now in the Archives of Theatre Historical Society for future use.

*View from Dearborn east to State Street*

The three photographs on these pages were added to the original texts. Above is a candid photo reportedly of firemen working in the alley behind the IROQUOIS. The view is to the east from Dearborn street. To the right, next page top, is a photograph taken from the stage to the southeast. Note the fireman standing in the first arch way of Aisle one. The doorways described in the text of the pamphlet are readily visible; the one in the balcony is closed. The lower photo on the next page is of city inspectors at one of the folding gates that were intended to restrict the movement of crowds from higher, less costly seats to better, lower seats. The blackened walls in the after-fire photographs are from fumes of burned stage hangings.





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