

Mount Carmel Archives, Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Finding Aid for

Our Lady of the Angels School, Chicago, Illinois December 1, 1958 Fire Collection

1958 – 2008, bulk 1958 - 1959

Finding Aid created by Jennifer A. Head, 2013

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Creator: Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Extent: 6 linear feet (2 boxes and 3 oversize flat file boxes)

Abstract: The records of the Our Lady of the Angels Fire, Chicago, Illinois include correspondence files, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, photographs, oral history transcripts and mass cards.

Language: The collection is in English, though several condolence letters are written in French, Polish, Japanese, Italian, Yugoslavian, and Greek. Some, but not all, of these letters have been translated into English.

Acquisition Information: These materials were deposited in the Mt. Carmel Archives at an unknown date.

Access Restrictions: The record group is open to research.

Copyright: The Mount Carmel Archives does not claim copyright to most of the materials in this collection. Copyright remains with the authors of the letters of condolence, the newspaper publishers and the photographers. Researchers are responsible for locating and obtaining copyright permission from the original authors/photographers. The Sisters who provided oral history accounts have granted permission for their accounts to be used without restriction.

Preferred Citation: [item], folder, box, Our Lady of the Angels Fire, Mount Carmel Archives, Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

History: On December 1, 1958 a fire broke out at Our Lady of the Angels school in Chicago, Illinois between 2:00 and 2:20 p.m. It started in the basement stairwell and travelled up the wooden staircase to the second floor; the first floor was blocked by a fire door but the second floor was not. Superheated gasses also travelled up a pipe chase to the attic where they eventually ignited. Fire travelled through the halls on the second floor of the north wing and down from the attic above the classrooms. By the time teachers and students on the second floor were aware of the fire, the hallway, the main route of escape, was blocked by smoke and fire. Five teachers and 329 students were trapped. Students in one classroom escaped using the school's only fire escape, which was adjacent to their classroom. But for

the other classrooms, the only escape was the windows. As the smoke, fire and heat began building in the classrooms, children began jumping from the second floor windows, approximately 25 feet above ground level. Many were killed or severely injured on impact or by the bodies of those jumping after them. Other children were trapped against the window sills because of the crush of bodies behind them or they were too small to climb over the ledge. Some children suffocated at their desks waiting for help to arrive.

The fire department received the first call at 2:42 and arrived four minutes later, but by the time the fire was noticed it had been burning for up to forty minutes. Even as fire crews began rescuing children by ladder, children still jumped from the windows. At approximately 2:55, less than ten minutes after fire crews arrived, flashover occurred and the roof collapsed. The rush of heat and gas from the collapse instantly killed anyone remaining on the second floor.

A total of 95 people died as a result of the fire. Three Sisters and 87 children died on December 1, 1958. Ninety people (87 children and 3 Sisters) required treatment or hospitalization. Five more children eventually succumbed to their injuries: three died before Christmas, one died in March 1959 and the last child died in August 1959.

The Coroner's Jury found that the origin and cause of the fire were "undetermined." Many suspect arson. In 1962, a boy who was in fifth grade at the time of the fire confessed to setting the fire, and provided details that were not released to the public. He later recanted and was never prosecuted because a court determined that evidence to substantiate the confession was lacking.

At the time of the fire, the school complied with all applicable fire codes and laws. However, it was not subject to new requirements due to the age of building. These requirements included sprinkler systems, heat detectors or automatic fire alarms that rang directly to the fire department.

Scope and Content: The records for the Our Lady of the Angels fire include correspondence, newspaper clippings, disassembled scrapbooks, anniversary remembrance materials, oral history transcripts, and research notes.

Box 1

The *Correspondence* file ranges from 1958 to 2008. It includes correspondence sent directly after the fire, notes about moving students to various public schools while the school was being re-built, information regarding the trust fund set up after the fire, correspondence regarding the individual who confessed to setting the fire, then recanted, concerns regarding a 1999 dissertation written about the fire, and information about various memorial activities.

The *Newspaper Clippings* file ranges from 1958 to 2003. It includes newspaper articles from the immediate aftermath of the fire, one and ten year updates, and articles from the 2000s about the fire and survivors. Boxes 3, 4 and 5 contain additional newspaper clippings.

The *Magazine Articles* file ranges from 1958 to 2001. The majority of the articles analyze the cause of the fire and how it spread so quickly. Others present personal recollections and historical overviews of the events.

The *Memorial Cards, Liturgy* file contains memorial material. It includes prayer cards for some of the victims, various memorial programs, the funeral sermon given for the three BVMS that were killed, and several listings of the victims, some with handwritten notes.

The *Law Suits* file ranges from 1959 to 1960. It includes the Findings of the Coroner's Jury as well as notices of several lawsuits filed against the school and the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The *Correspondence – Suellen Hoy – OLA Fire Article* contains correspondence and research from Suellen Hoy accumulated in the course of her research for an article about the three BVMS that were killed in the fire. A draft copy of the article is also included. The article was published in the Summer 2004 issue of *Chicago History* magazine. The Archives book collection includes a copy of this issue.

The *After the Fire – Oral History Collection* contains transcripts from several sisters about the fire and its aftermath.

The *After the Fire – Reflections* file contains correspondence and responses to the book *To Sleep With the Angels*. It also contains information regarding other books and articles about the fire.

The *Photos* file contains photos of the immediate fire aftermath, funerals, memorials and personal photos of one of the victims, Teresa Whitakker, cousin of Luca Yankovich, BVM. The Mt. Carmel Archives does not own the copyright for any of these photographs. Researchers must contact the respective photographers/publishers for reproduction permission.

The *Electronic Documents* file contains print-outs from various websites. The majority of the print-outs come from www.olafire.com, the website set-up by survivors. Other print-outs are about the documentary *Angels Too Soon* that was broadcast on WTTW in Chicago.

The *50th Anniversary* file dates from 2008. It contains material related to the commemoration of the fire; including a CD featuring a song by Jonathan Cain (a fire survivor) called "The Day They Became Angels," a flash drive with footage of the fire, downloaded from youtube.com, newspaper clippings about the commemoration and programs for the commemorations.

Box 2

The *Letters of Condolence* files (five folders) contain letters of condolence sent to the Sisters after the fire. The first folder contains a list of those sending letters. This list is not in any type of order and appears to have been compiled as the letters were received and/or reviewed. These letters were originally stored in a series of scrapbooks but have since been removed for preservation. Each scrapbook has been placed in its own folder.

The *Telegrams* file contains telegrams sent directly to the school/convent at Our Lady of the Angels or to the Motherhouse at Mount Carmel, Dubuque, Iowa immediately after the fire.

The *Photographs Removed from Scrapbook* file contains photographs that could safely be removed from scrapbooks about the fire. The photographs document the immediate aftermath of the fire, injured students and funeral masses. The Mount Carmel Archives does not own the copyright for these photographs. Researchers must contact the respective photographers/publishers for reproduction permission.

Box 3 – Oversize

This box contains portions of disassembled scrapbook #6. When possible, photographs were removed from the scrapbook and filed in Box 2. Most of the scrapbook pages have newspaper and magazine articles on them, though there are some photographs remaining. Also included are some of the telegrams that were received.

Box 4 – Oversize

This box contains portions of disassembled scrapbook #7. When possible, photographs were removed from the scrapbook and filed in Box 2. Most of the scrapbook pages have newspaper and magazine articles on them, though there are some photographs remaining. A significant number of telegrams are also included.

Box 5 – Oversize

This box contains newspaper clippings or entire newspaper editions of several Chicago-area newspapers, as well as the *Kansas City Times* and the *San Francisco Examiner*. There are two sets of newspapers, one organized by newspaper, the other organized by topic. Included in this box is a reprint of the iconic *Chicago American* front page on Friday, December 5, 1958.

Related Materials:

Researchers may wish to consult the following resources in the Mount Carmel Archives:

Closed Missions: Illinois: Our Lady of Angels – documents the early history of the school, the rebuilding after the fire and the closure of the school in 1996.

Office of the Mother General/President: Mother Mary Consolatrice – may include correspondence, etc. relating to the fire.

Other materials in the Mt. Carmel archives may relate to this topic. Please see the archivist for further assistance.

Box and Folder List

Box	Folder #	Folder Title
1	1	50th Anniversary, 2008
1	2	Correspondence
1	3	Correspondence, Suellen Hoy - OLA Fire Article
1	4	Electronic Documents
1	5	Lawsuits
1	6	Magazine Articles
1	7	Memorial Cards, Liturgy
1	8	Newspaper Clippings After the Fire -
1	9	Oral History Collection After the Fire -
1	10	Reflections
2	1	Letters of Condolence
2	2	Letters of Condolence
2	3	Letters of Condolence
2	4	Letters of Condolence
2	5	Letters of Condolence
2	6	Photos Removed from Scrap Books
2	7	Telegrams
3		Dis-assembled scrapbook with photos, newspaper articles and telegrams
4		Dis-assembled scrapbook with funeral sermon, newspaper articles, telegrams and photos
5	1	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: Chicago American
5	2	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: Chicago Daily News
5	3	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: Chicago Daily Sun-Times
5	4	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: Chicago Daily Tribune
5	5	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: Kansas City Times (Morning Star)
5	6	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: Rogers Park News
5	7	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: The New World
5	8	Newspaper Clippings by Newspaper: San Francisco Examiner
5	9	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: OLA Fire
5	10	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Victims
5	11	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Survivors
5	12	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: BVM's Funerals
5	13	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Jurors' Report on Cause of Fire
5	14	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Suit
5	15	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Fire Fund
5	16	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Honorees for bravery
5	17	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Effects on schools
5	18	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Letters to editors

5	19	Newspaper Clippings by Topic: Commemoration of 50th Anniversary
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