General Slocum Afire! Hundreds perish!!

...as it happened, 75 years ago

by FRANK CULL, Lieutenant, F.D.N.Y. Press Office

Long ago, sailors believed that a sea monster lived in New York Harbor and, in the true traditions of the deep, swallowed up ships.

Jeannette Edwards Rattray's "Perils of the Port of New York" tells us that New York Harbor has been the scene of more than 2,000 shipwrecks; the most infamous taking place on June 15, 1904, in the deadly currents of Hell Gate.

In that year, the General Slocum steamboat had headed up the East River on a Sunday School outing. They never made it to the picnic grounds. Along the way, 1,030 people lost their lives! This was the second largest disaster in the history of American inland passenger shipping. The worst recorded disaster was the one that claimed the lives of over 1,500 Union soldiers on April 28, 1865, when the Mississippi Riverboat Sultana blew up seven miles north of Memphis, Tennessee.

An occasional foghorn ruptured the quiet of the night at the waterfront along 50th Street as the General Slocum rocked back and forth, seemingly going to sleep. The only movement on board was that made by Walter Payne, a porter. He scurried about the storeroom, making final preparations for the next day. Reverend George C. F. Haas, pastor of St. Mark's German Lutheran Church, had hired the boat for an excursion to Locust Grove, out on Long Island. It was to be picnic time for the Sunday School kiddies from the Lower East Side.

The big steamboat, only 13 years old, was constructed entirely of wood. She was 250 feet long and 70 feet wide; making the Slocum one of New York Harbor's biggest excursion boats. Her owners boasted about the fact that the steamer was equipped with electric lights; a rarity for that time. Her stacks were set side by side, rather than one shaft the other, and were forward of the walking beam that rocked back and forth as the big paddle wheels churned up the foamy waters below.

She started around the Battery around 7 a.m., with a crew of twenty-seven "hands" aboard. The morning was bright and beautiful. The sun was dazzling and, as it bounced off the harbor waters, seemed to sparkle. The ugly factory walls that abounded along the lower waterfront were set off by the masts and flags that flew from all kinds of harbor craft.

About 8:20 a.m., the Slocum reached 3rd Street in the East River. The pier had been designated a Recreation
Pier, and several hundred excursionists were already there, waiting. Police Officers Thomas Reilly and Kurt Van Tassell were smartly attired in their blue uniforms. "It'll be hot today, especially in the 'bag,'" assured Reilly. Van Tassell smiled as both men took their posts on the off-shore side of the steamers. Standing at the ready with their nightsticks at their side, they took charge of crowd control and were ready to save any kiddie that might topple into "the drink."

Many of the parishioners had gathered at the German Lutheran Church on 6th Street. At half-past eight, the Rev. George Haas, black bearded and distinguished looking, left his flock together. The church group began to walk to the foot of East 3rd Street where the big steamer sat patiently. The children ran, jumped, shouted, skipped rope, and bounced rubber balls as their enthusiasm was about to run away with them. As the procession neared the foot of 3rd Street, one of the ship's mates turned to his co-worker and said, "Give them a blast of the whistle and let the kids know that the Slocum sees them coming." The whistle pierced the calm spring morning and the kiddies strained to out "too" it. The two police officers stiffened, and Reilly piped up, "Here they come Van Tassell, Christ Almighty!" The minister's young flock swarmed up the gangplank and spread out over the sun bathed decks. They moved with the quickness of a horde of ants marching through a picnic basket.

OFF AND SAILING

Hawkers were cast off, whistles shrilled their customary warning, and the big steamer slowly drifted away from the pier.

Up the river she sailed and, as the Slocum passed Broadway in Astoria, John Ronan, a dock department employee, stood and marvelled at the majestic sight before him. His co-workers, Andrew Clarke and Luigi Infuso, both of whom were recent immigrants, stopped working to take a long look. They could hear the band on the upper deck playing music that would start toes tapping. "Aw for the love of God, wouldn't it be grand to be aboard," said Clarke. Infuso sighed and thought to himself, "I'd give anything to go on that boat ride with a big mug of beer and some of my Maria's pasta." Ronan wiped his brow and shrugged his shoulders as the three men resumed their work. The Slocum sailed on.

One of the highlights of Sunday School outings of that time was a menu featuring clam chowder. A cook was hired for just that task, for the chowder had to be ready by the time the picnickers put ashore.

Now and again, a whisper of smoke slowly swept across the crowded decks. "Smell that," cried out Mrs. Kristoff, as she began thinking about the delicious clam chowder being cooked in the galley below. It wasn't the cooking she smelled—it was the burning wood.

The cook was hard at work in the galley below, in the forward part of the boat, and did have a brisk fire going in his stove. But, in the small storeroom nestling up against the bow on the same lower deck, a fire had somehow broken out. While it struggled for more oxygen and fuel, it kept sending out wisps of smoke that mingled with the smoke from the cook's stove. All this took place three flights below the hurricane deck, and could not be seen from the pilot house.

HALF WAY TO HELL

The Slocum was better than half way through Hell Gate when a few children playing "jacks" on the lower deck, noticed smoke pushing from the cabin. As small as they were, the kids sensed danger and spread out in search of one of the crew. Returning to the deck with the children, the mate placed his hand on the door. As the children looked on apprehensively, his heartbeat skipped. "Don't tell anyone about this," he said to the youngsters. "They'll fret over nothing!" He knew, however, that there was a fire inside the cabin. The mate had felt the heat when he touched the door to the storeroom.

The seaman called upon mate Flanagan to help him open the cabin. As they opened the door, they were met with a flash fire that filled their eyes with an orange glow. The crew swung into action, although they had never been drilled to fight a fire aboard the ship. They pulled a hose line from the wall and turned the wheel to open the valve, but no water came forth. An engine was started to pump water into the fire mains—still no water! One mate uncoupled the hose and found a solid rubber washer that had been placed there to prevent the hose from dripping water on the deck. The washer was removed, the hose recoupled, and the engine started up and operated at full force. This time the hose burst, and not a drop of water reached the rapidly building blaze. A Greek tragedy was unfolding.

Flanagan was now gripped with panic as he headed for the pilot house. "There's a fire in the storeroom up forward, Cap."

"Well, go down and put it out," snapped Captain William Van Schaick without showing too much distress. Van Schaick took the wheel as the steamer headed into the strong currents running through Hell Gate.

Looking across the water, William Alloway, who captured a dredge, saw some smoke emanating from the lower deck of the Slocum, just forward of the smokestacks.

Map below shows the tragic route of the ill-fated Slocum.
Alloway instructed his pilot to give warning, “Give them four blasts of our whistle,” ordered the Captain. Alloway and his crew could see the people scurrying about the sun drenched decks and they wondered why the skipper didn’t back his boat into the piers.

On board, the roar and crackle of the flames were now drowning out the screams that echoed from the water. A woman in a white dress looked over and saw three children floating on the starboard side. The head of one youngster, sliced from his body by the spinning paddle wheel, also floated by. The woman screamed just once, but it was so loud that an eerie hush came over the steamer. She pointed at the small bodies as they floated by. Horrified by what she saw, she screamed, “Meine Frieda!” Before anyone could stop her, she threw herself over the side. She whirled around in the swift current, and then disappeared from view. Now more bodies floated by in what seemed like an endless parade of grim death.

People were jumping overboard as the fire approached them. Some jumped overboard out of sheer panic. Others were driven over the side by the intense heat and smoke from the rapidly building blaze.

**FIREBOAT RESPONDS**

As the burning steamboat churned onward, alarms of fire were being turned in along the shore. At the foot of the pier in the Bronx, in a small wooden shed, a fire alarm box was utilized repeatedly as frantic citizens tried to help. As the first arriving units rolled in (Engine Co. 60 and Ladder Co. 17), they quickly realized the futility of the situation. Captain Joe Devine raced for the telephone on the pier and requested the response of the fireboat *Zophar Mills*.

Captain Van Schaick looked out from his lofty perch and could see the firefighters, their apparatus, and their horses. He paid no attention to these firefighters who were screaming and waving at the steamer. Down below, the crew was working at fever pitch to get water on the fire. Hose line after hose line burst, and the crew stood helpless. A group of children stood by in silent wonder, their eyes etched in horror. One by one, the crew slipped away in search of safety. The children soon followed.

No one will ever know what was going through Van Schaick’s mind, but all his hard earned experience, seamanship, and command seemed to vanish in the morning air. He never went below to inspect the extent of the fire, and sounded no alarm to summon the crew and alert the passengers. The captain also violated an old rule of the service which states that whenever a ship catches fire, it should be turned to the wind so that the part that is burning is farthest leeward, thus preventing the wind from fanning the flames. Captain Van Schaick issued no such order and nosed the steamer into a northeast wind, which contributed to the intensity of the fire.

Meanwhile, the firefighters stood on the Bronx Pier and watched helplessly as the *Slocum* sailed by. The fireboat *Zophar Mills* soon came plowing through the currents of Hell Gate, spotted the stricken steamboat, and gave chase.

**TAKE TO THE BOATS**

The fire officers on shore realized that the only way they might render assistance was to commandeer some small craft. Captain Devine shouted, “Take to the boats men!”

The F.D.N.Y. was, once again, responding. The fireboat kept picking up victims as she steamed up the river. Firefighter Joseph J. Mooney was aboard the fireboat. He was from one of the land companies that boarded the *Zophar Mills* before the boat left her berth. Joe Mooney was no stranger to heroism. He was honored at the previous year’s Medal Day ceremonies for saving a little girl from a fire at Madison Ave. and 60th Street. Mooney had received the William Strong Medal as the little girl he had saved stood at his side. Meanwhile, the firefighters spotted a woman waving for help, and he dove into the river to get her. He saved that woman, and then a second woman, and then a third woman.

At this point, only four living persons were taken on board the *Zophar Mills*. There were twenty-seven dead bodies on her deck. The men from Engine Co. 60 and Ladder Co. 17 were performing the same life saving acts as they pursued the stricken steamer.

When the roll of honor was written, no names stood higher than the eleven members of the Bronx Yacht Club. The club members were enjoying a day off, and were busy sprucing up their small craft for the summer season. Meanwhile, Joe Mooney stood at his side. This time, he was not planning a surprise attack against a boat. He was boarding the burning steamer sailed past, they joined the chase in three small launches. In the space of a half hour, the eleven men pulled many passengers from the swirling tide that was trying to claim still more victims.

**BORN TO DIE**

As the fire raged, one of the passengers found herself in the throes of childbirth. She was lying helplessly on the deck. Second mate Corcoran moved to help the young mother, and wrapped the newborn in a blanket. With the fire approaching rapidly, her neighbors started heaving all the children overboard. Corcoran was fighting off the crazed crowd which overwhelmed him, and then threw the young mother and her baby overboard. They both died.

People stood shoked on the shoreline as they looked out at the lurid glare of red, yellow, and orange flame that was engulfing the steamer. Police Officers Reilly and Van Tassel had herded as many people as possible to the stern of the ship. These two policemen, who were protecting the youngsters at the beginning of the sail, and who were making sure that no one would fall into the river, were now doing just the opposite. They were grabbing the youngsters and babies and heaving them overboard, hoping that those boats in hot pursuit would pluck them from a watery grave.

**PANIC TAKES OVER**

Panic was now at the helm. Like the proverbial “Pied Piper,” Van Schaick had several tugboats, the fireboat, and some small craft following in his wake. He turned to his pilot, and gave his last order. “Keep her jacked up (full speed), and beach her on North Brother, right ahead, starboard side on.” The *Slocum* sailed biitely down. Down below in the engine room, Second Engineer Everett Brandow had been left at the throttle, and he kept the boat going full steam ahead. By now, the heat and smoke were banking down, nearly suffocating him. Brandow could hear the terror above as the passengers tumbled and scrambled about the deck—crying, screaming, shouting. Despite the riotous danger and the severe handicap that he was taking, the engineer stuck to his post until the very last moment, and just did manage to escape. Everett Brandow, in the true tradition of the sea, was the lone member of the crew to be singled out for heroism.
To add to the catastrophe, the pilot sailed around to the far side of the island, passing up a sandy stretch of shoreline. When the boat was finally beached, it was in a rocky cove. The bow was in shallow water but was entirely engulfed in flames. The passengers still on board were crowded together at the sagging stern. The water here, however, was some 30 feet deep. As the blaze roared toward them, their only escape was over the side.

The people were now bobbing around in the water like apples in a bucket. People were jumping overboard to the screams of "abandon ship." Rev. Haas, the pastor of the church, had finally realized the futility of his efforts and, with his wife and daughter, made his way to the ship's rail. Each one donned a life preserver and they jumped overboard together. Bodies hurtling through the summer air hit the water and separated the minister from his family. Haas was pulled from the water near death, but his wife and daughter drowned.

Meanwhile the weight of the people who were still on the top deck, coupled with the fact that the blaze had weakened the supports, suddenly brought the hurricane deck and all the remaining upper portions of the boat crashing inward and downward. Those who had not jumped were now hurled into space and plunged into the roaring fire in the hull below.

Probably the last life lost aboard the Slocum was that of a youngster who somehow managed to avoid the flames in the forward part of the steamer. There were shouts of surprise and looks of horror as the six year old boy climbed up the flagstaff; the deck below him a raging inferno. A husky lad, he was sheer determination as he inched his way up the pole. Flames from the fire were licking his legs as he climbed higher and higher.

By now, rescue boats were in sight and moving closer. The pole began to tremble and suddenly it started to give way. The young lad was hurled into a mass of flames, his blond curls disappearing into the ball of fire.

TO THE RESCUE

The first angels of mercy on the scene were the tugboats John Wade and Walter Tracy. Life jackets, preservers, and anything else that might float went splashing into the waters below. This, followed closely by the crews of the two tugs who kept diving in and pulling out one victim after another. The Zophar Mills arrived and joined in the rescue effort as hundreds of people were now foundering around in what was to become a watery grave. Also sailing in were the firefighters from those Bronx units who had set out in small boats.

The crews from the two tugboats were credited with saving more than 200 lives. The firefighters from the fireboat and the land units combined their efforts to save another 150 lives. Doctors and nurses from the isolation hospital on North Brother Island swam out and pulled many more victims to the safety of the shoreline.

By now many boats and their crews were working valiantly to save the people in the water. The Franklin Edison and the Massasoit were right in the thick of things. Captain Jack Ward, master and owner of the tug, bearing his name, was cursing and swearing as he directed his daredevil crew. Roddy MacCarroll, his chief mate, dove into the water, grabbed a victim and climbed back aboard the tug. After repeated trips, the one effort that had pushed him past his physical limits was getting a very heavy German woman on board. MacCarroll plopped down on the deck, sure that he would die. Suddenly the woman screamed, "Oh God, there's my Hans." The hefty woman helped MacCarroll up to get a look and then shoved him overboard. Roddy, back in the water, grabbed the youngster and managed once again to climb aboard. The fat woman hugged her little Hans, the youngster disappeared between her huge floppy arms. Roddy MacCarroll shook his head, smiled, and fell flat on his face from sheer exhaustion.

People helping people was the order of the day. A big marble works, situated directly across from North Brother Island, closed down. The manager sent 150 men across the water in all kinds of small craft. Everyone got involved!

Meanwhile, the nurses from the hospital waded out into the water. Their white uniforms were clinging to their skin as they formed a human chain to pull out the "dead" and "the alive."

Jack Wade, sporting blue dungarees, now black from the grime of his trade, adjusted his cap as he shouted orders. A tough customer, Wade could best be described as a "river rat." Wade burst into the engine room and screamed at the pilot, "God damn it Fitz, get closer." The little tug was maneuvered into position right alongside the Slocum and was now being used as a bridge to allow the passengers an escape from the fiery holocaust. Seventy-eight passengers made it across as the terrible fire blazed the deckhouse of the tug. The Zophar Mills turned her big streams on the Wade and kept Capt. Jack's tug from being destroyed. Jack Wade sustained second and third degree burns on both arms and on his neck—a tough customer indeed!

True to the reputation of New York's "Finest," Police Officers Van Tassell and Reilly were among the last to leave the doomed vessel. Van Tassell had been knocked unconscious when the hurricane deck had collapsed and knocked him into the water. He was pulled from the river by a mason from the marble works factory in the Bronx. Reilly stayed aboard to the bitter end, calming, directing, and holding back those who had panicked. His hair singed...
and his uniform burned in quite a few sections, Tom Reilly was as calm as though he were marching in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Reilly jumped into the water and was pulled aboard a tug, knowing full well that he had performed above and beyond the call of duty.

In fairness to Capt. Van Schaick and First Pilot Edward Van Wart, it should be noted that they held steadfast to their responsibilities as seaman. With everything crashing down around them, they leaped from the Slocom to the deck of a tugboat with tongues of flame lapping at their backs. The captain and pilot had stayed at their posts and were the last to leave the sinking steamboat.

The calamity was over! The Slocom and Hell Gate had claimed their victims.

FIRE CHIEF ARRIVES

Edward Croker, the Chief of Department, stood on the shoreline with a pained expression and voiced his disbelief. Fire Chief Croker, when notified of the ship’s trouble, had responded in his red motor car. This was the first horseless carriage to make inroads into the New York City Fire Department.

When he had reached the foot of 138th Street, he made his way out to the island on one of the boats that were ferrying the victims to the Bronx pier. It was 11 a.m. when he took command at the grim scene. Croker, a veteran fire officer, whose hair had turned to silver, had burly features that looked like they were chopped from a California Redwood. He seemed stunned by the chain of events. As he nervously rubbed his forehead, he looked at his aide who was shaking his head in disbelief. Those who were standing nearby could hear the Fire Chief cursing under his breath and then catch himself. “God forgive me,” he remarked. Croker then continued with a list of “whys.”

“Why didn’t they bring her in at 138th Street? When they got here, why didn’t they beach her on the sandy shore?” Standing amidst rows of bodies covered with white cloths, Croker continued his line of questioning. “Why didn’t they head the Slocom into the wind, fire first? Why aren’t there life preservers on the bodies?”

Chief Croker, his eyes filled with tears of frustration, watched as his men brought body after body onto the land. He dropped down on the sandy shore and sat there forlornly. Croker had been dismissed from the Department for two years, after a battle with the Fire Commissioner, and just months before, had been reinstated by a court order. He stared at the sand and peered at his firefighters. A feeling of empathy played on his emotions. He knew that his men were suffering the pains of anxiety and frustration. His firefighters, dedicated to saving life, were helpless as the fires raged right by them.

“Rush and confusion” were hand in hand companions. Volunteers were pulling out bodies at the rate of one a minute. By now, the beach was lined with public officials. Dr. Darlington, the president of the Health Board, arrived, as did Coroner O’Gorman, Police Commissioner McDaid, and Mayor McClellan. Fire Chief Croker called the superintendent’s office of the Metropolitan Street Railway Company for gasoline flare lights. When darkness fell, the lights from the railway company illuminated the rows of dead. By 10:30 that night, 415 corpses had been recovered and tagged at North Brother Island. The watches on the victims had one thing in common; they all stopped at approximately 10:22 a.m. As time lapsed, the full force of the disaster was starting to sink in. The most dramatic playwright at that time would find his genius taxed in order to portray the overwhelming tragedy and the helplessness at the loss of over one thousand souls.

Coroner O’Gorman, a big robust individual, was charged with the initial investigation at North Brother Island. It didn’t take long for him to make his first statement.

“After talking to survivors,” announced O’Gorman, “I am convinced that the crew of the steamer, owned by the Knickerbocker Steamship Co., made no attempt to save any passengers and were guilty of cowardice. No attempt was made by the crew of the burned steamer to fight the flames.” He looked out from under his straw hat with menacing eyes that reflected a burning intensity to find out what had happened. He called for divers, and instructed his men to safeguard any item that might help his investigation. “The life preservers” were useless. Many of them could be ripped open with the scratch of a thumbnail. They were filled with decaying cork, and some had hunks of iron sewn in the seams, so that the preserver would make the required weight. Others were nailed to the walls of the steamer, and placed so high that they were out of reach of the women and children.

That night firefighters gathered at the home of Harold Kepple, a member of their unit. Word had reached the firehouse that Willie Kepple, the son of Firefighter Kepple, was among the missing. The Slocom had apparently victimized Mr. and Mrs. Harold Kepple. This same scene was being reenacted in hundreds of homes throughout the lower East Side. Family, friends, and relatives gathered to comfort those who had lost loved ones. The steamy rundown tenements were filled with tears.

FINAL ACT

In the next few days, people swarmed to the morgue, looking like bees clustering around a flower. Throngs of relatives and thrill seekers lined up. At one point, the police estimated that some 10,000 people were waiting outside for a chance to enter the “halls of death” and view the bodies within. A makeshift morgue was set up in the pier at the end of East 26th Street. Ice wagons lined up, and their owners volunteered their ice to help preserve the bodies of the victims. Several affecting scenes marked the identification procedure. A police officer and a minister accompanied one man into the morgue. The man, Gustave Burfiend, was frantic with grief. In vain reason to be. Burfiend lost his wife and nine children in the mishap.

The Lower East Side community was now ready to bury the dead. Black and purple bunting hung from buildings. German and American flags flew at half staff, as a mark of respect for the dead victims. Funeral corteges became a common sight. Undertakers worked without sleep, as funeral homes were taxed beyond their limits.

Strange but True

Strange, but true, stories began to surface.

- The body of an eight year old girl washed up against the side of a pier at the foot of Clinton Street in the East River, a block away from where the youngster had lived. The tide, by some strange irony, had brought the body from the scene of the calamity at North Brother Island down the river to a point right near her home.
- Valuables removed from the victims reached the staggering amount of $200,000.
- Hose, that was on the main deck of the Slocom, was
purchased at Church Street and Park Place, in Lower Manhattan, the current site of Fire Headquarters for the New York City Fire Department.

- St. Mark's Lutheran Church had its own parochial school. Schoolmaster John Holthusen had been principal for some twenty-seven years. The principal had notified the pastor that he was ready to retire and had announced to the parishioners and the school children that the excursion trip would be his last official act as principal and would close out his career at St. Mark's. The ill-fated excursion ended his life.

- Captain Van Schaick, the veteran river navigator, had made arrangements to retire at the end of the 1904 Summer season. He and his wife had decided that he should retire from sea life. His record, up to the day of the great disaster, had been outstanding. He had carried almost 2 million passengers in safety up and down the river during his long years of service. The last 1,030 were not as lucky.

- Willie Kepple, the 11-year-old son of a firefighter, was alive. Willie had sneaked aboard the Slocum without his parents' permission. When tragedy struck, Willie jumped overboard and quickly put to use all the experience he had gained down at the docks near his home. Rather than fight the tide, the youngster floated until he was picked up by a tugboat. Willie later remarked, "I was so scared that I might get a licking for going on the excursion without permission, that I stayed up in Harlem and slept in the park. The next day, I picked up a paper," continued Willie, "and saw my name among the missing, so I thought I'd go home and take my licking instead of breaking my mother's heart." Willie went home and his tearful mother hugged and kissed him for ten straight minutes. His father gave him a dollar for being such an excellent swimmer.

BAD ACTORS

The real "bad actors" in the Slocum scenario would have to be the inspectors who had somehow managed to permit the excursion steamer to pass inspection. With sleight of hand that would rival a magician, fines that had been levied for violations on the Slocum had been magically reduced from $2,000 to $25. These inspectors were, of course, dismissed on the orders of President Teddy Roosevelt, lending little consolation to those who lost their loved ones in the mishap.

On July 7, 1904, upon direction of the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and Labor, there was a reinspection of all passenger steamers in the Port of New York by inspectors from other ports. It became clear that the manner in which the inspectors had been carrying out their duties was completely inefficient and unsatisfactory. The rigid reinspection ended with the condemnation of vast quantities of hose, and supplies of life preservers.

The report of the U.S. Commission of Investigation on the "Disaster to the Steamer General Slocum," which followed on October 8, 1904, stated, "The ship was made entirely of wood, built in 1891 and had no fireproof hatches or bulkheads. All upperworks were of light wood, painted many times and highly inflammable. The hose was several years old and of the cheapest grade; the fire buckets on the main deck were not only out of reach, they had no water in them. The mate was not a licensed officer."

The commissioners instituted revisions of the statutes with regard to life preservers, hose, fire extinguishers, and lifeboats; clarification of the law with regard to the inexperience of crews; and extra powers for the steamboat inspection service.

Ineptitude, greed, bribery, and inadequate equipment were in this way more firmly controlled. Poor judgment and panic cannot, of course, be legislated against, but these new laws and statutes gave them poorer ground in which to flourish, and kill.

The skipper of the Slocum, Captain William Van Schaick, was tried on two counts of manslaughter, found guilty, and sentenced to ten years at hard labor. The shipping industry, incensed that Van Schaick was made the lone scapegoat for the disaster, had raised $5,500 for his defense. The captain was pardoned by President William Howard Taft after serving five years of "hard time."

CLOSE THE BARN DOOR

Public indignation is always aroused by a major disaster. The Peshtigo, Wisconsin fire (the nation's worst), resulted in laws restricting the use of certain roofing materials, and also gave birth to our forest rangers. The Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago, which claimed 692 lives, brought fire safety to theatres. That tragedy resulted in mandatory sprinkler systems, better exit facilities, and panic bars on exit doors. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire, in lower Manhattan, claimed the lives of 146 employees in a sweat shop. The Labor Law was instituted and many new ordinances of fire safety in factories were enacted. The rules and regulations for night clubs were scrutinized after the Cocoanut Grove Night Club fire in Boston. The club's Melody lounge turned to tunes of disaster as 492 patrons perished. The fire at Our Lady of Angels in Chicago in 1958 gave way to the modern one story school building. At that blaze, 175 school children perished on the upper floors of the school building. New fire safety laws for school buildings were enacted shortly thereafter.

The recent mishap at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania will force officials to take a (Continued on page 23.)
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closer look at nuclear power.

The Slocum was no different. For this awakening, it cost the lives of an entire boatload of innocent people. The

SLOCUM MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

The Slocum Memorial Committee is the successor to the organization of the General Slocum survivors, which was founded in June of 1904. Each year the group meets for the Annual Slocum Memorial Service at the Trinity Lutheran Church in Middle Village Queens. Immediately following the church service, the congregation proceeds to the Slocum Monument in nearby Lutheran Cemetery for prayers and the placing of a wreath. The Committee also unveils a five foot high mounted wreath with 61 red Carnations; one for each of the victims who were still unidentified when the Slocum Monument was dedicated on June 15, 1905.

General Slocum disaster will long be remembered as the biggest calamity ever to hit New York City.

It was the day that the “Devil” was an uninvited guest on the passenger list for the Sunday School Boat Ride. ▲

Besides keeping alive the memory of the victims of the disaster, the Committee works year round with documents, films, slides, and records to maintain the historical significance of the last cruise of the Slocum. The organization’s Board of Officers is headed by Chairman Thomas F. Schweitzer, Mrs. Henry Schrimpe (Treasurer), Mrs. T. Robert Schweitzer (Secretary), and Hon. Frank Wuttge (Historian).

For those interested in obtaining more information, or purchasing their souvenir post cards contact: The Slocum Memorial Committee of the Queens Historical Society at 89-19 218th St., Queens Village, N.Y. 11427.