

# DANCE HALL FIRE (RHYTHM CLUB)

Natchez, MS

April 23, 1940

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*Natchez Dance Hall Tragedy*

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# FIRE INVESTIGATIONS

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## Natchez Dance Hall Tragedy<sup>25</sup>

One of the worst fire disasters of the twentieth century occurred in a small dance hall in Natchez, Mississippi, a quiet old river town of about 16,000 population. There, on the evening of April 23, 1940, 207 persons lost their lives and 200 others were injured when fire involved combustible Spanish moss over the dance floor. There was only one main exit and the small windows apparently were nailed shut. The panic stricken people piled up at the rear wall of the building, most of them dying from suffocation or from being trampled.

The Rhythm Club in Natchez was used as a place of entertainment by the black people. It was only one story high with the roof and sides made of corrugated iron. It was a long, narrow structure, measuring 120 feet in length and thirty-eight wide. The main entrance opened to an interior lobby which in turn opened onto the dance floor. At the rear of the building was a bar, with the orchestra platform in the opposite corner. Along the side and rear walls were approximately eighteen

windows, all boarded to keep out "gate crashers." There were no skylights or upper windows to vent the heat of any fire which the metal walls of the building would confine like an oven.

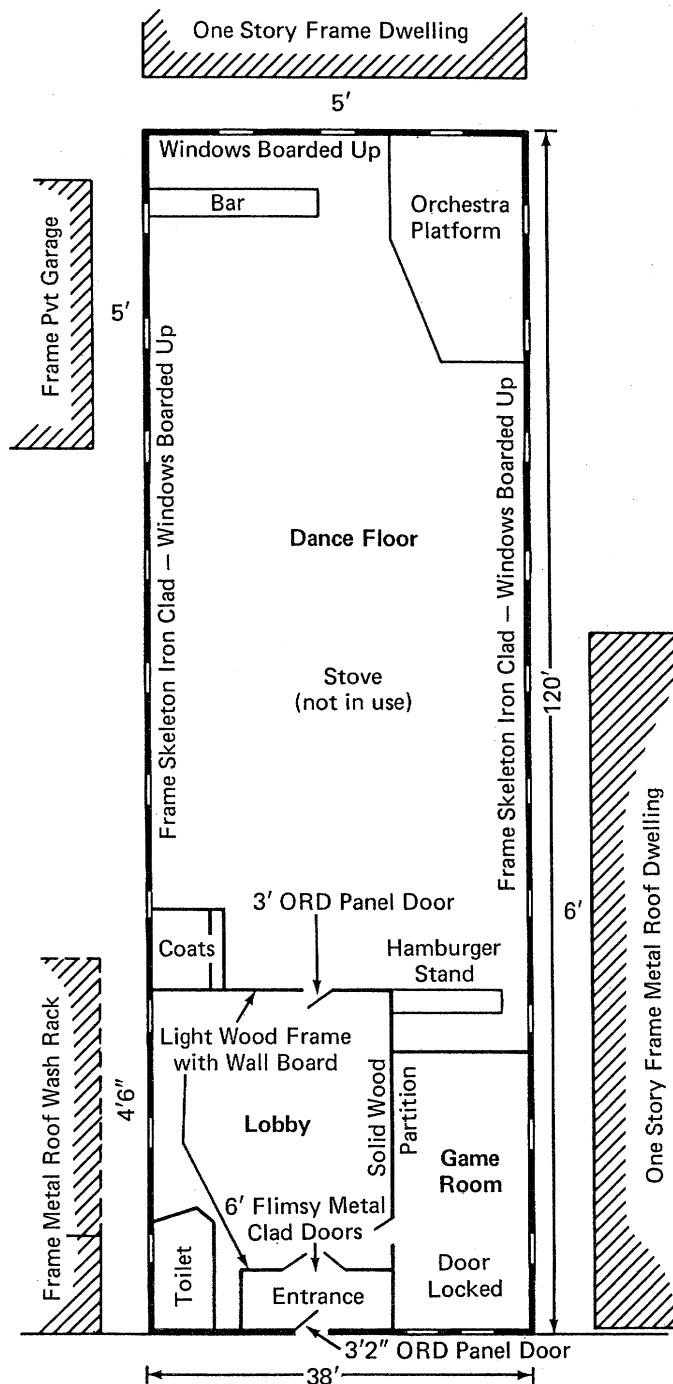
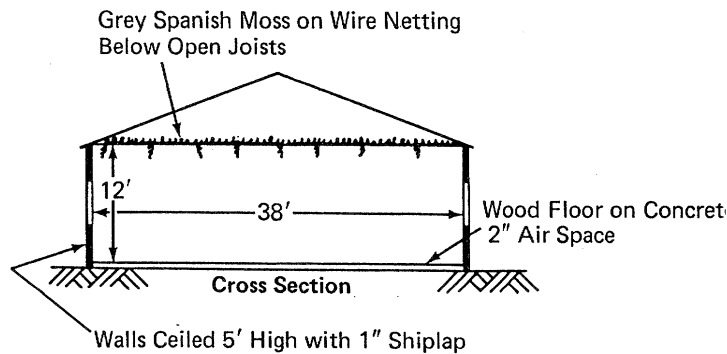
On the night of the fire, a popular Chicago orchestra had attracted a record crowd and about 700 or more persons were inside the building at about 11:15 p.m. The fire started near the hamburger stand at the front of the dance hall when the gray Spanish moss, hanging from ceiling joists, ignited and began to burn rapidly. People in the lobby in front of the dance floor were able to get out the door quickly, but others were trapped by a hedge of fire when the burning moss dropped and ignited clothing of the people. In a surging movement the hundreds of victims within the hall pushed back to the rear, where most of them died. It was surprising that so many escaped since the only main exit passed through a cloak room and the lobby where the doors opened the wrong way, inward.

The fire department responded to an alarm within minutes and the fire was quickly extinguished. Sheet metal siding was torn off to allow rescuers to reach the victims but many, trapped below the deck, suffocated before they could be released.

Like every other fire tragedy, this incident presented lessons which should have spurred many cities into improving their fire prevention regulations. The Rhythm Club had one main exit which was partially blocked. Doors leading to this exit opened toward the interior; but people trying desperately to escape expected the doors to open the other way. The mass of highly combustible Spanish moss was an obvious danger; so were the closed windows. The outer iron covering of the building, while noncombustible, confined the heat with maximum intensity on the people trapped inside.

Similar fires, in earlier years, should have served as a warning. In 1929 in a club in Detroit, the combination of combustible oak leaves hanging from the ceiling and boarded windows caused twenty-two fire deaths and twice as many injuries from panic when a carelessly discarded match ignited the decorations.

In 1936 nine persons lost their lives in a New York City restaurant when fire spreading through a window from the floor below flashed over festooned silk cloth ceiling decorations. Today, fire codes require that no furnishings or decorations of an explosive or highly flammable character shall be used in any place of assembly or other occupancy. But, after Natchez, other fire disasters would underscore the need for such common-sense fire safety.



## The Natchez Dance Hall Holocaust.

Report by Mississippi State Rating Bureau,  
(Member N.E.P.A.)

The utter disregard for ordinary fire preventive measures in a dance hall in Natchez, Mississippi, changed what was to be a gala, rhythm evening on Tuesday, April 23 last, into a grim catastrophe that wiped out the lives of 207 negroes. The hazards disregarded included (1) the use of highly combustible material for decorating purposes, (2) inadequate exits and (3) the overcrowding of places of assembly.

In the 1850's Natchez was a flourishing cotton growing center of 18,500. Now, it is a very quiet and very old river town of 16,000. Sixty per cent of its population is negro. Lately, Natchez has become famous for its ante bellum homes, which thousands of tourists visit each year. More recently, the town has become famous for the dance hall tragedy which occurred there on the evening of April 23.

On that evening, Walter Barnes, a Vicksburg, Mississippi, negro, was bringing his Chicago swing band to the Rhythm Club in Natchez for a one-night stand. Tickets were selling for fifty cents apiece and the cream of the Natchez negro population was turning out to pay its respects to a successful negro from the home state. Some came to mingle with society, listen to the music and depart early. Most came to dance and depart late. The ticket-taker in the lobby of the building took in 577 paid admissions, and 150 passes. Also in the dance hall were 14 members of the orchestra and five attendants, bringing the total to 746. At eleven p.m. probably a small number had departed.

Then with almost lightning speed, the dance hall became a blazing inferno. So swiftly did the flames spread that the merry-makers were caught entirely unawares. At 11:15 the fire department received a first alarm by telephone. Shortly thereafter, the fire was brought under control and extinguished. It was believed that all occupants of the building had escaped until members of the fire department went inside the smouldering ruins. There, victims by the score were piled one on top of the other, their clothing burned, their bodies charred. With but a few exceptions, all were dead. Many of those who showed some spark of life died en route to the hospital.

### Construction of the Building.

The building had served two purposes before it was converted into a dance hall by the members of the Rhythm Club. At one time it had been a garage; previous to that it is said that it had also been a church. The building was 38 feet wide and 120 feet long.

*Pictures, Inc.*  
The morning after the fire. Note corrugated sheet iron construction of the building. Removal of the bodies of 207 negroes necessitated tearing a hole through the rear left of the building. Many of the negroes seen loitering about building lost either friends or relatives, or both, during the fire of the preceding evening. It was estimated that each negro family in Natchez suffered the loss of some friend or relative.

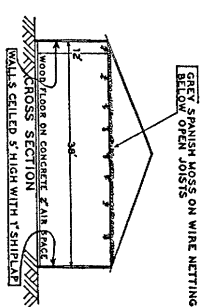
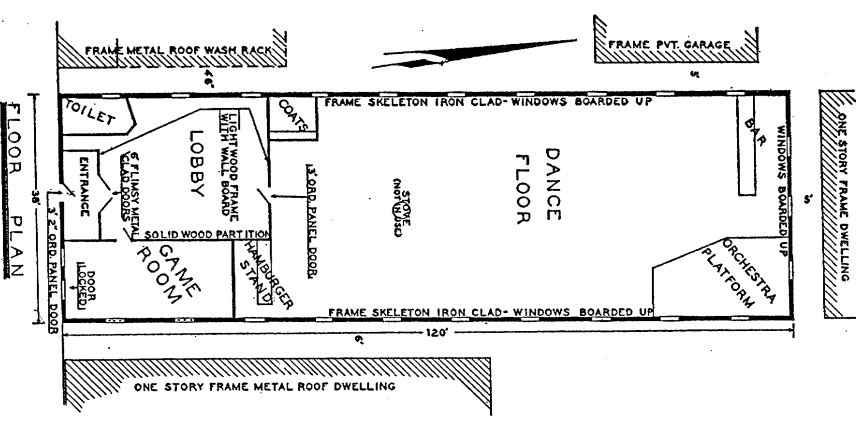
There were 24 window openings in the building, of which two in the game room (front right) were iron barred. A third window in the game room had ordinary glass, while all other window openings in the building were covered over by shutters to obstruct the view of the curious and to make the hall usable in the winter time. All of the shutters opened to the inside and were about four feet above the floor level. Some of the shutters were held secure by sliding latches. The majority of them were nailed shut. Very few of those trapped were able to make an escape through the window openings.

The sides of the building were constructed of two by four wooden studs covered with corrugated metal. Inside, one-inch ship-lap lined the building for a distance of five feet above the floor. The lining prevented those trapped from breaking through the side walls. The corrugated metal construction turned the building into an oven when the fire began to spread.

There were two entrances, but each was located in the front and one was padlocked from the outside. To all intents and purposes, then, there was but one exit available to those trapped in the building when the fire broke out. Although the single available door opened to the inside, it is not believed that this increased the loss of life, for there was no accumulation of bodies in the

Pictures, Inc.

The rear of the dance floor. Orchestra platform is at the right, bar is at the left. Note that some strands of Spanish moss are still hanging from the wires under the ceiling joists. Note also, ship-lap boarding that lined building to a height of five feet above the floor. This is the portion of the building where the negroes died. Window openings were nailed shut at time of the fire.

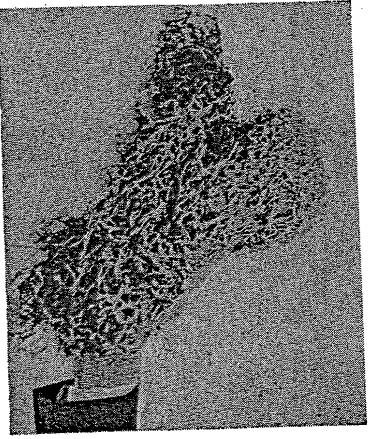


Layout of the Natchez, Mississippi, Rhythm Club. Fire that wiped out the lives of 207 negroes started somewhere near the hamburger stand and spread rapidly to the rear of the dance floor where the bar and orchestra platform were located. Merry-makers caught behind the advancing wall of flames were either suffocated, baked by the intense heat, or trampled to death. Note single entrance to the dance floor, boarded windows, and "check-valve" exit system of lobby. Spanish moss, which served as interior decoration, was supported by wire netting below open joists. Building was once a church and later a garage. No part of the building was completely burned, nor did any part of it collapse.

lobby. Without a doubt, however, the door did act as a check valve for those who were trying to get out.

The single door opened into a narrow entrance way about six feet deep, at the end of which were a pair of double swinging doors, which also opened to the inside and into a lobby. The lobby was a room about 24 by 27 feet. The dance floor itself was reached from the lobby through a single door mounted on a flimsy partition and which opened to the outside. The hazard created by the doors which opened into the lobby can readily be seen.

The dance floor gave the impression of a long cave. The entire ceiling was covered with gray Spanish moss supported by wires strung in both directions. The moss was everywhere from six inches to a foot in thickness and was intended to conceal the roof space. The draped moss added to the cave-like atmosphere of the dance floor, for it was stalactite-like in appearance. Not unlike stalactites, it was estimated that the moss had hung in the building for two or three years as decorative material. It was tinder dry.



Spanish moss. Natchez holocaust is a grim reminder that decorative materials must be flame-proofed. Spanish moss should never have been used for interior decorating in the first place. That which decorated the dance hall had been there for two or three years, and was tinker dry. When ignited, it fell from the wires that supported it, ignited clothing of those trapped below. Time required for all moss to become ignited was probably not more than two or three minutes.

To the right of the entrance to the dance floor was a hamburger stand. In the far right corner was the orchestra on a raised platform, and directly across from the orchestra in the far left corner was a bar.

#### Progress of the Fire.

At eleven o'clock when the fire started, the social hour was in full swing. A large crowd had gathered around the bar in the far left corner of the building while another large group was congregated about the orchestra platform.

Although the cause of the fire could not be definitely established, it was believed that a lighted cigarette or match somehow found its way into the moss decorations. Someone was heard saying, "Now you did it. You set the place on fire." For a moment, there was nothing. Then, a blinding sheet of flame near the hamburger stand.

Panic seized the negroes standing about on the dance floor as the blaze spread toward them. As the moss began to burn, it fell to the floor and formed a wall of fire between those in the rear of the hall and the single exit. Many tried to reach the exit through the burning moss. Their clothes were ignited immediately. Their cries of horror and pain probably stopped others from doing likewise.

Meanwhile, the falling moss extended its wall of flame from the front to the rear of the dance hall. The merry-makers found themselves being driven to the rear wall of the building where, ultimately, they were to be either suffocated or trampled to death. Few were able to beat through the nailed shutters of the windows with chairs. Those who did escape in such a manner received horrifying burns, and most did not live. The majority of those trapped at the rear end of the building were either suffocated or baked by the superheated temperature of the corrugated iron.

Once the fire department had arrived, it was a comparatively simple matter to stop the blaze. No part of the building burned completely nor did any part of the building collapse. In order to remove the seared remains of those 198 negroes trapped and cremated, it was necessary to tear away a portion of

the sheet iron at the rear of the building. Of the few who were still found alive, nine died from the shock which they had undergone. Many of the victims were comparatively young — sixteen and seventeen years of age.

#### Conclusions.

"The decorations of theatres and assembly halls shall be of fire-resistant or non-flammable materials. Fabrics and papers used for such purpose shall be treated with an effective flame-proofing material. Stage settings made of combustible materials shall likewise be treated with flame-proofing materials.

"(Note. Paper and cloth decorative materials should be kept to a minimum in places of public assembly, since such flimsy materials increase the hazard of the kindling and spread of fire."

The above is a verbatim quotation from Sec. 25 of the N.F.P.A.'s Building Exits Code. Spanish moss is certainly a decorative material and certainly a flimsy material, so flimsy that it should never have been used for a decorative material in the first place. It should have at least been flame-proofed.

For the second and third conclusions, it is possible to quote from the same N.F.P.A. publication, but such quotations should not be necessary. The need for exits at both front and rear of the building is obvious. The cost of making it obvious, however, has been 207 lives, and indescribable grief and anguish for the entire negro population of Natchez.

Lastly, the building was tremendously overcrowded. So overcrowded that it seems incredible that as many escaped as did.