

# Tragedy at the Upstairs Lounge

By: R. Marc Kantrowitz December 10, 2015

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They gathered to socialize, party and enjoy each other's company. While the chains of hatred and homophobia still held a chokehold, a few links had ever so slightly loosened.

Perhaps sensing the hint of freedom — it was, after all, four years after Stonewall and the start of the gay rights movement — approximately three score, all men minus one, met clandestinely to celebrate the final day of an understated Gay Pride [Weekend](#). For half, it would be their last celebration.

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The Upstairs Lounge was the nondescript structure that it had to be. Drawing attention to itself, like openly celebrating Gay Pride, invited not only trouble but the possibility of confrontation and violence, from the bigots and some members of the public and police.

The lounge occupied the second floor of a three-story building in the French Quarter of New Orleans, and served as a gathering spot for the city's gay population.

On [June 24](#), 1973, a Sunday, members of the Metropolitan Community Church met for services. Founded some years earlier in Los Angeles, the church was the nation's first to provide for a gay congregation. Later, during the early evening hours, the club was percolating with conversation and laughter, a not-so-unusual event at the lounge.

Indeed, it was so comfortable that regulars Jim and Eddie Warren brought their mother, Inez, to join in the festivities. Many were gathered around a piano being played by the talented David Gary. Others were being served and regaled by the colorful bartender, Buddy Rasmussen, who earlier in life had served in the Air Force.

At a few minutes before 8, the downstairs buzzer started ringing incessantly. Finally separating the buzz of the door from that of the crowd, Buddy, who had been expecting a taxi, shouted out to a friend, Luther Boggs, to go downstairs and let the cabbie in.

When Boggs opened the upstairs door, a slight odor of lighter fluid hit him, followed an instant later by flames that exploded up the stairs as if propelled by a cannon. Seconds later shouts of fire filled the now-panicked room as the trapped ran for safety.

Rasmussen yelled for the others to follow him and led many to safety. But not everyone was so fortunate. Running to windows that had been barred to keep some in, others out, a few of the thinner men wiggled their way through the 14 inches of metal to escape. No one else followed.

Bill Larson, the spiritual leader of the church, like a fly in a spider's intricate web, found himself trapped and incapable of moving, screaming, "Oh, God, no!" as the flames quickly engulfed him.

The assistant minister, George Mitchell, called Mitch by his friends, escaped but upon discovering that his partner, Louis Broussard, was still inside, rushed back to save him. Later, the two were discovered tightly intertwined in their final embrace.

In all, 32 people died. The inferno was one of the deadliest fires the city had ever endured, and it was the deadliest fire involving gays in our nation's history.

The reaction to the fire was mixed. Given the “nature” of the victims, many city officials shied away from speaking about the horror of those who tragically died and instead focused on the need for improved safety measures.

Some victims were never identified, with no one coming to claim their bodies, perhaps out of fear of being associated with a gay loved one.

Some church leaders refused to host services for the deceased. The Rev. William Richardson, of a local Episcopal Church, did, only to be later rebuked by his superior, who had received numerous complaints from parishioners objecting to a ceremony for “moral deviants.”

While some thought the tragedy might spur on the gay movement — much like Stonewall in 1969 — it did not. For one, while the case has never been solved, it appears the fire had been set not by a homophobe, but by a mentally ill regular of the club, Roger Dale Nunez, who took responsibility for the act on numerous occasions before killing himself a year later.

But still, progress was being made. At the end of the Rev. Richardson’s service, word went out that members of the press had arrived and were outside filming. Before the fire, many seeking anonymity would have quietly left through a rear entrance. Given that option here, they refused, instead choosing to go out the front door in full view of the cameras and public, no longer ashamed of who they were but determined to show that they desired and were worthy, like all living in a civilized society, of respect and dignity.

For that, Luther Boggs, Bill Larson, Inez and her two sons, and the 27 others who perished hopefully may rest in peace.

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