

# **FIRE!**

**Elmer F. Stein**

*This Bulletin was written by R.W. Bro. Elmer F. Stein, Senior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge F.A.A.M. of the District of Columbia. A retired Deputy Chief of the D.C. Fire Department R.W. Bro. Stein brings 39 years of firefighting experience on a subject too many of us tend to ignore. We thank Brother Stein for accepting the challenge to write this Short Talk Bulletin.*

Fire! Man's best friend – man's worst enemy.

When controlled, fire warms man, cooks his food, and if out camping, protects him from carnivorous animals.

However, when out of control, fires have burned millions of dollars worth of homes, buildings and woodlands.

What causes these disasters? A carelessly discarded lighted match, cigarette or cigar, in wooded areas, hot smoking materials including pipes laid upon chairs, sofas or beds in buildings; faulty electrical wiring; spontaneous combustion containers, and, of course, – arson.

What, you may ask, do these things have to do with Freemasonry?

Just this, Brethren – if you have ever sustained the loss of a Lodge Hall, meeting room, building or valuable property through fire, then you should be interested.

In Washington, D.C. in 1963, Potomac Lodge No. 5 lost the entire contents of their building and almost lost the building itself by fire. Likewise in Aberdeen, Maryland and in Murphy, North Carolina, lodge buildings fell victim to fires that destroyed the entire property and their valuable contents. More recently, the Grand Lodge of Ohio, reported two lodges, Charity No. 530 in Palmyra, lost its building and contents, while Boggs Lodge No. 292 suffered a damaged floor, rug and some furnishings from a fire that originated under the Altar. In the case of Charity Lodge No. 530, the cause was thought to have been defective heating controls, but for the most part, causes of Lodge fires remain unknown. We could go on and on, citing cases in almost every Grand Jurisdiction, and listing hundreds of such instances if space allowed. These are but a few scattered instances of Lodges destroyed by fire. The losses in these few cases ran between

\$75,000 to well over \$200,000. Some, such as in Ohio, were adequately covered by insurance, others were not.

There is also the danger of a general conflagration which may destroy hundreds of buildings, including Lodge Halls, such as in Chicago in 1871 and the more recent Baltimore fire of 1904. However, in this article, we are more concerned with the individual lodge and its own building. In a general conflagration there is little one can do but hope and pray the fire does not reach the lodge building, but there are many things we all can do in the case of the individual building, to prevent fires from starting, protecting ourselves if such occurs and seeing that we are adequately protected financially from severe loss.

Our first question is, how safe is your Lodge hall? Is it safe enough so that you will not have a fire in the kitchen? ... In the Lodge Room by faulty wiring of the Lesser Lights? ... or in the Ante Room by a cigar or cigarette carelessly left on a chair, table, or sofa?

Is the electrical system modern, or ancient? Are your circuits overloaded by extra lighting during degree work, or strained by the use of numerous appliances during a lodge dinner? When an electrical circuit blows, does some well-meaning member put a penny behind the fuse in the fusebox, so that you can continue your work, or cooking? Does a well-meaning member dump a glass or pitcher of water on the small hole that is being burned in the fabric of the chair, couch or sofa?

These things are done, Brethren, resulting in over-heating wires that later in the night set fire to combustible material in the walls or ceiling through which they run. That chair, couch, or sofa may burst into flames long after everyone has left the Lodge Hall, because such a fire, like a cancer, eats its way down into the soft material, and though apparently put out at the time by the water poured upon it, it may eventually eat its way into the open and find the necessary air to ignite it. The water has merely blocked the opening with a hard crust and such items as this should be promptly removed to the outside, where it will not endanger, or be a threat to any other property. It should be left there for at least 24 hours.

There is a fallacy that has been perpetrated for years that buildings of modern materials, such as brick, stone, or a combination of both, are fireproof. Nothing is farther from the truth. No building is fire-proof. Fire resistant, yes! But never fire-proof! Even fire resistant buildings are subject to disastrous fires. It is the contents that burn, not the building, although, of course, under proper conditions such as a general conflagration, even brick and concrete will crumble. Every Lodge Hall in the world has its share of furniture, paintings, rugs, plastics, even oilbase paint on the walls, that are subject to combustion once a fire has gained a headway.

Now let us look at what may be done in your lodge to ward off such a catastrophe.

Needed first and foremost is a sprinkler system, something that is on guard day and night, every day and night of the year. Of course, even a sprinkler system is subject to human error by someone turning off the valves for inspection and forgetting to turn them on again. However,

this practice is rare and wherever sprinkler have been installed in buildings, and kept operational, none have ever sustained more than a minimal loss, and then at the point of fire only. There may be some water damage, but compared to the probable loss of the entire structure, such a loss is infinitesimal and this could and should be covered by a sufficient amount of insurance for such eventuality.

These two items, sprinklers and insurance, are of utmost importance to a lodge or Grand Lodge, yet whenever brought up in a meeting, the hue and cry of how much these items cost is deafening and for the most part are laid aside, with the feeling "It can't happen to us." Such frugality can be and is, more costly than we realize. For the small amount involved to install sprinklers, the return is tremendous. First, there will be a definite reduction in the amount of insurance needed cost-wise, and the feeling of confidence that your Lodge Hall is safe and secure from being destroyed by fire.

These two items are well worth the original cost of the sprinklers. The amount paid out for insurance to protect your Lodge Hall from water damage, in case a sprinkler head should go off and extinguish a fire in its incipient stage, is also minimal. An outside alarm system installed as part of the sprinkler system, alerts the passerby that something is wrong in the building and a prompt response by the Fire Department assures the difference between slight water damage and a probable complete loss of the entire building by fire. Only too often have we sat in lodges and even Grand Lodges, and listened to arguments as to the proper amount of insurance that should be carried. Never have we heard discussions regarding the protection of a lodge building before the fire strikes. The argument is always the same – the high cost of the insurance and the settling for the minimum amount and the lesser cost. Yet, a little foresight would have prevented the loss of lodge buildings mentioned in the beginning of this talk. Just a few dollars invested in protection over the years, would have more than taken care of their loss.

The argument against buying insurance, is sadly, that the insurance never takes care of the entire loss. This is true, but compared to a complete loss, which only repays around 80 percent, a sufficient amount of insurance that repays whatever the water damage is from a sprinkler, certainly knocks that argument in the head – or it should.

Have you ever given serious thought to what might happen to your lodge, if your Lodge Hall, with all of your equipment, were destroyed? Most lodges do not. Would your members stay with the lodge and meet somewhere else, probably in less suitable quarters? Most would, many would not. They would affiliate with other lodges and the resultant loss in membership would seriously cut into any program you offered to raise money to rebuild. Today, money is "tight" and there are many Masons just not in a position to come up with sufficient donations, contributions or assessments, to enable you to rebuild your lodge building. And these Brethren as mentioned above, if pushed too hard for funds, would dimit or be dropped for non-payment of dues, even though they would probably want to remain members of the lodge, because the cost of doing so would be prohibitive.

Now let us turn to the preventive side of the coin. One item for the prevention of fire is adequate incombustible trash containers equipped with tight lids. It is strange, but smokers have a bad habit of tapping live ashes from a cigarette or cigar, and sometimes even throwing the lighted cigarette or cigar, into a waste basket or trash container. In the case of waste baskets, smoke arising from it will usually alert someone to the fact there is a fire brewing. In the case of the trash containers, a tight cover would in most cases prevent a fire from starting, due to the lack of oxygen. A fire needs air and the tight lid assures protection if the lid is properly placed on the container. In lodges where smoking is permitted, adequate ash stands, with the flip top permitting the "butt" to fall into the bottom, should be provided.

Do you have a competent janitor or does some good Brother volunteer his services in keeping your lodge trash area and kitchen cleaned up? There is a distinct danger in allowing grease to accumulate under the hood over kitchen stoves, and in and around the stoves themselves. When sufficient grease accumulates, and sufficient heat is applied such as long preparations for a lodge dinner, then you have the ingredients for a hot, nasty and dangerous fire, such as the one in the kitchen of Cornerstone Lodge No. 224 in Takoma Park, Maryland. Luckily, at the head table was seated an off duty member of the D.C. Fire Department, who, when notified that the kitchen was on fire, told the Brother to notify the local Fire Department and then calmly proceeded to the kitchen, shut the door, and fought the flames under the stove hood and going up the wall through the exhaust fan, with wet towels. Luckily also, was the fact that he practically had the fire extinguished when the Fire Department, much to the amazement of the dinner guests, began to bring their equipment through the dining room to the kitchen. This was an incident where luck prevailed, having a fireman present who understood what to do and who took charge of the situation. What might have happened if he had not been there? The excited Brother coming from the kitchen and crying "Fire?" Several hundred Brethren trying to get out of the room through two exits, both of which led up a flight of stairs to the outside, at the same time. The danger of panic, that normally kills or injures more people in such circumstances than the actual fire?

This fire, like many others, would never have occurred, had strict attention been given the periodical cleaning of the stove hood and exhaust fan. A further protection would have been an adequate hood sprinkler designed for that purpose, or a carbon dioxide, or foam extinguisher, installed on a wall bracket in the kitchen. It may be well to mention here that extinguishers can be somewhat dangerous unless the person using them has been taught to use them properly. This can be done with little effort on your part by carefully reading, and thoroughly understanding, the instructions on its use. Not when the fire occurs, but when the extinguishers are installed, and again and again at frequent periods. In many cases, lodges have Brethren who are also members of the local fire department, and who would be only too happy to assist your lodge in any way possible by instructing the Brethren or the janitor, in the use of extinguishers, or by inspecting your quarters for defective electrical systems, that could cause you trouble.

Then, heed his advice. It may be the most valuable single item in your plan against a fire occurring in your building.

Every building of three or more stories, housing a lodge, should certainly be equipped with fire escapes, one of which should be readily available to the lodge room itself. An inside fireproof stairwell is the preferable type, but one or more on the outside, certainly. These also, should be examined regularly for rust, painted, and kept free of ice and snow during the winter. The pulley through which the cable runs for the weights, if it is the drop ladder type, should be examined regularly to make sure the cable runs free to drop the ladder in case of emergency.

When the building or lodge room is occupied, there are several precautions that should be taken such as making sure the building is properly marked with small signs, but big enough to draw instant attention, indicating where exits are located, and exit lights are burning brightly. If you have an elevator, signs stating the elevator is not to be used in case of fire, should be prominently displayed.

There should also be signs plainly stating the emergency phone number of the local fire department, the location of the nearest alarm box and the nearest fire station. The janitor, and when occupied, the Tiler of the lodge, or lodges, should also be thoroughly instructed in the proper method of calling by phone, or otherwise alerting the fire department if an emergency occurs.

Auxiliary lighting systems, not dependent upon city circuits for electricity, should be a must in every lodge room, hall and stairway of every building, in cases of power failure. Emergency auxiliary lights which provide illumination over a 5,000 square foot area are available at modest cost. Their use can prevent serious injury in cases of an emergency.

Should your building have an alarm system, not connected with the city fire department, this should be plainly shown by a large card, stating this fact, that it is for alerting the occupants of the building only, and does not call the fire department. This oversight many times has caused fires of incipient origin to become full scale conflagrations, just because someone failed to notify the fire department, thinking the pulling of the local building alarm had taken care of this factor.

We often see on television these days, commercials advising us to hold family meetings to discuss a second "escape plan" whereby we may leave our home in safety if the regular exits are blocked. Why not this same discussion in your lodge officers meetings, or every so often in open lodge? You may never need it, yet some day it may save your, and your fellow members, life.

Masters today are constantly looking around for programs to fill out their meetings whenever degree work is not on the agenda. You want a program? Here is a suggestion. The second week in October of every year is known as "Fire Prevention Week." Why not have a fire prevention

program, with the Chief, or some prominent and knowledgeable member of the local fire department, whether he be a Brother or not, as the principal speaker?

In closing, my Brethren, you are strongly urged to take a new look at your lodge building. Check over your insurance to be sure you have adequate insurance coverage against any type of disaster, especially fire, and if any of the items as listed in this article are needed, take prompt action to protect yourself. The old cliché of "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," applies even more today, with its inflated prices, than when it was first coined many years ago.

*STB - January 1980*