

This Date in Safety History: Fire Prevention



"I was in World War II, and I never went through anything like that."

Dr. J.J. Kirschenfeld died in 2004 at the age of 85. He was one of the survivors of the fire at Dale's Penthouse, an upscale restaurant in Montgomery, AL. The fire broke out in the cloakroom of the restaurant on the eleventh floor of the Walter Bragg Smith apartment building just before 10 pm on Feb. 7, 1968.

Firemen thought they were responding to a small fire, but it turned out to be a towering inferno. As fire trucks arrived on the scene, panes of glass began falling from the upper floors of the building. Desperate patrons trapped by the flames were breaking the windows to find clear air. But the open windows also allowed air to flow through the restaurant, feeding the fire and turning the blaze into a monster: "It was like someone turned a blowtorch on it," recalls retired Montgomery Fire Chief William C. McCord.

The restaurant chef managed to get two groups of people out in the elevator before it stopped working. He and the firefighters then had to slide down the elevator cable from the eleventh floor to make their escape. Some patrons, including Dr. Kirschenfeld, managed to crawl out onto the ledges. Kirschenfeld and his family were rescued after they worked their way around to a patio.

Others weren't so lucky. Many were unable to get out of the building. Most of those trapped inside died of asphyxiation. Their bodies were found in the back office (which lacked an exit) piled like cordwood, and so badly burned that they couldn't be identified. Investigators later discovered that a stairway up the building to the tenth floor had not been extended to Dale's when the restaurant was built. The elevator was the only way out. The stairway was directly underneath the exit-less office.

The fallout from the Dale's fire? Assistant Fire Chief William Davis said it best: "It changed the way high-rise fires were handled." The tragedy drew national attention to the problems of high-rise fires, resulting in the enactment of new state and municipal fire regulations and changes to national fire codes. The new rules covered, among other things, the number of exits, emergency sprinklers required, and occupants permitted in a building. Today, the [workplace fire prevention plan](#) is a staple of OHS regulations.