

MCCORMICK PLACE FIRE, CHICAGO: JANUARY 16, 1967

McCormick Place, an exhibition center on Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, opened in November 1960. The center included a theater, several restaurants and banquet rooms, and over 500,000 square feet of exhibition space. In January 1967, McCormick Place hosted the National Housewares Manufacturers Association Show, which featured nearly 1,250 booths selling kitchen and household appliances. The event was scheduled to open on Monday, January 16, but, at around 2 AM that morning, McCormick Place janitors noticed smoke rising from a small fire at the back of an exhibition booth.

The janitors waited to raise the alarm and instead attempted to extinguish the fire themselves by beating at it with brooms and pieces of carpeting. The flames quickly spread to the walls of the booth, prompting the janitors to call the Chicago Fire Department. Firefighters responded immediately and, within five minutes of the first alarm, an officer on-scene ordered a second alarm. By 2:30 AM, five alarms were sounded, bringing 94 apparatus and over 500 fire and rescue personnel to the scene. Fire fighting efforts were severely delayed, however, as four of the seven McCormick Place fire hydrants were shut off. To attack the flames, firefighters had to draft water from Lake Michigan and rely on fire hydrants a quarter-mile away. The fire was extinguished by 10 AM, around the time the N.H.M.A. show was scheduled to begin, but McCormick Place was essentially destroyed.

Initial investigations by the City of Chicago exposed several serious fire safety issues that had been overlooked by McCormick Place management. The exhibition area did not have fire sprinklers or fire walls, and fireproof materials did not protect the steel roof supports. Also, most of the electrical wiring for the booths did not follow electrical safety standards, as the facility was still using temporary electrical systems for the exhibition areas. Most tragically, one McCormick Place security guard was killed in the fire, presumably because he could not find an unlocked emergency exit. Other employees who escaped the blaze confirmed that they had never been told how to find unlocked emergency exits.

In the months following the fire, the Illinois Inspection and Rating Bureau launched a comprehensive investigation into the McCormick Place Fire and published a detailed report on its findings. The investigators did not determine a definitive cause, but it is assumed that the temporary electrical wiring started the fire. The report did, however, shine light on many of the difficulties the firefighters faced, noting how "firefighting was seriously hampered because of lack of adequate water, intense heat, rapid fire spread, early roof collapse and unstable exterior panel walls." The report helped to bring about numerous changes to the Chicago Municipal Code, as ordinances on exhibition halls, electrical facilities, emergency exits, fire walls, and smoke and heat vents were soon revised based on the lessons learned from the McCormick Place Fire.