

Night of Terror, Loneliness, Despair

By Les Rickey

It was a night first of terror, then loneliness and despair for the survivors of the Grandon Hotel fire.

When fire broke out in the building at about 11 p.m. Thursday, most of the elderly residents of the hotel were asleep in the upper floors — mostly on the second and third.

"Someone woke me up by banging on my door," said Mar-

jorie Nason, 68, who lived in Apartment 28 on the third floor. "I smelled smoke and got into my bedroom slippers, but I couldn't see to get anything the smoke was so thick."

Pandemonium in the Hall

In the hall, there was pandemonium. The fire escape door on the third floor, residents said, was locked. Firemen broke down the door to rescue those inside.

Mrs. Nason and two others were interviewed in the shadow of the huge blaze. They sat, soot-grimed and frightened, in the Community Cab office while across the street, their possessions went up in flames in the not-so inferno.

Ahead of the survivors was

a night with no money, no food, and for some, no place to stay. Halfway House took care of some. The Catholic Diocese helped others. A few stayed with friends or relatives.

"I'll be all right, if I can just get my purse," Mrs. Nason said. "I even lost my glasses."

"I had \$45 worth of food, almost my whole pension check," said Patrick Belgard, 71, who was on the second floor in Apt. 7.

Emergency Assistance

The Helena Chapter of the American Red Cross announced this morning through disaster chairman Lt. Col. Garritt K. Leppink that emergency assistance has been made available to victims of the fire.

Information can be obtained at the Red Cross office in the Lalonde Building, Leppink said. The scene was blitz-like, with the Grandon Hotel looking as though it had been bombed and the streets littered with debris and fire hoses.

Some Started Packing

Residents of surrounding houses watered down their homes with water hoses and began packing their possessions as they prepared to flee the flames.

Chips of embers, some as big as a man's thumb, wafted across Sixth Avenue and landed on rooftops. Sparks lifted high into the sky, dropping around the east side of town.

Firemen, policemen and photographers were driven back by

the heat, which melted the plastic storm windows of the cab company office across the street. Asbestos shingles of buildings across Sixth Avenue steamed, and power lines shorted out with white flashes, leaving a smell of ozone in the air.

Power Knocked Out

"Get away from those power lines!" firemen yelled down Warren Street as lights went out

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Night of Terror

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throughout the area. People scampered out of the way with a wary eye on telephone poles.

Tom Bates, 214 E. Sixth Ave., gave his family instructions and raced down the street to help firemen evacuate the hotel.

"The smoke was so thick that we had to have a man ride on the ladder to find people," Bates said. "I rode the ladder over to where a woman was sitting on a ledge on the second floor and we brought her down."

Bates said he tried to enter the rear apartment of the landlady, Mrs. Sarah Brown, 85, believed to be one of those still missing.

"The heat was intense and the smoke was too much," Bates said. "I couldn't find her."

Awakened by Shouts

George B. Teskey, 77, in the third floor in Apt. 47, was awakened by the shouts of those in the hall. Some of them pounded on his door.

"The fire escape door was locked," Teskey said. "I kept trying to get my pajamas off and my pants on. I'm still wearing my pajamas under these pants."

Mrs. Thirza Maras, 63, was sitting in a Montana Power Co. truck, her son's work vehicle. It was parked less than 150 feet from the burning hotel.

"I smelled the smoke and opened my door. The smoke just gushed into the room. You couldn't see anything," she said.

"I knocked on Marjorie's door and tried to get out of the fire floor, but it was locked."

About 40 Occupants

Residents estimated there were 40 persons in the building, with only about two of them on the fourth floor.

"My poor parakeet," said Ralph Adams, 55, who lived on the second floor. "My poor, little parakeet."

Earl Morris, 41, lived on the second floor. It was he who probably smelled smoke first. He walked out the front lobby just before it burst into flames.

Morris turned in the alarm from the cab company office.

Halfway House was packed, with seven refugees from the fire and the 15 men who live there, Jim Fleming, who operates the reclamation facility, and his wife, Blanche, were serving coffee and sandwiches. Al Owens, the house chef, was on

duty, as was the Flemings' 15-year-old daughter, Mary Pat.

Robert O'Dell, 60, and Joseph Hawkins, 21, found a window on the third floor. They kicked it out to escape, with Hawkins receiving a severe cut when glass fell from the fourth floor.

Women Became Hysterical

"One woman — I don't know who she was — went into hysteria and ran in the opposite direction," O'Dell said of the nightmare that was the third floor with the locked fire escape door.

"Hawkins ran after her, but the smoke was so dense he was about to choke down. I grabbed his coattail and dragged him back."

"There were several of them up there hollering for help. At least three that I know of."

One of those screaming for help was Herbert Carlson, 56. He finally crawled down the main stairway through thick smoke and stifling heat. A fireman with a fumes mask found him and pulled him out.

Father John Bauer, director of Catholic Charities, saw what he thought was "just a small fire in the lobby."

"Then all of a sudden, it just went," Father Bauer said while sitting in Halfway House. "I saw someone silhouetted on the third floor. They were packing a suitcase."

Mrs. Nason, puffing on a cigarette in the cab company office, coughed violently. The heat outside was becoming intense.

"That smoke was terrible," she said. "I have asthma and that smoke bothers me."